

NARRATIVES AND FRAGMENTS: IMRE KERTÉSZ AND LÁSZLÓ MÁRTON¹

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In this essay, I interpret two Hungarian novels from the field of Holocaust literature concentrating upon the problems of representation. I argue that neither Kertész nor Márton can avoid facing the question whether the challenges of remembering and representation can be bound and reflected in a literary form. Past events are repeatedly narrated in present tense in both novels. For Márton, the fragments of narration do not constitute a story, and the invasion of imaginative elements provokes the conventional frames of depicting historical facts in an epistemological horizon. On the other hand, in *Fateless* storytelling emphasises the inconceivable character of the Holocaust, and Kertész's work sheds light on philosophical paradoxes beyond epistemology. In this sense these two novels prove to be different but connected forms of Holocaust literature.

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Let me start with a commonplace: it is pretty hard not to speak at all. The simpler it seems to be, the more difficult it becomes. What is to be done, i.e., spoken, if there is nothing to talk about; or if there is something to refuse to say; or if there is no one to talk to. If I were a socio-linguist, I would argue that these situations are not rare in the least. Now, I am just turning to one situation, to one particular case, which, however, might prove to be an extreme and radical root of these otherwise everyday phenomena: the Holocaust. Probably, it is not necessary to explain thoroughly why human language is insufficient in this context. So what I would like to deal with now is speaking in its most elementary sense. And since I have to write about two Hungarian narrative works, I will place the significantly differing points of view in the center of my interest.

It might not be without importance that the main characters with whom the points of view (at least three, because it is divided into two in László Márton's novel) are connected are young people. Presumably the reason should not be sought in the dramatic or even pathetic emotional effect that can be reached by de-

picting the torments and the killing of innocent children. It could be much more important that the horizon of a child is much closer to the present – which is the dominant grammatical verb tense in the novels – and cannot be conceived of as a horizon based on broad historical experience. Of course, this raises the question of memory.

The elimination of memory can be regarded as a constituent part or goal of genocide. On the one hand, it refers to the break of religious tradition in which God reveals himself to his chosen people. On the other hand, it can be connected with the difficulty of remembering. If there are no significant acts or rich personal histories behind names, the reconstructive potential of remembrance becomes seriously limited, while the chance of unperceived forgetting rapidly increases. And young people usually have not had enough time to play a remarkable role in history. In this sense, what is at stake in László Márton's *Shadowy Main Street* is partly to reconstitute the “unlived” lives of its two main characters and several others who were killed at very young age and had no time to leave real tracks.² They are like shadows that have no perceivable bodies, only an obscure contour.

Az árnyas főutca nem azért árnyas, mert árnyat adó fák szegélyezik,
hanem azért, mert árnyak mutatkoznak mindkét oldalán, emberi
lények árnyai.

(The shadowy main street is not shadowy because it is bordered by
trees that provide shade but because shadows appear on both of its
sides, the shadows of human beings.)³

In the case of the *Fatelessness*⁴ the autobiographical connotations somewhat palliate the question of tracelessness in order to emphasize a not less disturbing one: the young narrator's world of life reflects upon the weakness of European culture and tradition. György Köves, who is the protagonist and narrator of the novel, accommodates to and accepts the new rules of, so to speak, his life in the death camps. These small steps of a cruel “socialization” turn the old belief in progress on its head and reveal the darker implications of Enlightenment, i.e., the effective industrialization of killing. From this perspective, *Fateless* can be read as an anti-*Bildungsroman*, which underscores the failure of the intended goals in European, especially in modern European, history. The conceivable grasping of this “step by step” accommodation has two narrative conditions. The youthful main character has much less knowledge of either the noble or the wicked elements of its tradition, whereby on the one hand the personal interpretation of the chain of events and the distinction between intentions become uncertain. On the other hand the narrative point of view should be drawn near to the character instead of becoming a reflexive retrospective narration. The oscillation between the narrated past and the grammatical present has already been established in the first sentence, “Ma nem mentem iskolába.” [Today I did not go to school.]⁵ Here the

word “today” refers to the first day of the story and not to the time of narration. The last sentences of the novel – “Igen, erről kéne, a koncentrációs táborok boldogságáról beszélnem nekik legközelebb, ha majd kérdik.” [Yes, about this, about the happiness of concentration camps I should talk to them next time, if they ask me.] – are also in the present of the character and turn the usual hierarchy of narrated events and narration upside down. The act of narration is unfolded as the uncertain future implied in and supposed by the narrated “present”. So the world of death camps is not only represented but (re)presented during the narration. And for death, as it is, it denies what would be present, this contradiction gives grounds for the ironic character of the text: everything is living just for the sake of being eliminated. Although Márton’s story, with the exemption of some fragments, comes to an end before the deportation, and thus avoids depicting the sharp oxymoron of “life in death”, the narrator’s reflective comments establish a similar historical and even philosophical background emphasizing the contradictions of assimilation to an anti-Semitic society.

The role of the dominant present tense in *Shadowy Main Street* is different from Kertész’s novel but is similarly related to the two major points of view. The starting point of Márton is a – fictive or non-fictive⁶ – collection of photos that has been lost and that no one has seen since the war. At the end of the novel the narrator sees only the white back sides of the photos running away in a river. In general, the fate of this collection might be read as an allegory of the Holocaust, and significantly similar to the shadows of being that actually exist on the border of remembering and forgetting, being and non-existence. This frame of the narration lays stress upon the activity of imagination in remembrance. In the most elementary sense the separate photographs must be connected so that a story-line can be sketched. Although *Shadowy Main Street* consists of different anecdotes without close references to one another, even this very limited narrative frame could not be implemented – explicitly during the first pages – if the creativity of imagination was full of numbness. Moreover, the re-creation of the missing photo-collection also raises the almost arbitrary imaginative feature of narration. Finally, the arbitrariness, which is the most provocative component of Márton’s poetics, establishes the possibility of narrating the lives of some characters after the Holocaust. In other words, to create a fictive world, which is invaded by the traces of Holocaust, nevertheless in which some part of what in fact happened is rewritten. The creation of a new world might happen in the present or by bringing about another present outside of history. In this fictive world, imaginative space and time, the events are compressed and accumulated. The novel includes one day (from the late morning to the evening), one year (from spring to the late winter), and about ten years (from the middle of the 1930s up to 1944) as different aspects of the same narrative world. Considering the parallelism of times, we can understand how the lifetime of some characters can be changed. If they are present on one

time-level, they can also be present on the parallel time-levels, at least, as shadows, or transitional beings. Of course, the intention of this poetical decision is not to change and rewrite history. On the contrary, its goal is to create the conditions for remembering people whom one can hardly remember,

Ha felidézzük a történeteket, úgy emlékezésbe menekülő életünkkel, ha pedig hagyjuk kárba veszni a történeteket, úgy feledésbe menekülő életünkkel járulunk a magunk módján hozzá, hogy ne történjék semmi. Vagy bezárkózunk a pillanatba, és az elmúlás káprázatként zajlik észrevétlenül, vagy úgy menekülünk az előző pillanattól a következőbe, ahogy az éjjeli lepke repül egyre szűkülő körökben a gyertyaláng felé; vagy pedig történetek szövögetőjeként, anekdoták ügyes kidomborítójaként járjuk az emlékezés nyomvonalait, ahogyan a háló küllőin és körein a keresztespók szaladgál.

(If we recall what has happened, then by our life that escapes into remembrance, and if in turn we let the stories become wasted, then by our life that escapes to oblivion, by all means – in our own way – we help to make sure that nothing will happen. Either we lock ourselves in the moment and the passing of time happens as an illusion without being observed, or we escape to the next moment from the previous one as the moth flies toward the candlelight in narrowing circles; or we follow the traces of remembering as weavers of stories, accentuating anecdotes cleverly as the spider runs on the spokes and circles of its net.)⁷

The fictive (conditional) modality of the stories narrated in *Shadowy Main Street* always becomes conspicuous partly by the frequent ironic discontinuity of the fragmented story-telling. What is narrated is mainly narrated with the aim of showing those inhuman sides of the Holocaust that cannot be rendered perceptible by any language. It results in the permanent ironic withdrawal of what has just been told.

The ambivalent creativity of Márton's imagination is legitimized by the point of view. On the one hand, the shadows by which the main street becomes peopled cannot be called into existence; they erode and finally annihilate the frame of narration that borrowed their perceivable being. On the other hand, Márton invented a strange and special narrative position to account for and justify the provocative power of his method. The narrator – when he/she establishes the governing rules of narration at the beginning – resists the temptation either to hide himself/herself behind the voice of a character, or to look at the events through the eyes of a figure. Instead, the narrator wants to read in and from the glance of their characters of whom the unseen or invisible photos were taken. This unusual and dialogical position of Márton's narrator enhances either the reality of the victims or the striking function of imagination. The re-creation of forever lost possibilities is for the sake of nothing else but to sharpen the opposite side: the total lack of possibilities.

While the fragmentary and allegorically disintegrating narration of what could have happened is far from the academic perspective of historical studies – neither Kertész's nor Márton's novel can be read as a history book – I cannot avoid mentioning a parallel idea of fine arts, i.e. the works of László Fehér, a contemporary Hungarian painter with close connections to the Hungarian Jewish tradition. After his early hyper realistic period he began to move away from photographic portrayal, and since the middle of the 1980's in his pictures transparent and bodiless figures are delineated, whose contours let us see what is behind them. Their existence seems to be only transitional in the field of being.

If I had to find a non-literary analogy of *Fateless* then instead of fine arts I would rather turn towards music, the continuous development of one theme from another, the next notes form the former ones. By the continuity of Kertész's narration the present tense as well as the conditional form has a different meaning from Márton's narrative poetics. For Kertész conditionality serves as a tool to make the Holocaust domestic, a historical event that fits into the sequence of other events. By the reintegration of modern history, the wounds of time, the traumatic tears in the texture of history, could be healed and in a sense forgotten. But the current of the narrative action does not allow a still point of view from which human history could be structured and the unsolvable paradoxes such as the happiness of death camps reject any unifying perspective. The present of the narration is also that of the interpretation which has no end. Even if we have memories, these are getting alienated without the unceasing act of remembering. In Márton, memory is not presupposed but – partly by its absence – established. In the horizon of *Fateless* the Holocaust needs to be present and cannot be exceeded because all of its explanations, all the experiments to grasp it and handle it as a part of past history, must be repeatedly reinterpreted. There are no remaining traditions on which a certain perspective could be based.

To sum up briefly, in comparing these two Hungarian Holocaust novels, one is not able to draw general conclusions about the historical or poetic possibilities of Holocaust literature. Nevertheless, they might provide an insight into the difficulties of representation and conventions of reading from either historical or poetical points of view. The fact that Kertész had a personal experience in the Holocaust, while Márton was born after World War II, raises the question of whether this circumstance has a significant impact upon the literary character of their works. I have argued that neither of them can avoid facing the problem of representation and remembering. For Kertész, story telling is permanently intermingled with the present tense that emphasizes not only the importance of remembering but the intellectual inconceivability of the Holocaust. In Márton's *Shadowy Main Street* the deeply problematic character of representation is more crucial and obvious. The fragments of narration do not constitute a more or less clear story line, and the transgressive invasion of imaginative elements provokes the conventional frames

of depicting historical facts. Besides the fast and continuous shifting from tragic to ironic modality and back, it leads to the build-up of an epistemological horizon in which the Holocaust is not a mere historical data among other past events. *Fatelessness* – neither ignoring nor concentrating on epistemological questions – seems to assume a philosophically paradoxical point of view that does not supply the readers with answers, but sheds light on questions that might be asked beyond epistemology. In this sense these two novels can be conceived of as different but connected forms of Holocaust literature; forms which strengthen each other's influence in this new century.

Notes

- ¹ A short preliminary remark on László Márton, who is not well known in the English speaking world and whose works have not been translated into English extensively yet, might prove to be useful. He is a middle aged Hungarian writer who has already written more than ten books, mainly novels.
- ² Without giving a complete list, I only refer to some of the more detailed criticisms: Péter Balassa: "A leírhatatlan pillantás" (Indescribable glance), in *Törésvonalak* (The widening of the cracks) (Budapest: Csokonai Kiadó, 2001), 89–96; István Margócsy: "Márton László: Árnys főutca" (László Márton: Shadowy Main Street) *2000* (2001/2): 62–67; Gyula Rugási: "Háromezer összehúzott nap" (Three thousand compressed days), *Holmi* (2000/5), 603–609.
- ³ László Márton: *Árnys főutca* (Shadowy main street) (Pécs: Jelenkor Kiadó, 1999), 7. (All of the translations are mine.)
- ⁴ For further bibliography see the monograph of Péter Szirák, *Imre Kertész* (Pozsony: Kalligram Kiadó, 2003).
- ⁵ Imre Kertész's works on the web: www.irodalmiakademia.hu
- ⁶ Márton later admitted that the photos are real: "A lovak kihaltak. Márton Lászlóval beszélget Nagy Boglárka" (The horses are extinct), *Jelenkor* (2001/12), 1296–1298.
- ⁷ L. Márton: *op. cit.*, 49. The translation is almost impossible not only because of the difficult sentence structure but the play with words. In other contexts, the Hungarian word *kár* (damage) can be connected with the words *kór* (disease) and *kor* (age or epoch), which can be easily read as key-words of the novel.