

Fatelessness

Sorstalanság

Presented by: Filip Kučeković

Imre Kertész's novel *Fatelessness* (*Sorstalanság*) is part of a rather extensive literary tradition that deals with the Holocaust as one of the most traumatic events in human history. Kertész's partly autobiographical novel is specific in that it deals with the Hungarian Jews, whose systematic extermination only begins in 1944. Until then, the Hungarian regent Miklós Horthy had passed several racist laws against the Jews, but hesitated to initiate their mass deportation to concentration and death camps in order to keep open the possibility of switching to the side of the Allies in the event of the collapse of the Third Reich. When this was out of the question in spring 1944, Hitler ordered the occupation of Hungary and in just under two months, from May to July, 440,000 Hungarian Jews were deported to various camps, most of them to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Kertész's novel, narrated in the first person from the perspective of fourteen-year-old György Köves, begins at precisely this moment. His father is conscripted into forced labour and the family says goodbye to him, knowing full well that they will most likely never see him again. György suddenly has to grow up and work, which is why he is given a work permit and goes to work outside the Jewish ghetto every day. As this is against the racial laws, which restrict the freedom of movement of Jews in certain parts of the city, he is dragged off the bus one day by the police together with other workers from the Jewish ghetto and taken first to Auschwitz, then to the Buchenwald camp and finally to Zeitz. There György is liberated, and the last part of the novel follows his return to Budapest and his encounters with family, friends and neighbours who were not deported to the camps, but who have already been told terrible and unbelievable stories about life in the camps.

In his treatment of the subject, *Fatelessness* is in the tradition of Holocaust prose, which was defined by one of the first novels on the subject, *If This Is a Man* (*Se questo è un uomo*, 1947). He follows on from Levi, who came to the conclusion that the Holocaust is better described in an objective, neutral and even cold narrative, so that its horrors are not hidden behind a dismayed narrator in a heightened emotional state. Kertész thus extends his idea of how Holocaust literature should be beyond its boundaries, which is why it can be interpreted as a criticism of the tendency to read Holocaust literature as testimony and thus to blunt its political character.

This is made possible by the choice of a four-year-old boy as narrator, who has limited cognitive abilities due to his experience and knowledge, which is why everything that happens to him is interpreted extremely literally and objectively, more objectively even than Levi's protagonist. It is precisely the serenity and absence of emotion in the narrative that makes this novel more frightening than those Levi speaks against. The consequence is the impossibility of identifying with the characters, which distances the text even further from the phenomenon it describes and from the reader, making it truly autonomous, from other realities and the reader, and thus political. The

absence of identification as a principle on which the relationship between the reader and the text, and then any community, is built is evident in the description of the narrator's first encounter with the camp and the prisoners in it, who wear striped uniforms reminiscent of prison uniforms: „It was easy to work out that over there, clearly, must be where the convicts lived. Maybe because this was the first chance I had to spare the time for it, they now began to intrigue me for the first time, and I would have been curious to know what offenses they had committed.“ (82) György himself refuses to identify with the prisoners he finds in the camp, as he assumes that they are wearing striped uniforms because of the crimes they have committed, and he will maintain this view of the camp until liberation.

The refusal to identify himself is also evident in the first-person narrator's style. In the peripheral parts of the novel, before being sent to the camp and after liberation, free indirect speech is very present in the narrative, in which György combines his own words and thoughts with those of other characters, commenting and reflecting on them. In the middle section of the novel, free indirect speech is conspicuously absent, and the narrator's consciousness refuses to integrate the consciousness of others into his own and thus establish relationships of identification.

Another important moment of the manifestation of the political in Kertész's novel is the rejection of the paradigm of witnessing, which is often associated with the body of literature about the Holocaust and according to which the literary text serves as a transmission of a specific experience. Towards the end of the novel, when György returns to Budapest, a journalist stops him on the street and asks him about the camps he was in. When he suggests that they describe the hell of the camps together, György replies: „...I had nothing at all to say about that as I was not acquainted with hell and couldn't even imagine what was that like.“ (248) György rejects the proposal to describe and convey imprisonment metaphorically as hell as impossible, because every experience, even the one the reader has read in Kertész's novel so far, cannot be reduced to anything without a certain excess that changes it and on the basis of which it cannot be described as testimony.

In the case of *Fatelessness*, this excess is literary, and this is precisely what makes the novel political, because it does not distance itself from the two usual points to which texts about the Holocaust are reduced: identification with the victims and the treatment of the literary text as testimony. These are the mechanisms that deny the text its political character by limiting its interpretative possibilities and assigning it tasks that a literary text neither can nor should fulfil.

LANGUAGE: Hungarian/Magyar nyelv

This title was not censored before publishing