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Fateless

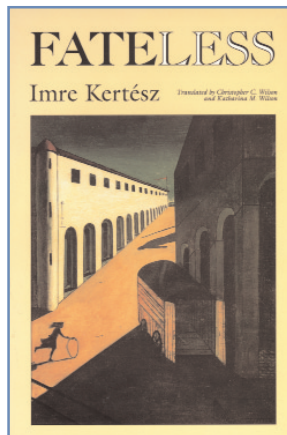
by Imre Kertész

Translated by Christopher C. Wilson and Katherine M. Wilson. Northwestern University Press. 191 pp. \$19.95.

THE PROPHET OF AUSCHWITZ: ESSAY BY JUDITH BOLTON-FASMAN

The 2002 Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to Imre Kertész, a Hungarian Jewish writer whose imprisonment in Auschwitz and Buchenwald as a teenager is central to his body of work. Kertész's masterpiece, *Fateless*, is a spare, powerful novel told in the voice of Gyorgy Koves, a fifteen-year-old boy who is deported to Auschwitz and later liberated from Buchenwald. *Fateless* was specifically cited by the Academy as a novel in which "Auschwitz is not an exceptional occurrence that like [sic] in an alien body subsists outside the normal history of Western Europe. It is the ultimate truth about degradation in modern existence."

That truth, crystalline and pure, makes *Fateless* a paradoxical, enduring work of fragile beauty. Gyorgy, who narrates Kertész's autobiographical trilogy, is a sturdy, wide-eyed observer whose fictional experiences in the Holocaust closely parallel those of the author. At first glance Gyorgy appears detached, naïve, and even willfully blind to his situation. But his cool, steady voice fearlessly relates both the ordinary minutiae and the unspeakable crimes that come together in the horror of the concentration camps. At the end of *Fateless*, Gyorgy returns to an indifferent Budapest, and his story continues in a second book, *Fiasco*. After a long string of rejections, Gyorgy, who is well into middle age, finally publishes his memoirs of Auschwitz, only to be repeatedly disturbed by the thought of exposing his inner life. The third book in Kertész's trilogy, *Kaddish For a Child Not Born*, is Gyorgy's detailed explanation of why he could not bring a child into a world that made Auschwitz possible.



Kaddish, the Jewish prayer of mourning, embodies the kind of paradox that Kertész brilliantly exploits in his work. A prayer in which death is never mentioned, it focuses instead on the glories of God as manifested in this world. It is a prayer bound up in both the present and the future. Gyorgy senses this in a harrowing scene towards the end of *Fateless*, in which he and his fellow inmates are forced to witness the hanging of three prisoners who had attempted to escape. Gyorgy recognizes a rabbi who is quietly uttering the Kaddish among the spectators:

...barely audible but constant, like some rumbling from beneath the earth...I knew that this was the so-called Kaddish, the prayer of Jews to honor their dead. Possibly this, too, was just simply an aspect of stubbornness, a final and perhaps – I had to admit – somewhat forced one because it was pretailored, pre-designed, and useless (because, after all, nothing had changed up front, and except for the few, final struggles of the ones hanging, nothing had moved, nothing was affected by these words). Yet I somehow understood the emotion with which the rabbi's face seemed to dissolve and the force by which even his nostrils trembled in such a strange way. It was as if that long-awaited moment had arrived, that certain victorious moment... And indeed, at that moment and for the first time (I can't explain why), I too felt a sense of loss, even a little envy. This was the first time I regretted a little that I wasn't able – if only for a few phrases – to pray in the language of the Jews. (PAGE 119)

A muted optimism animates *Fateless*. Gyorgy, a forward-looking narrator, anticipates the changes he is about to experience with the peculiar joy and curiosity of the uninitiated. And Kertész's linear narrative records the surprisingly fascinating ways in which daily life proceeds in the camps. Kertész addressed this phenomenon in his Nobel lecture:

...the hero of my novel does not live his own time in

the concentration camps, for neither his time nor his language, not even his own person, is really his. He doesn't remember; he exists. So he has to languish, poor boy, in the dreary trap of linearity, and cannot shake off the painful details. Instead of a spectacular series of great and tragic moments, he has to live through everything, which is oppressive and offers little variety, like life itself.

But the method led to remarkable insights. Linearity demanded that each situation that arose be completely filled out.

Kertesz also plays with this linearity in his subtle exploration of memory. While every moment in the camps is accounted for – the roll call, the soup line, the showers, the ragged clothes, the punishing work – Gyorgy looks back and says, "...it was as if all these fading, rather unimaginable, barely reconstructible events hadn't taken place in the normal confines of minutes, hours, days, weeks and months, but so to speak, all at once...." (PAGE 186)

Toward the end of *Fateless*, Kertesz brilliantly alludes to Dante's *Inferno* in a quiet yet cinematic gesture. Gyorgy has just returned to Budapest, still wearing the striped uniform of the camps and facing the questions of a curious bystander:

'Shouldn't we picture the concentration camp like hell?' he asked. I answered, while drawing circles in the dust with my heels, that people were free to ignore it according to their means and pleasure but that, as far as I was concerned, I was only able to picture the concentration camp because I knew it a bit, but I didn't know hell at all. 'But, still, if you tried,' he insisted. After a few more circles, I answered, 'In that case I'd imagine it as a place where you can't be bored. But,' I added, 'you can be bored in a concentration camp, even in Auschwitz – given, of course, certain circumstances.' Then he fell silent and asked, almost as if it was against his will: 'How do you explain that?' After giving it some thought, I said, 'By the time.' 'What do you mean by time?' 'Because time helps.' 'Helps? How?' 'It helps in every way.' (PAGE 181)

During his incarceration, Gyorgy further notices that "with time one even becomes accustomed to miracles." Miracles in Auschwitz? It's a bold yet logical suggestion. Gyorgy takes it a step further by acknowledging that there were genuine moments of happiness for him in the camps. "Even back there, in the shadow of the chimneys, in the

breaks between pain, there was something resembling happiness. Everybody will ask me about the deprivations, the 'terrors of the camps,' but for me, the happiness there will always be the most memorable experience, perhaps." (PAGE 191)

That happiness is evident in Gyorgy's friendships, his delight at finding the extra potato in his soup, his gratitude that water trickles out of the shower. The very extremity of his plight anchored him to everyday life and enabled him to triumph over his fatelessness. In his Nobel lecture, Kertesz addresses "...the need to step out of the mesmerizing crowd, out of history which renders you faceless and fateless. To my horror, I realized that ten years after I had returned from the Nazi concentration camps, and halfway still under the awful spell of Stalinist terror, all that remained of the whole experience were a few muddled impressions, a few anecdotes. Like it didn't even happen to me, as people are wont to say."

Gyorgy exemplifies those words when he says that he "lived out a given fate. It wasn't my fate, but I am the one who lived it to the end." Kertesz the writer elaborates that he was able to write so effectively about the Holocaust by living under Communist oppression. Gyorgy says as much in Buchenwald. "I have heard it said before, and now I can attest to its truth: narrow prison walls cannot set limits to the flights of our imagination." (PAGE 188)

Ultimately the intimate knowledge of Auschwitz unleashes the furious power of imagination for Kertesz himself. "When I am thinking of a new novel," the writer has said, "I always think of Auschwitz." For the adamantly secular Kertesz, Auschwitz is Torah, the experience from which the laws of life are explicated. A famous passage in the Mishna about the Torah implores one to "turn it and turn it again, for everything is contained therein." For Kertesz, coming back again and again to the Auschwitz experience is not a return to the past, but an act of Jewish prophecy. For Jewish prophecy is not concerned with predicting the future, but with having an impact on the present.

By that definition alone, Imre Kertesz is a Jewish prophet, a standing that is readily corroborated in his fiction, essays, and Nobel lecture:

Old prophecies speak of the death of God. Since Auschwitz we are more alone, that much is certain. We must create our values ourselves, day by day, with that persistent though invisible ethical work that will give them life, and perhaps turn them into the foundation of

a new European culture. I consider the prize with which the Swedish Academy has seen fit to honor my work as an indication that Europe again needs the experience that witnesses to Auschwitz, to the Holocaust were forced to acquire.

Judith Bolton-Fasman is a writer in the greater Boston area.

SELECTED PASSAGES

It was tiny, gray, and entirely deserted, with small closed windows and with that ridiculously steep roof that I had been seeing ever since yesterday. Before my very eyes it solidified into a concrete outline in the misty dawn, changing from gray to lilac, and then all at once its windows glistened red as the first rays struck them. Others observed this too, and I recounted it all to the curious. They asked if I could see a name above it. I did: namely, I saw the words in the early light on the narrower side of the building facing in our direction under the roof. Auschwitz-Birkenau was what I read, written in the fancy ornate letters of the Germans, with the two words connected by a double-curved hyphen. I for one canvassed my geographic knowledge in vain; others proved no wiser than I about the place. Then I sat down, because people behind me were asking for my place and because it was still early, and since I was tired, I soon fell asleep once more. (PP. 56-57)

I remember far few details from the subsequent days. Just as in the brick factory, only a general feeling or impression remained. Defining it would be difficult. During these days there was much to be learned, seen, and experienced. Once or twice during these days I was touched by the cold of that same strange, peculiar feeling that I felt when I first saw the women. It also happened once or twice when I found myself in a ring of shocked, incredulous faces staring at one another repeating: "What do you say to that? What do you say to that?" And the answer in these situations was either nothing or always the same: "Terrible." But that is not the word, that is not exactly the term I would use to characterize Auschwitz, speaking entirely for myself, naturally. (PP.85-86)

We can never start a new life. We can only continue the old one. I took my own steps. No one else did. And I remained honest in the end to my given fate. The only stain or beauty flaw, I might say the only incorrectness, that

anyone could accuse me of is maybe the fact that we are talking now. But that is not my doing. Do you still want all this horror and all of my previous steps to lose their meaning entirely? Why this sudden turn, why this opposition? Why can't you see that if there is such a thing as fate, then there is no freedom? If, on the other hand...there is freedom, then there is no fate. That is...we ourselves are fate. (PP. 188-189)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Gyorgy Koves, the fifteen-year-old narrator of *Fateless*, notes that Hebrew is not a language he knows. How does that affect his seeming detachment from his situation?
 - 2) In his Nobel lecture, Imre Kertesz says, "in my writings the Holocaust could never be present in the past tense." What are the implications of his statement? How are these implications manifested in *Fateless*?
 - 3) What exactly does it mean to become "fateless?" Is there more than one meaning?
 - 4) What dramatic effects does Kertesz's linear narrative achieve?
- Gyorgy observes that intentions and distinctions disappear in camp life. How is this reflected in the novel?
- 5) What is the role of imagination in Gyorgy's survival?
 - 6) Upon Gyorgy's return, he was advised to "forget the terrors so that you may live." Why does he find this impossible to do?
 - 7) In his Nobel lecture, Kertesz remarks that "being a Jew to me is once again, first and foremost, a moral challenge." How does that relate to Gyorgy's fate?
 - 8) Is Kertesz a prophet in the Jewish sense of the word?

- 9) Early in the novel, Gyorgy's uncle tells him that he is "part of the common Jewish fate." What does that mean? For the uncle it means "a millennium of continuing persecution" doled out by God in reprisal for the sins of our ancestors. Does that resonate in the novel? [JR](#)

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