

Being an Object, Being a Person

Indirect interpersonality in Imre Kertész's oeuvre

"Good people are on the side of war"

Robert Musil

In the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, individuals, under pressure or by conformism, were reduced to their mere functions; in post-totalitarian conditions, after losing their function, people became particularized as consumers, ignorant users. Both power-structures, the dictatorial and the post-dictatorial one are based on depersonalization and exclusion. More precisely, there is an interdependent relationship between the lack of personality and the solidarity of people and dictatorship: people assume less their personality withdrawing in their private life, they manifest less solidarity; authorities become more dictatorial, and vice versa, stronger is the control, the common institutions (schools, public spaces, cultural institutions, justice etc.) are more subordinate to the private interest of leaders; it is more difficult to build up the networks of solidarity, it is more risky to assume one's personality.

I have recently realized that there's a possibility to misunderstand the Nobel prize laudation of Imre Kertész's oeuvre, closing it into the role of the chronicle of past times: "for writing that upholds the fragile experience of the individual against the barbaric arbitrariness of history", even if what it follows stands against historicization by considering Auschwitz a universal experience: "For him Auschwitz is not an exceptional occurrence that like an alien body subsists outside the normal history of Western Europe. It is the ultimate truth about human degradation in modern existence."

*Kaddish for an Unborn Child*¹ and *Liquidation*², and many essays, diaries, notes and interviews takes us beyond the comforting boundaries of "the barbaric arbitrariness of history". Comforting, because being part of history suggests that those times are gone. In contrast, the contemporary individual in Kertész's works appears as even more fragile. His/her fragility is even more outstanding, as the unspeakable sufferings didn't become shared knowledge. Most of contemporary people are excluded from culture, only the products of cultural industry are accessible. Judith says in *Liquidation*, that visiting Auschwitz she felt herself as in a show in an open-air museum; the author himself answers to Iris Radisch's question: "Once I was invited in Buchenwald, where I saw people limping around costumed in prisoners' uniform. It was tasteless."³

¹ Imre Kertész, *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* (Translated by Tim Wilkinson. New York: Vintage, 2004)

² Imre Kertész, *Liquidation*. (Translated by Tim Wilkinson. New York: Knopf, 2004)

³ Imre Kertész beklagt die "Holocaust-Industrie". *Die Zeit*, 11 September 2013, <http://www.zeit.de/kultur/literatur/2013-09/Imre-Kertesz-Vorab> (accessed April 8, 2016)

In *Mentés másként*⁴ [Save As] he calls our contemporary society a “free-market democracy”. That’s a tender and precise way of expressing himself. Free market homogenizes phenomena, surrenders them to capital, something without price becomes also senseless or at least invisible. The so called ‘free’ market implies the fake universality of money and the particularization of people, their division, according to their consuming habits. It is a continuous segmentation process, a construction of closed identities incapable to communicate to each other. B. from the novel originally appeared in 2003, *Liquidation* sees no reason in publishing his novel. In his suicide note he asks his former wife to burn the manuscript, as “I do not want to go to the tumultuous literary fair, I do not want to promote my merchandise.”⁵

Besides continuing to search the ways of forming autonomous and free decisions in our contemporary society, interpreting Imre Kertész’s novels inside of the frames of 20th century’s totalitarianisms is obscuring the fact that these novels expose and surpass the conditions of being an object, being a subordinate. Köves from the *Fatelessness* and from the *Fiasco*⁶, B. from the *Kaddish* and from the *Liquidation* not only succeeds to step out the role that makes him an object, a role that uniformizes his fate according to some particular qualities, he doesn’t find a mere one-off and exotic, an only private way, but the possibility of solidarity, of the freedom of the other person, of the universal existence.

Being personal means articulating the individual existence beyond its particular givens, his/her historical/ethnic/religious/gender etc. data without claiming to be general; to give room to the other, no matter from where he/she comes; to articulate his/her individual existence also without claiming to be general. Being personal is not some genetic inheritance, personality cannot be delimited, and as it doesn’t run out whenever it is given, it is totally unfit for consuming. Relying on Marx’s example, the *War and Peace* never runs out, never can be part of the circulation of commodities, because it is the same for it to be read by 5 or 5000 people.

Being personal doesn’t have anything to do with privacy that cuts out a part for only itself. And being personal is not equivalent with subjectivity either, which gives up taking responsibility and the possibility of communication with anybody, so unwillingly becomes a proof for the arbitrariness and hopelessness of existence. Privacy doesn’t want; subjectivity cannot express universal issues. Personal messages come into existence by communication. Privacy and subjectivity pleads for its own privileges; a personal utterance invites other personal manifestations.

Köves Gyurka oversteps the depersonalization⁷ related to the dictatorial regime and to the clichés of different particularisms self-satisfied by their own privileges only when he assumes responsibility for the arbitrary occurrences and compulsive situations of his life: “I also made my own steps, not only in the line of Birkenau, but here, at home, too. I stepped with my father and I stepped with my mother, I stepped with Annamaria and I stepped – maybe the most difficult – with the elder sister. [...] It was not my fate, but I lived it – and I cannot take it why they do not understand that I have to do something with it, I have to adjust somewhere or to something, I cannot content myself by

⁴ Imre Kertész, *Mentés másként* (Budapest: Magvető, 2011)

⁵ In original: „Nem akarom felütni sátram az irodalmi zsidóvásár piacterén, nem akarom kitergetni a portékámat.” - Imre Kertész, *Felszámolás* (Budapest: Magvető, 2003), 96.

⁶ Imre Kertész, *Fiasco* (Translated by Tim Wilkinson. New York: Melville House Publishing, 2011)

⁷ Kertész speaks about the “depersonalization” of the hero of the *Fatelessness* in his *Galley Diary*: “It is a story of depersonalization that is evolving as slowly as it would be a story of a personality.” – Imre Kertész, *Gályanapló* (Budapest: Holnap Kiadó, 1992), 21.

considering it a mistake, a bad luck, a random derailment, or, perchance, that it did not even happen. [...] I cannot take in that stupid bitterness of being just innocent.”⁸

Here Imre Kertész rejects the most elementary dichotomy, the abundantly appearing cliché, the mythical opposition of good and evil, innocence and guilt. He doesn't accept the role of the innocent prepared for him. By rejecting this role, he rejects to contribute to the system that considers the concentration camps a necessity. “I was a modestly striving, not always irreproachable advancing member of the silent conspiracy against my life”⁹ – says B. to his wife in *Kaddish* just before he steps over the actual conventional role, that of a father's.

In the novel *Fiasco*, innocence is the obstacle of sense-giving to the world and the personal existence in it. According to the most stable and most unthoughtful convention, oppositions are considered guarantees of safety. Besides, they release from taking responsibility. The carefulness of somebody relying on oppositions is decreasing, so he/she becomes more defenseless, and, finally, more endangered.

When Hannah Arendt reporting of Adolf Eichmann's trial speaks about the banality of Evil, when arguing that this man was not the embodiment of the Evil, only an obedient subordinate, she offends this convention. One of the most mysterious characters in *Fiasco*, both a divine and a vulnerable person named Berg tries to put himself in the role of the Eichmannian logics of the subordinate. He writes a monologue entitled “Me, the Executioner”. The utmost difficulty is to express in a single speech the fact of being responsible for the death of thousands of people and the other one: he only executed orders, consequently he cannot be considered responsible.

Berg goes insane by the intrinsic contradiction of the innocent executioner. By his imagination he is capable of realizing that “external pressure is only secondary, in fact it is the projection of the real will that comes into existence whenever the reality is opportune for it”.¹⁰ The problem is that he does not have concrete experience about this real will. Berg, this likeable, sad figure of the book is the only one who doesn't take part in the indifferent and mendacious discourse of the so called communist dictatorship. Berg internalize evil to gain responsibility over it, he does so to avoid to be forced to withdraw in conventional passivity, as almost everyone who do not stand against the havoc. Köves relates in a letter to Berg the story of “The good Jailer”, the missing concrete event, the first cause in the process of which end is the execution of 30.000 people, but the letter doesn't reach Berg, his nerves has already given up to deal with the contradiction that is totally incomprehensible alone, inexpressible on a single voice, in a single story.

⁸ In original: „én is megtettem a magam lépéseit, s nem csupán a birkenai sorban, hanem már itthon. Léptem apámmal, és léptem anyámmal, léptem Annamáriával, és léptem – s mindközött tán a legnehezebbet – a nagyobbik nővéremmel. [...] Nem az én sorsom volt, de én éltem végig – és sehogy se értettem, hogy is nem fér a fejükbe: most már valamit kezdenem kell vele, valahová oda-, valamihez hozzá kell illesztenem, most már elvégre nem érhetem be annyival, hogy tévedés volt, vakeset, afféle kisiklás, vagy hogy meg sem történt, netalántán. [...] nem nyelhetem le azt az ostoba keserűséget, hogy pusztán csak ártatlan legyek.” (*Sorstalanság*, Századvég, Budapest, 1993.207-209.)

⁹ In original: „Egy szerényen igyekvő, nem mindig kifogástalan előmenetelű tagja voltam az életem ellen szőtt hallgatag összeesküvésnek” – Imre Kertész, *Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért* (Budapest: Magvető, 1990), 173.

¹⁰ In original: „a külső kényszer másodlagos csupán, nem egyéb, mint a valódi akarat kivetülése, amely valóra válik, ha a való kedvez neki” – Imre Kertész, *A kudarc* (Budapest: Századvég, 1994), 303.

The first cause for Köves is not that moment when he, as “the good jailer” slaps a disobedient prisoner, but already that situation in which he accepts the role offered to him. For sure, he has no choice; he is forced to accept it. For pragmatic reasons, the only real possibility would be to accept and to execute thoroughly the given task. Kertész reveals us that this construction leads towards reducing people to objects and, in the same time, towards the self-destructing insanity of reality itself.

After more than 25 years it would be too easy to acknowledge the ideologically fictionalized and constructed character of the reality in those days of totalitarianism, only that the validity of Kertész’s propositions does not expire with destroying the Berlin Wall. The fictionalization of reality, where one can be only an innocent subordinate, but responsible person, capable of changing things not, is constructed continuously, even in this very moment. Berg saw it clearly: “external pressure is only secondary, in fact it is the projection of the real will that comes into existence whenever the reality is opportune for it”.

Berg’s thought applies not only to a terroristic system but also to the present formations of power that propagate the futility of active public life, the unpredictable violence of the masses, and the vainness of thinking together, in community. Freedom is restricted to discrete private lives. Conventions work and absolve us from responsibility without even knowing about it. In contrast, precise and sharp phrasing tip us out from comforting (or mere accepted) roles. This is how personal comes to existence, not by indulging some particular identity. This last one concludes in objectification of a person, putting him/her into a seemingly great story, a distractive serial or a statistics with ordered results.¹¹

“Maybe that is what I wanted. Yes, to grab hold, if only in my imagination and by artistic means, of the reality that all too really holds me in its power; to subjectivize my perpetual objectivity, to become the name-giver instead of the named.”¹²

When in his second novel, *Fiasco*, Kertész speaks about the process of writing the *Fatelessness*¹³ (or the process of gaining his personality, because in his case is almost the same) the banal reality is so precisely described that it turns over and becomes the unveiling of its fictitiousness. Writing (or every creative act) is not liberating as self-manifestation but as getting into acquaintance with the world, experiencing and forming a new interaction with it. Anyway, self-manifestation is an illusion. I, what does it mean? Köves Gyurka in the *Fatelessness* “is nothing else than a bunch of

¹¹ Kertész in the notes from the *Save As (Mentés másként)* speaks about the everyday fictionalization of real happenings, the abundance of mythical-conventional fairy-tales, in front of which people socialized to consuming passivity do not have the knowledge or the courage for resistance. (Kertész writes about the basic trauma of the recently begun 21th century, the 9.11.): in the end good succeeds anyway (which good? for sure, that one, which assures us that everything is as good as it, and meantime it happens to be a blockbuster) the so called good succeeds, the good that has nothing in common with you, the mere walking gentleman or you, the showgirl; this role is always given to a star, whose privilege is to survive and to get the amount of money figuring in the contract.”

¹² The term “subjectivize” used in this translation made by Tim Wilkinson is conforming to the original term, but in the Hungarian sentence the grammatical relation was decisive: *subject* who does something with the *object*, without having “subordinate” as another meaning for the term *subject*.

¹³ Imre Kertész, *Fatelessness* (Translated by Tim Wilkinson. New York: Knopf, 2004)

delimitations, reflections and tropisms: he is made to speak only by the sufferings received from the world, otherwise he would not be able of speaking at all; he never makes the world to speak up.”¹⁴

Becoming a person is a revolt, even if the witnesses of this revolt are only Mr. Steiner and the Fleischmanns from the neighborhood; becoming a person is stepping out from the conveniences upholding the such-existing reality; it means the rejection of both roles, that of the victim and that of the executioner, too.¹⁵

Imre Kertész says from time to time in his interviews that he didn't intend to radically renew literature. Perhaps; whatsoever, all his novels are created in a new form, as the process of becoming a person – even if again and again it starts from Auschwitz – seems to be to grab hold the infinitely changing reality. And if the reality has changed in the direction that in Mauthausen happens to be a show of the concentration camp played by figures with contract in regular to please the public, and the Nobel Prize may be considered for some people an opportunity to the commercialize the infinite sufferance caused by the Nazi regime, then the character of the *Liquidation* is invented to be born in Auschwitz.

He is innocent, in the original meaning of the word. He cannot live without constantly remembering Auschwitz; but nevertheless, he cannot live with seeing how it was turned into a spectacular fiction. Preparing and writing his novel during long years became his form of life, his personality. Writing for him is the manifestation of reality. Writing gives sense to his life, his place of birth and his stigma on his body.

According to Alain Badiou, a person is constructed by the faithfulness to his own event, and event, can happen in one's life in 4 fields: politics, mathematics, arts and love.¹⁶ Faithfulness does not mean acceptance of a given thing, instead it is an active, creative relation-process. B. from the *Liquidation* lives in the contradiction of two events: Auschwitz as a political event (the consequence of the quality of our public life) and the love-event with Judith. Contradiction leads either to forgetting one's existence, giving up one's own personality or to a schizoid situation.

The novel transmits by its multilayered indirectness the only way that B. can avoid unfaithfulness to both his events: he gives his life for writing the novel of non-withdrawing love (which means withdrawing Auschwitz) and he trust Judith – after she has read it – to burn it.¹⁷ For his lover

¹⁴ In original: „csupán meghatározottságokból, reflexiókból és tropizmusokból áll: mindig és mindenütt kizárólag a világtól elszenvedett kín szólaltatja meg, különben beszélni sem tudna; ő sosem szólaltatja meg a világot.” – *Gályanapló*, ibid. 26.

¹⁵ Conformism for Kertész means an attitude towards becoming a schizophrenic, bestial machine (See *Galley Diary*: „A konformizmus: ha az ember nem a valósággal, hanem a tényekkel keresi az összhangot. Mi a valóság? Röviden: önmagunk. Mik a tények? Röviden: a képtelenségek. A kettő kapcsolata, röviden: az erkölcsi élet, a sors. Vagy: nincs kapcsolat, ez a tények elfogadása a véletlenek és a hozzájuk való igazodások sorozata. Így a konformista maga is tényné, képtelenségé válik. Elveszti szabadságát, felrobbantja centrumát, és szétszóródik a tények űrjében. Az ismeretlen, vészesen távolodó darabkákból soha többé nem tudja összerakni idegen életét. Az ember ellentétévé válik: géppé, skizofrénné, szörnyeteggé. Áldozat lesz és hóhér.” – *Gályanapló*, ibid. 14.)

¹⁶ Alain Badiou, *Théorie du sujet* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982)

¹⁷ Judith, whose character is built by complex mediations and cross-references, fulfills the wish of her lover and burns the manuscript. From this moment she has the freedom of living without the external constraint of remembering Auschwitz; remembrance can become her personal, free choice. Regarding the character of Judith, we have some interesting cross-relations in Jewish mythology and universal literature: she is the symbol of faithfulness to her people, as chopping Holofernes' head for the freedom of her people. Besides, Holofernes is also the name of the school master from Shakespeare's play, *Love's Labour Lost*, a comedy without happy ending. This play happens to be one of Adrian Leverkühn's favorites to which he even compounds music – Adrian being the hero of the novel

not to be the prisoner of his event, for the possibility of transforming her perpetual objectivity into personality too, the compulsiveness of remembrance has to be released to make free decision possible.

B. speaks to the self-searching narrator of *Liquidation* about the initial state, the so called identity from the point of view of the specific anthropology as the result of the experiences of the 20th century:

It is forbidden to get in such situation, you must not find out who you are – he said. I think I will never forget this conversation. We live in the age of catastrophe, each people are the bearer of the catastrophe, so we need special skills of life to survive, he said. The man of the catastrophe has no fate, no qualities, and no character. [...] For him there is no returning point towards some center of the Ego, towards some solid and undeniable self-certitude. He is lost in the most real sense of the word. This being without an Ego is the catastrophe itself, the real Evil, said B., comically enough, without being evil, but capable of every deed.¹⁸

The Ego – if I am really interested in, and I do not settle for the ready-made identities offered by the various brands, for the personalized products as the symptoms of the severe distress of personalities – is a shapeable somebody who is capable to everything, but does not have any knowledge about this everything. And, comically enough, quite this is the situation with lacking the Ego. With or without Ego, none does know anything, in spite of compulsory education,¹⁹ in spite of interactive exhibitions in museums, in spite of the quiz-programs of televisions etc. Without becoming personal knowledge, everything that happened before is – although sometimes useful – mere wry and boring set of information.

The tendencies of the 20th century, the lack of Ego and the desperate determination to do anything, no matter what, the defenselessness of the political spectacle in front of the “spiritualized violence of money”²⁰ are clearly discovered in the novel quoted so many times by Kertész, Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities*: “The human being is, at the same time, ready to eat her fellow or to the critique of the pure reason, she performs any of them with the same conviction and quality

that represents the *Liquidation*’s narrator, Keserű’s *artistic event of life*. And most relevant: that novel – Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* – is recalled here as that one in which the 9th Symphony, “everything that is good and noble”, everything that can be considered human is withdrawn. I analyzed these relations in detail in the essay entitled “What does it happen with the 9th? – On Imre Kertész *Liquidation* and Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*. In: Zsuzsa Selyem, *Fehérek közt*. (Budapest: Vigilia, 2007), 194-223.

¹⁸ In original: „– Nem szabad ilyen helyzetbe kerülni, nem szabad megtudnod, hogy ki vagy – mondta. Azt hiszem, sosem fogom elfelejteni ezt a beszélgetést. A katasztrófa korában élünk, minden ember a katasztrófa hordozója, ezért különös életművészetre van szükség, hogy fennmaradjunk, mondta. A katasztrófa emberének nincs sorsa, nincsenek tulajdonságai, nincs jelleme. [...] Az ő számára nincs többé visszatérés az Én valamelyik középpontjába, valami szilárd és cáfolatlan énbizonyosságba: tehát a szó legvalódibb értelmében elveszett. Ez az Én nélküli lény a katasztrófa, az igazi Gonosz, mondta Bé, komikus módon anélkül, hogy ő maga gonosz lenne, habár minden gonoszra képes“. (*Felszámolás*, ibid. 70-71.)

¹⁹ “Ilse Koch in her civil life has learned that killing is forbidden. Then she arrived in Buchenwald, where she was taught that killing is a virtue” – exemplifies Imre Kertész his experiences about education and the consistence of the character in the interview for *Die Zeit*.

²⁰ This is how Arnheim, the sensitive, humanist millionaire expresses himself in Robert Musil’s *The Man without Qualities*.

depending only on the circumstances; and during this, for the enormous external differences correspond only tiny internal differences.”²¹

B. from the *Kaddish*, rejecting the conventional roles, says no to the child. Even if this radical ‘no’ is justifiable from the point of view of his revealed experiences, the kaddish addressing the unborn child – “would you be a dark-eyed little girl? with pale sunspots scattered around your nose? or a stubborn boy? your joyful and stern eyes resembling a grey-blue pebble?” –, the kaddish could be written thanks to two phenomena: (1) the Teacher’s character, his consistency of personality unreducible from the circumstances; and (2) a soiré, when B. tells the story with the Teacher saving his life while a “beautiful, Jewish woman” is stepping towards him on a blue-greenish carpet, who later becomes B.’s wife. These two events are meeting each other in *Liquidation*: B. is writing a novel for only one person in which he withdraws – no, not love, as Thomas Mann’s composer in *Doktor Faustus*, Adrian Leverkühn – B.’s novel withdraws Auschwitz for Judith.

Withdrawing either Auschwitz or love would mean for B. the betrayal of his personality, unfaithfulness to his events. Writing the novel and asking its only reader to burn it is a realization of the link between the two events, as B. and Judith fell in love while telling the story with the Teacher in Auschwitz. So, his voluntary death is not a desertion, but “the gesture of maintaining the world-order”, as Imre Kertész express himself in the *Galley Diary* meditating on the ethical questions of suicide. He says that for being ethical, it has to be constructive, rooted in deep tradition and valid, uncompromising *will*.

Imre Kertész’s characters choose those stories that they are able to take responsibility for. But stories and events are linked to each other. However outstanding would be, Auschwitz for Imre Kertész is not an argument to withdraw the possibility of love.

Auschwitz for Imre Kertész is the ultimate cause for revolt against the depersonalizing power structures of all times.

²¹ This observation belongs to Ulrich, the man without qualities himself.