

Economics of Survival

Imre Kertész: *Fatelessness*

Gergő BALOGH

University of Szeged, Department of Hungarian Literature
baloghgergo@outlook.com

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I aim to analyse Imre Kertész's *Fatelessness* from the perspective of its economic systems. In Kertész's work they form a discursive network that permeates the entire novel (Szirák 2022). It is also important to see that the circulation of symbolic and material values also plays a key role in the demarcation of the boundaries between the concentration camps and the world outside. However, in the novel's memorable yet perplexing conclusion, this distinction turns into a speech about the relative purity and simplicity of life in the camp. In an attempt to answer the questions arising from this statement by György Köves, I will argue that understanding of the economic models and the differences between them in the worlds of the inside and the outside is essential to the interpretation of *Fatelessness*.

Keywords: Imre Kertész, 20th century Hungarian literature, economics, systems of language, history, subjectivity

1. World outside the camp

“Yes, in a certain sense life was purer and simpler there” – reads György Köves' enigmatic statement in the conclusion of *Fatelessness* (Kertész 2004, 262). After having returned home to Budapest and after unsuccessfully trying to find Bandi Citrom, the broke Köves, wearing a prison uniform, takes the tram where an inspector insists that Köves should buy a ticket. During the scene, the protagonist is caught in the crossfire of two looks. On the one hand, he is observed by the old woman dressing in the fashion of an earlier age who initially shies away from him, and later turns away in offence, and on the other hand, by the ticket inspector in uniform, who is also reacting – at least implicitly – to the old woman's behaviour. Of these two rather unsympathetic characters, the narrative is not able to interpret the first, but only the second – not only

the old woman's dress is "queer", but also her reaction to the dialogue between Köves and the inspector is mysterious and cannot be explained by reasons. The ticket inspector confronts this incomprehensibility with the authority of the law and even to clarify his own position as regards access to the law: "Soon a man in cap and uniform came along and asked me to show my ticket. I told him I didn't have one. He suggested I buy one so I said I had just got back from abroad and didn't have any money. He inspected my jacket, me, then the old woman as well before informing me that there were travel regulations, they weren't his rules but had been brought in by his superiors." (Kertész 2004, 246)

Here the horizon of the legal order coincides with that of the economy: one must possess the ticket or be able to buy it (this connection is forgotten by Köves, who is temporarily out of the jurisdiction of the legal order, but, as it is seen, he refuses the idea of taking the next tram from this direction [Kertész 2004, 261]). The assessment of the cause of the lack of money and the potentially resulting morally based possibilities for action are outside this framework and, as the example of the old woman shows, it is far from clear that this problem, which deeply affects György Köves' homecoming, is neutralized by socially corrective mechanisms (a similar example can be found in the reaction of the woman who opens the door when the protagonist returns to her former apartment: after she declares that Köves, who thinks he lives there, is mistaken, she locks the door on him without further explanation [Kertész 2004, 253]).

That fairness to Köves would have been conceivable at all in this situation is only made clear by the journalist's appearance in the novel who, after paying for our protagonist's ticket, tries to confront the participants with the shamefulness of the proceedings. Although this proves ineffective, it again highlights the intimate relationship between the conductor and the old woman, between the power that acts and the non-acting individual who not only provides the space for this power to operate, but also maintains and legitimises it. The journalist then asks the boy a series of questions which, still on the tram, lead to one of the novel's famous outbursts:

He fell silent, this time for a longer period, before starting up again: "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”. (Kertész 2004, 247)

The two perspectives that clash here, from Köves’s point of view, are that of ignorance, childishness, and, implicitly, at the opposite pole, that of knowledge, adulthood (Kertész 2004, 247) – the irony of which lies in the reversal of roles. While the individual with the knowledge produced by the concentration camps is able to think of a different meaning of the word “naturally” than the ordinary one, the childlike thinking without this knowledge only recognises the primary use value of the word. The journalist’s outburst about Köves’s use of “naturally” thus points out that the use of language is, so to speak, not at all natural. The order of the concentration camp intrudes into language (Erdődy 2008, 21) and modifies the conventional system based on differences that determines the existence of linguistic value (“in a concentration camp they were natural”), which makes the journalist’s desperate attempt to restore the system nothing but a tautology (“a concentration camp in itself is unnatural”) (e.g. Szirák 2003, 11; Pór 2004).

Köves’s speech, seen from this point, is a break in the linguistic system of the world outside the concentration camp (Schein 2002, 1303). The journalist, who seems very understanding until his outburst, tries to bridge the gap, although in a way that makes the protagonist aware of their basic inability to dialogue (child/adult). The journalist, upon being confronted by Köves with the threat represented by language’s unnatural nature, clings to the boy’s explanation. During this, he simultaneously distinguishes between the worlds of outside and inside, and establishes a quarantine for the pole of the concentration camp. The inoperability of these processes is, however, obvious (as indicated by the repeated hesitation in the journalist’s words). Köves cannot and does not want to leave behind the reality of the camp, which has shaped his language, his view, his thinking. For him the distinction of the journalist is meaningless, because the *there* to which the latter refers has always remained *here*, inseparably part of him. For the journalist the distinction between the here and the there is at the same time that of the camp, which can be understood as the suspension of natural states, and of the normal state based on nature. For Köves, in contrast, due to the impossibility of a distinction between the natural and the non-natural, the camp becomes interpretable not as a suspension of the normal course of things, but as a consequence (Földényi 2007, 174).

The scene may point to the fact that György Köves’ way of speaking, when he returns to Budapest, generates a conflict between two economics of linguistic values that establish themselves in different contexts. Already in this scene, one of the typical insights of *Fatelessness* is thus revealed, according to which the experience of the camps, as well

as Köves' language and vision, prove to be unintegrable for those who have not had this experience, while, nevertheless, they attempt to tame their subversive power.

This is also implied by the journalist's insistence on imagining the world of the camps through the use of a linguistic cliché (which is one of the main features of his use of language [Szegedy-Maszák 2003, 131]): the trope of hell ("Can we imagine a concentration camp as anything but a hell?" he asked.). The boy in turn, however, implicitly asserts the primacy of the literal name ("I was not acquainted with hell couldn't even imagine what that was like", "I could only imagine a concentration camp, since I was somewhat acquainted with what that was, but not hell" [Kertész 2004, 248-249]). Köves not only rejects the idea that the camps are imaginable, but also points out that even his own imagination would lead him astray (see also: Kertész 1993, 22). The preference for literal naming and the avoidance of figurative language are therefore connected to the contrast between imagination and experience. Although Köves makes an attempt to convey the experience of the camps by describing in detail the specific form of the relationship to time, the journalist finally declares it unimaginable ("No, it's impossible to imagine it. For my part, I could see that."). From the perspective of the aforementioned distinction, figurative language can be understood as a compensatory act that – as a kind of counter-pole to the literal use of language, erasing its own origin – makes the unimaginable imaginable ("and I even thought to myself: so, that must be why they prefer to talk about hell instead" [Kertész 2004, 250]).

Stepping off the tram, now sitting on the bench, Köves realises that the journalist's real purpose is to use his story in a series of articles, in his newspaper. According to the journalist, this would be beneficial to Köves for two reasons. Firstly, it would give the boy "some money" (Kertész 2004, 251), and secondly, it would have a healing function on an individual level and a restorative function for justice in the world. From the journalist's point of view, Köves' story is no longer a private matter, since it belongs to him as much as to the world (Kertész 2004, 252), which also means that the boy cannot treat it as his own property. The journalist's strategy of persuasion thus not only appeals to the satisfaction of individual interests (money and supposed desire for revenge), but also highlights the imperative of responsibility towards the community. This strategy obscures his actual interests and ambitions, presenting him as a neutral intermediary with a purely mediating function – as someone, who serves both the protagonist of the series and the political community (Vári 2003, 70). The story of the protagonist, which the journalist promises would be published on the basis of Köves' own words (Kertész 2004, 251), here clearly would become a part of the world of means and ends. Not only a product to be bought, but also a part of the novelty-based press economy of modernity.

While the journalist seeks to exploit, make use of and consume the experience of the concentration camps, Uncle Fleischmann and Steiner,

at the end of the novel, urge its isolation and oblivion (“»Before all else,« he declared, »you must put the horrors behind you«”), so that Köves can be free and thus truly begin a “new life” (Kertész 2004, 256). The boy rejects this partly with mnemonic and partly with semantic arguments. On the one hand, he draws attention to the uncontrollability of memory, which in itself may call into question the conception of a free life – freed from its past – that appears here, and on the other hand, he expresses doubts about the possibility of a “new life”. Of these doubts, the first one once again brings into play the conflict between the figurative and the literal aspects of language, offering an interpretation of Uncle Fleischmann’s idiomatic use of language from the latter direction. However, the second, to the consternation of his interlocutors, outright denies the experience of horrors.

Köves highlights a recurring turn in the language of the “two old men” (“so, for example, ‘the yellow -star houses »came about‘, ‘October the fifteenth »came about‘, ‘the Arrow-Cross regime »came about‘, etc.”) and criticises it (“but it was not quite true that the thing ‘came about’: we had gone along with it too” [Kertész 2004, 255; 257]): the spatial metaphor of “came about” presupposes a subject who is reached by something beyond his own possibilities of action, in contrast to the cognitive model of “steps” proposed by Köves, which links the relation to the present – and thus the life lived in the present – to the acts of the survivor (Kertész 2004, 257-258). In Kertész’s novel, the steps, understood as a metaphor for survival, represent a form of action that (1.) is both representative and devoid of freedom of choice, (2.) as it both has and has no alternative, and (3.) as such becomes both rational and irrational to the greatest extent possible (“But what could we do?! [...] I said to him: nothing, naturally; or, rather, anything, which would have been just as senseless as doing nothing, yet again, and just as naturally.” [Kertész 2004, 258]). This form of action, which Köves thematises as a general paradigm of action, is thus based on the impossible.

From the perspective of Kertész’ novel historical narratives (Molnár 1996) necessarily (“naturally”) produce a causal idea of the succession of events (Kertész 2004, 257-258). This is what excludes singularity – the impossible, or in other words: freedom -, which cannot be integrated into this order, from history (“if there is such a thing as fate, then freedom is not possible [...], if there is such a thing as freedom, then there is no fate; that is to say – and I paused, but only long enough to catch my breath – that is to say, then we ourselves are fate” [Kertész 2004, 260]). In contrast, Köves’s account presents a contextualization of the relation between subjectivity and history that, at its most fundamental level, threatens the determinist model of this relation. This is because it eliminates the pure possibility of passivity in any context:

I took the steps, no one else, and I declared that I had been true to my given fate throughout. [...] Did they

want this whole honesty and all the previous steps I had taken to lose all meaning? [...] It was impossible, they must try and understand, impossible to take everything away from me, impossible to for me to be neither winner or loser, for me not to be right and for me not to be mistaken that I was neither the cause nor the effect of anything; they should try to see, I almost pleaded, that I couldn't swallow that idiotic bitterness, that I should merely be innocent. But I could see they did not wish to understand anything, and so, picking up kit bag and cap, I departed in the midst of a few disjointed words and motions, one more unfinished gesture and incomplete utterance from each. (Kertész 2004, 260-261)

The position of the interlocutors and the form of the relation between subjectivity and history they outline do not simply offer another experience of human existence, but – from Köves' perspective – diminishes the survivor, depriving the fact of survival of any meaning. At stake, of course, is subjectivity itself, which Köves conceives precisely in terms of freedom, the impossibility of action and, ultimately, the responsibility for one's own fate. To this extent, subjectivity can be lost, which nevertheless also means that it is something that can be, and even must be, possessed: subjectivity is grounded in this relation of possession, and as such could even be said to be identical with this relation. For Köves, then, to enter into the symbolic economy of the world outside the camp would be to give up the self. The forgetting that family friends encourage him to do is therefore also a forgetting of self. The conflict that emerges here is structurally similar to the debate about the word *natural*. As Köves' use of the word breaks into the linguistic system of the world outside the camp, the impossibility of integrating the boy's insights into the horizon of Fleischmann and Steiner becomes obvious. The survivor's language, his view of subject and history, has a subversive power and as such poses a problem to be dealt with, since it interrupts, suspends and repositions the acts that establish a clear distinction between outside and inside, activity and passivity, guilty and victim. While the journalist perceives and thematises this as a linguistic problem which is dissected in the figural dimension of language, the two uncles are unable to do the same, since for them it is not a linguistic problem, but one that problematizes the essence of the selfhood that is separated from it, and which profoundly determines the conceivability of their own and the community's identity.

It is also of paramount importance to analyse the discrepancies between the two scenes in question. The journalist, after he exhausted the dialog's potential, leaves the scene himself, expressing a hope of future contact, in contrast to Köves' elderly, agitated discussion

partners, whom the boy leaves in a similarly agitated state, rejecting the possibility of dialogue. In light of the above, we can note the latter scene's de facto incompleteness: the suspension of gestures and sentences, which is embodied in the sudden cessation of linguistic and non-linguistic communication. In the light of the foregoing, the most important difference between the two scenes is, at a structural level, whether the force inherent in Köves' language, his view of the subject and history, which is perceived as pure negativity from the perspective of the world outside the camp, and which disrupts the formal order of conceivability itself, is intended to be used by those confronted with it for some purpose, and whether they have the means to integrate the unintegrable. However, it is also important to pay attention to the similarities between the two scenes. While the journalist ultimately hopes for material and symbolic gain from the sale of Köves's story, the family friends also hope that the formal structure of subjectivity, and thus the relationship between the individual and the world, will remain intact by forgetting the horrors they have experienced. As the scene progresses, the increasingly indignant rejection of the boy's speculations become increasingly interpreted as a defensive operation of self-positioning, uninfluenced by the camp's experience. Either Köves gives himself up, or Fleischmann and Steiner do; either the position of continuity between the camps and the outside world, or the position of radical separation loses its legitimacy.

What the two scenes have in common, therefore, is that in the case of Köves' interlocutors, neither in the former nor in the latter, do the interests that determine the relationship between the boy and what he has to say, and the strategies to be employed in dealing with it, become transparent (as Péter Szirák has pointed out, this is also typical of the world outside the camp in general, just think of Sütő's figure, for example [Szirák 2022, 394]). The discursive digestion and containment of the survivor's experience – connected to forgetting – is linked to the same economic imperative: utilise it if it can be utilised, and erase, lock it up or put it out of reach if it cannot. From this point of view, the journalist and the uncles embody two sides of the same paradigm.

2. The world inside the camp

Kertész's novel places great emphasis on the economics of the concentration camps which is characterised above all by the quest for physical survival. The organizing principle of the camps' exchange is an extreme, unprecedented degree of hunger, which, as Köves testifies, affects every action carried out in the camp:

But neither stubbornness nor prayers nor any form of escape could have freed me from one thing: hunger.

I had, naturally, felt – or at least supposed I felt – hunger before, back at home; I had felt hungry at the brickyard, on the train, at Auschwitz, even at Buchenwald, but I had never before had the sensation like this, protractedly, over a long haul, if I may put it that way. I was transformed into a hole, a void of some kind, and my every endeavour, every effort, was bent to stopping, filling, and silencing this bottomless, evermore clamorous void. I had eyes for that alone, my entire intellect could serve that alone, my every act was directed toward that; and if I did not gnaw on wood, or iron or pebbles, it was only because those things could not be chewed and digested. [...] As much as two slices of bread was the asking price for just one small, pointy onion bulb, and the fortunate well-offs sold beets and turnips for the same price. I personally preferred the latter because they were juicier and usually larger in volume, though those in the know consider there is more of value, in terms of contents and nutrients, in sugar beets [...]. (Kertész 2004, 162-163)

The economic context detailed here is not entirely unfamiliar in Holocaust discourse. Primo Levi directly refers to bread as the “currency” of the camp (Levi 1988, 50; 83). Bread, as Kertész’s novel testifies, can be cast in this role because in the exchange economy of the camp it not only represents value, but is itself posited as value, a value, moreover, that everyone is free to dispose of. Bread can be consumed, but it can also be exchanged for other goods that are more difficult to obtain: the symbolic order of exchange between them – the comparability of values – is determined by the extent to which the common knowledge of the camp is seen as conducive to survival. However, as the comparison of sugar and beef beet shows, these values are not stable, as they are based on the individual considerations, value choices and preferences of the participants in the transaction. For this very reason, buying potato peelings later can lead to unforeseen difficulties (Kertész 2004, 164). While, as shown in the quoted section, beetroot is larger and its juice can be expected to provide some hydration, sugar beet is still perceived to provide a higher energy intake due to its higher sugar content – their price, as their markets are not governed by objective facts but by the perceptions attached to them, are nevertheless the same, which suggests that demand for beef and beet is approximately the same. From the buyer’s point of view, the benefit of these transactions is above all a greater chance of survival, after Marx’s “use-value” (Marx 1996, 72), a kind of survival value. This also means, however, that the pursuit of a greater profit, of better chances of survival, may in some cases

serve the trader who exchanges his bread better, since the exchange value he assumes and accepts may not be proportional to the extent to which the good can actually help him to survive (an example of this might be that Bandi Citrom, according to Köves' assumptions, would protect him from buying potato peels). In this process, even though it may be dangerous (the food may even become more important than medical care for the protagonist when he has problems with his knee [Kertész 2004, 173]), it is, by implication, extremely difficult not to get involved, since, as we read in the novel, even with the consumption of the rationed food, the extreme degree of hunger that Köves speaks of occurs, so that the rationing and exchange of bread may seem in a sense to be an equally rational course of action, which enhances the value of knowledge, which thereby becomes a commodity itself (Levi 1988, 121). (From this point of view, Bandi Citrom's selfless words of a tutor-instructor can be interpreted as a pointwise break with the economic order, although it should be added that, in exchange for his knowledge, he also receives knowledge, "since he does not speak German" [Kertész 2004, 130]).

In this context, hunger is the motivation for action, an inalienable part of it, and in a negative sense, if the action is aimed at its elimination, also its goal. Hunger disconnects the body and the mind and rearranges their relationship. As a result, it transforms Köves' (felt) body (Schmitz 2011, 66) into a kind of void, a condition that consciousness is called upon to eliminate. In this extreme situation, the task of consciousness is primarily to limit the body's autonomy by obtaining food, its independence from itself, which inverts the classical hierarchical relations between body and consciousness ("my entire intellect could serve that alone, my every act was directed toward that"). Although the partial autonomy of the body is posited as something to be restrained for the consciousness, it is still meant to facilitate survival— which is precisely when the hunger that produces the body's experience of alienation, the conflicting relationship between body and consciousness, in the company of all the life-sustaining senses, is gone (Kertész 2004, 171-172). It is extremely important to note that Köves enters this state, which the novel associates with tranquility and relief, after he exploits himself to the limit in the scene of packing cement bags in exchange for the recognition of a soldier. Köves then drops a bag of cement, to which the guard responds with a beating and a promise:

He then hauled me to my feet, swearing he would teach me [...] so I would never drop a bag again in the future. From then on, he personally loaded a new bag onto my shoulders each time it was my turn, bothering himself with me alone; I was his sole concern, it was me exclusively whom he kept his eye on following me all the way to the truck and back,

and whom he picked to go first even, by rights, there were others still ahead of me in the queue. In the end, there was almost an understanding between us, we had got the measure of one another and I noticed his face bore what was almost a smile of satisfaction, encouragement, even dare I say, a pride of sorts, and from a certain perspective, I had to acknowledge, with good reason, [...] by the end of the day I felt that something within me had broken down irreparably; from then on, every morning I believed that would be the last morning I would get up; with every step I took, that I could not possibly take another; with every movement I made, that I would be incapable of making another; and yet for all that; for the time being, I still managed to accomplish it each and every time. (Kertész 2004, 170)

The guard's promise establishes a special relationship between him and Köves, which puts the protagonist in a privileged position and which, at the same time, places a particularly heavy burden on him, since the guard's promise can only be fulfilled through his work. The guard's behaviour encourages Köves to stop dropping the bag; to stop disappointing the guard, to follow his gaze, watching his every tiny movement, just as the guard follows his movements. In this two-way relationship, a kind of complicity develops between the guard and the prisoner ("In the end, there was almost an understanding"), which might lead us to conclude that Köves' self-exploitative effort is based, as if in a self-exciting way, precisely in the guard's perceived satisfaction, encouragement, pride, i.e. it becomes conceivable as a function of the recognition he receives for keeping his promise. The symbolic exchange relations that emerge here between Köves' willpower and his perceived recognition of it override Köves' physical capacity for performance. This is why the fulfilment of the guard's promise can only be achieved at the cost of the protagonist's future. In other words, the soldier's promise can only be fulfilled if he sacrifices the promise of survival. The way in which the promise is fulfilled here, manifesting an asymmetrical structure, creates a break between the present and the future of Köves, presenting the latter as unthinkable. The break that occurs in the scene of the cement sack is thus the result of the fact that Köves – whose camp behaviour is influenced by the striving to become a model prisoner plays a very significant role (Szirák 2022, 393) – is dominated by a cycle of purely symbolic values (will, aspiration – satisfaction, encouragement, pride). This temporarily blurs the position of the prisoner, imprisoned in a concentration camp and deprived of his rights, and the guard who supervises and controls him, making their relationship "almost"

perceived by the protagonist as a human bond, outside or beyond the real context.

The break between present and future in Kertész's novel threatens the basic structure of survival, the structure of metalepsis. What is "broken down irreparably" in the protagonist is, from this point of view, nothing other than the capacity to make the present accessible through the operation of interchanging the present with the future, life with survival, thereby establishing the possibility of the latter.

The drastic deterioration of Köves' condition from this point onwards brings the protagonist closer and closer to the "Muselmänner" in the camp. One of the crucial questions concerning the meaning of the novel is whether he crosses the border and becomes a Muselmann himself. In the *Gályanapló*, as in the diary entries on which it is based, Kertész answers this question with a clear yes (one may also note, however, that *Fatelessness*, as in the *Gályanapló*, the Muselmann appears in an increasingly broader range of meanings), which means, among other things, that this state of affairs is reversible and survivable (Sipos 2021, 199-200). Agamben, in analysing various testimonies, sees the difference between the Muselmann and the survivor however in the fact that while the former cannot bear witness to the horrors they have experienced, the latter can. This is due to the fact that the paradox of the testimony put forth by Levi is precisely that only those who have undergone the experience of being murdered at Auschwitz can provide a "complete" testimony about the camp, as the experience of those who were murdered was lost with them (Levi 1988, 42; 70; 103).

At a point in *Fatelessness*, already discussed from another angle, in the heat of the debate, Köves seems to be discussing similar things, implicitly thematising both the "shame of the survivor" (Levi 1988, 64) and, in Levi's words, the "incomplete" nature of the testimony: "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" (Kertész 2004, 259). Köves' survival, as seen, is a "blot", a "fly in the ointment", an "accident"; something that could be turned against him, as if the knowledge he possesses and testifies to in relation to the camp is not complete to the furthest extent. As if it lacks the authenticating moment of death, or of Levi and Agamben: the Muselmann as a counter-signature marking the threshold of human existence (Levi 1988; Agamben 2017; Farrell 2011), and thus the indistinguishability of life and death, the human and the non-human, which according to Köves's interpretive linkage, Bandi Citrom might have seen in Köves' eyes (Kertész 2004, 172-173).

In Agamben, the figure of Muselmann is first and foremost a position produced by the camp (a historical form of bare life), which makes sense at the structural level of the intertwined philosophical problem of biopolitics and testimony, as the final point of biopolitical operations.

As an “absolute biopolitical substance”, the “*Muselmann* of Auschwitz is [...] defined by a loss of all will and consciousness” (Agamben 2017, 817, 790). The complete transformation into a *Muselmann*, from this perspective, disconnects body and consciousness, even eliminating the possibility of self-reflexivity, and thus, by smashing all the economic systems and acts that could potentially be established for the sake of survival (exchange is always a relationship of trust existing in temporal slips, and therefore never without a future horizon [Fogarasi 2022, 101]), eliminates the self. In this context, the most important dilemma concerning the *Muselmann* is not how to interpret Bandi Citrom’s gaze, but, in the depiction of Köves’s subjectivity, whether the event of transformation actually occurs in Kertész’s novel (Sipos 2021, Zsadányi 2019) or not (Szirák 2022).

In the seventh chapter of the novel, when Köves is transported back from the hospital to the concentration camp, his body’s previously established non-self, which is deepened both by its character as an object – already beginning in the hospital – and by its designation as “earthly remains” (Kertész 2004, 184), is reversed in a crucial sentence of the novel. This occurs after a prisoner, whose voice is familiar to the protagonist, and whose voice he hasn’t heard for a long time, saying (“I... p... pro... test...” [Kertész 2004, 187]), signalling his life and thus drawing the attention of the workers, who have come to collect the lifeless bodies, to Köves. The testimony to the will to live, which Köves experience, in this situation is directly linked to the perception of a very specific sight and a corresponding smell. The narrative tells us that they trigger the protagonist’s relief and then his affirmation of life:

Here and there, more suspect plumes of smoke mingled with more benign vapors, while a familiar-sounding clatter drifted up faintly my way from somewhere, like bells in dreams, and as I gazed down across the scene, I caught sight of a procession of bearers, poles on shoulders, groaning under the weight of steaming cauldrons, and from far off I recognized, there could be no doubting it, a whiff of turnip soup in the acrid air. A pity, because it must have been that spectacle, that aroma, which cut through my numbness to trigger an emotion, the growing waves of which were able to squeeze, even from my dried-out eyes, a few warmer drops amid the dankness that was soaking my face. Despite all deliberation, sense, insight and sober reason, I could not fail to recognize within myself the furtive and yet – ashamed as it might be, so to say, of its irrationality – increasingly insistent voice of some muffled craving of sorts: I would like to live a little bit

longer in this beautiful concentration camp. (Kertész 2004, 189)

The will to live manifests itself as a kind of shame (e.g. Kertész 2004, 200). The survivor feels shame for wanting to survive; for having made what he considered to be a rational choice about his life (Köves responds to the survivor's protests by saying, "I resolved than that I, for my part, was going to be more sensible." [Kertész 2004, 187]), is overridden by a program of self-preservation that is not rational, but which undoubtedly has an effect on consciousness and which guides it, manifested by the sight of soup-carriers, the smell of soup, and by the emotional reaction to it, the interplay of senses and affections. From this point of view, not only does Köves not become a Muselmann, but, as can be seen, the smell of the soup and the sight of its carriers are able to override the temporary suspension of the metalepsis of survival (already anticipated by the formulation of the desire to avoid a painful death [Erdődy 2008, 32]), caused by the prevalence of symbolic exchange relations in the scene of the cement bag carrying. The shame of the surviving witness, Köves, lies precisely in the fact that his words are not authenticated by his own death; that they are not, and can never become, the words of the Muselmann; and that life, as the novel's memorable conclusion points out, cannot be continued, yet it must continue (Kertész 2004, 262). The Muselmann defines the language of *Fatelessness* precisely by making the protagonist's incessantly flowing speech accessible from the direction of the impossibility of speech, at the same time as drawing attention to the fact that the witness can only speak through the impossibility of speech (Agamben 2017). The Muselmann is the silent domain of language, a language without language, present in all testimony, always reminding us that the one who speaks, speaks for others, but not for those whose destiny is to become a Muselmann – a "full-fledged" but silent witness.

The second hospital, to which the protagonist is taken in chapter eight, after he is discovered to be alive among those lying on the ground, is a kind of transition zone between the two great economic systems of the novel. Here, Köves encounters no operations primarily characteristic of either the camp or the world outside the camp. The hospital and the road leading to it, whose relations the protagonist does not really understand and only slowly gets used to the norms prevailing there, can be understood as a place of give-away, where Köves, as the novel emphasizes, receives goods for no consideration, "without any interest" (Szirák 2003, 56; Spiró 1983, 5): "Then [...] they pushed two objects into my hands. One was a bowl of warm coffee, the other a hunk of bread, roughly one-sixth of a loaf, I estimated. I was allowed to take them and consume them without payment or barter." (Kertész 2004, 191-192) This odd event is followed by a scheduled sugar lump from the doctor, which he places on the beds of the patients, and then, in the hospital room in one of the "neat green barracks", since the nurse, Pyetyka, is

interested not in Köves' number but in his name, it is the return of the name – albeit written down in a corrupted form ('Kevisztjerz') – that takes place (Kertész 2004, 201), only to be followed by another nurse, Bohús, who does not even wait to be thanked. The "aneconomic" (Derrida 1992, 7) world of the hospital, that is breaking the circulation of symbolic and material goods, of giving and receiving, and that is more human than anything previously known, is interpreted by the protagonist as a miracle ("I have to say that over time, one can become accustomed even to miracles" [Kertész 2004, 225]). From this point of view, the miracle does not simply consist in the temporary suspension of economic systems at points or over a longer time span, but in the norming of aneconomic relations, which at the same time leads to the habituation of the miracle, and ultimately to its profanation.

3. Conclusions

Three scenes, three economic models: one that hides its own organising principle (home); one that makes it explicit (camp); and one that opens up a zone on the border between the two that, by its aneconomic nature, puts both into critical perspective (hospital). While in the first case, Köves refers to himself repeatedly as a parental property in relation to a possessive relation, in the context of the second, he defines himself in relation to different camp functions (Kertész 2004, 25, 31, 113), while in the third situation he defines himself as an agent who participates in the miracle, and at the same time, an agent who inevitably consumes the miracle.

"Yes, in a sense life was purer and simpler there." But simpler and cleaner from what? What, in these contexts, would be the meaning of simplicity, and even more worrying, the concept of purity? It is impossible to give a reassuring answer to this question, and yet, from the perspective of the above, it could even be argued that it is above all the nature of the exchange relations between people in different contexts, and the interpretability of these relations by the protagonists, that is worth reflecting on here. Reflecting on the fact that the world outside the concentration camp in *Fatelessness* is emphatically unknowable and inaccessible, cannot be rationally explained, since it is governed by causal relations that constantly conceal their own operability. Just as the aesthetics of the "more attractive" (Kertész 2004, 10) stars at the beginning of the novel obscure the inhumanity behind them; just as Sütő's assistance masks the family fortune and the later acquisition of Köves' stepmother (it is telling that the uncles thematise this as a kind of absolute debt repayment: "She owes her a lot, »everything, as a matter of fact«" [Kertész 2004, 254-255]); the way the gendarme who takes valuables from the deportees invokes patriotism and the ticket inspector later refers to the law; the way the journalist creates the appearance of altruism in order to achieve his own ends; the way the words of

Fleischmann and Steiner are used to neutralise the threat to the basic structure of subjectivity; or more generally: just as the protagonist becomes conceived of as a possession as a result of the legal proceedings brought about by the conflict between his father and mother, Köves constantly finds himself in a context in which the underlying causes are not made visible or comprehensible.

By contrast, the basic relations of the camp, which can only be revealed in the novel as forms of the means-ends relation, are organised by the economics of survival. The latter transforms human relations into immanent exchanges, seen from the direction of the economic system (e.g. Kertész 2004, 154), whose transactional organization must remain transparent in order to remain functional (the cement bag scene is precisely an example of what happens when this requirement is not met). The manifestation of the aneconomic world of the hospital shows precisely how Köves is awed, even distrustful, of the breaking of the immanence of exchange relations, which leads him to interpret this event as a manifestation of transcendence: the breaking of the economic order is a miracle, since it is not of this worldly origin and thus establishes relations that cannot be integrated into the protagonist's paralytically rational discourse.

Bibliography

- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen and others. Stanford UP, 2017.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Erdődy, Edit. *Kertész Imre*. Balassi, 2008.
- Farrell, Joseph. "The Strange Case of the Muselmänner in Auschwitz." *New Reflections on Primo Levi. Before and After Auschwitz*, edited by Risa Sodi and Millicent Marcus, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 89-99.
- Fogarasi, György. "Az adomány mint zsákmány: Máté és Marx a pénzmágról" [Donation as Loot: Matthew and Marx on Seed Money]. *Kapitalizmus és irodalomtörténet* [Capitalism and Literary History], edited by András Csaba and Hites Sándor, reciti, 2022, pp. 69-102.
- Földényi, F. László. *Az irodalom gyanúba keveredett: Kertész Imre-szótár* [Literature has Come Under Suspicion: An Imre Kertész Dictionary]. Magvető, 2007.
- Karl, Marx. *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, edited by Frederick Engels, Progress Publishers, 1996. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf>
- Kertész, Imre. *A holocaust mint kultúra: Három előadás* [Holocaust as Culture: Three Lectures]. Századvég, 1993.

- . *Fatelessness. A Novel*. Translated by Tim Wilkinson. Vintage Books, 2004.
- Levi, Primo. *The Drowned and the Saved*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal, Summit Books, 1988.
- Molnár, Gábor Tamás. "Fikcióalkotás és történelemszemlélet: Kertész Imre: *Sorstalanság*" [Fictionalization and the View of History: Imre Kertész: *Fatelessness*]. *Alföld*, vol. 47, no. 8, 1996, pp. 57-71.
- Pór, Péter. "Köves Gyuri utazása a Rossz birodalmában. Megjegyzések Kertész Imre *Sorstalanság* című regényének értelmezéséhez" [The Journey of Gyuri Köves in the Realm of Evil: Notes on the Interpretation of Imre Kertész' *Fatelessness*], translated by Bende József, *Vigilia*, vol. 69, no. 11, 2004, pp. 840-849.
- Schein, Gábor. "Összekötni az összeköthetetlen: Megjegyzések Kertész Imre prózájához" [Connecting the Unconnectable: Notes on Imre Kertész' Prose]. *Jelenkor*, vol. 45, no. 12, 2002, pp. 1296-1303.
- Schmitz, Hermann. *Der Leib*. De Gruyter, 2011.
- Sipos, Balázs. "Sonderberg bűne: Ábrahám- és testvérháborúk" [Sonderberg's Sin: Abrahamic Brother Wars]. *Identitás, nyelv, trauma: Tanulmányok Kertész Imréről* [Identity, Language, Trauma: Studies on Imre Kertész], edited by György Péter, Magvető, 2021, pp. 173-250.
- Spiró, György. "Non habent sua fata. A *Sorstalanság* – újraolvasva" [Non habent sua fata: *Fatelessness* – Reread]. *Élet és Irodalom*, vol. 27, no. 30, 1983, p. 5.
- Szirák, Péter. "(Nem) hasonlít. Még egyszer a *Sorstalanságról*" [(Un) analogy: Once More on *Fatelessness*]. *Irodalomtörténet*, vol. 103, no. 4, 2022, pp. 383-396.
- . *Kertész Imre*. Kalligram, 2003.
- Szegedy-Maszák, Mihály. *A megértés módjai: fordítás és hatástörténet* [Ways of Understanding: Translation and History of Influence]. Akadémiai Kiadó, 2003.
- Vári, György. *Kertész Imre: Buchenwald fölött az ég* [Imre Kertész: The Sky Above Buchenwald]. Kijarat, 2003.
- Zsadányi, Edit. "The Abject as Body Language in Imre Kertész's *Fateless* and Alaine Polcz's *One Woman in the War*", *Hungarian Cultural Studies*, vol. 12, 2019, pp. 92-107.

Author's profile

Gergő Balogh is an assistant professor at the Department of Hungarian Literature, University of Szeged. His main research interests include: the history and theory of poetry; literary and cultural history of Hungarian modernity; literature and law; the educational, economical, and political aspects of literary production, theories of linguistic performativity.