

Nobel Prize in Literature 2002



Imre Kertész

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The Nobel Prize in Literature for 2002 is awarded to the Hungarian writer Imre Kertész "for writing that upholds the fragile experience of the individual against the barbaric arbitrariness of history".

In his writing Imre Kertész explores the possibility of continuing to live and think as an individual in an era in which the subjection of human beings to social forces has become increasingly complete. His works return unremittingly to the decisive event in his life: the period spent in Auschwitz, to which he was taken as a teenage boy during the Nazi persecution of Hungary's Jews. 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.

Kertész's first novel, *Sorstalanság*, 1975 (*Fateless*, 1992), deals with the young Köves, who is arrested and taken to a concentration camp but conforms and survives. The

novel uses the alienating device of taking the reality of the camp completely for granted, an everyday existence like any other, admittedly with conditions that are thankless, but not without moments of happiness. Köves regards events like a child without completely understanding them and without finding them unnatural or disquieting - he lacks our ready-made answers. The shocking credibility of the description derives perhaps from this very absence of any element of the moral indignation or metaphysical protest that the subject cries out for. The reader is confronted not only with the cruelty of atrocities but just as much with the thoughtlessness that characterised their execution. Both perpetrators and victims were preoccupied with insistent practical problems, the major questions did not exist. Kertész's message is that *to live is to conform*. The capacity of the captives to come to terms with Auschwitz is one outcome of the same principle that finds expression in everyday human coexistence.

In thinking like this, the author concurs with a philosophical tradition in which life and human spirit are enemies. In *Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért*, 1990 (*Kaddish for a Child not Born*, 1997), Kertész presents a consistently negative picture of childhood and from this pre-history derives the paradoxical feeling of being at home in the concentration camp. He completes his implacable existential analysis by depicting love as the highest stage of conformism, total capitulation to the desire to exist at any cost. For Kertész the spiritual dimension of man lies in his inability to adapt to life. Individual experience seems useless as soon as it is considered in the light of the needs and interests of the human collective.

In his collection of fragments *Gályanapló* ("Galley Diary"), 1992, Kertész demonstrates his full intellectual scope. "Theoretical justifications are merely constructions", he writes, but nevertheless conducts an untiring dialogue with the great tradition of cultural criticism - Pascal, Goethe, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kafka, Camus, Beckett, Bernhard. In essence, Imre Kertész is a minority consisting of one individual. He regards his kinship with the concept of Jew as a definition inflicted on him by the enemy.

But through its consequences this arbitrary categorisation has nevertheless been his initiation into the deepest knowledge of humanity and the age in which he lives.

The novels that succeeded *Sorstalanság*, 1975 (*Fateless*, 1992), *A kudarc* ("Fiasco"), 1988, and *Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért*, 1990 (*Kaddish for a Child not Born*, 1997), can almost be characterised as comments and additions to the first and decisive work. This provides the theme of *A kudarc*. While he waits for an expected refusal of his real novel, the one about Auschwitz, the aging author spends his days writing a contemporary novel in the style of Kafka, a claustrophobic description of socialist Eastern Europe. In the end, he is informed that his previous book will, in spite of everything, be published, but all he can feel is emptiness. On display in the literary marketplace, his personality is transformed into an object, his secrets into banalities.

The refusal to compromise in Kertész's stance can be perceived clearly in his style, which is reminiscent of a thickset hawthorn hedge, dense and thorny for unsuspecting visitors. But he relieves his readers of the burden of compulsory emotions and inspires a singular freedom of thought.

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