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Jill Sullivan
Salem State University

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Auschwitz Has Formal Consequences: Imre Kertész and the "Rule of Metaphor"

A Thesis in English
By
Jill Sullivan

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Chapter I

I Was Looking For a Usable Metaphor:

A Formal Approach to Imre Kertész

Metaphor is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality.

Paul Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor

Puzzled. Disconcerted. Offended. These are adjectives that describe many readers upon completion of the novel Fatelessness, the most famous work of Hungarian Nobel Prize winner and Holocaust survivor Imre Kertész. With its matter-of-fact and dispassionate tone, its virtually bloodless exposition of what should be horrific and traumatic episodes, and its implication that something almost positive can be taken out of the concentration camp experience, the novel defies expectations on a variety of levels. Recounting events that hew closely to those of the author’s life, the reader is inclined to place the work within the genre of Holocaust testimony, or, at the very least, autobiography. Yet the narrative is labeled “fiction” and is missing the pathos one looks for from Holocaust literature of any type. What is going on here? A read of Kertész’s three subsequent novels as well as a memoir the author slyly implies could also be called a novel only serves to increase the confusion. The body of Kertész’s oeuvre reveals the employment of a mixture of various stylistic strategies and generic conventions that discourages easy categorization of his work.

Given the time period during which Kertész writes, the mid-1970s through the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, placing his work under the umbrella of postmodernism is an attractive but ultimately facile move that offers little utility. Although many tropes of postmodern literature are evident in his work, such as the lack of an objective
perspective on events from outside the narrative, variable evocations of temporality, and an overall atmosphere of indeterminacy and doubt about reality, the label “postmodern” is an inadequate answer as to why Kertész, a Holocaust survivor, would write about his experiences in these ways. Such a categorization is only useful if it explains and illuminates the purposes of the operations utilized in the texts as well as, or even more importantly, their effects. This thesis is the result of my search for such an explanation. In it, I will recount my understanding of the specific methods of narrative and language Kertész uses to create different textual worlds in each of his four novels, the relationship of these methods to his themes and objectives, and their impact on the reader. Kertész toiled for more than a decade to write *Fatelessness*, exemplifying the difficulties Holocaust survivors face finding not only the will, but also a viable form in which to express their experiences. In a 2013 interview, Kertész stated, “I had to forge a language from scratch, one sufficiently strong and precise. I didn’t just want to add to all the white noise around the topic” (Zielinski). These startling sentences frame my inquiry. What sort of language does Kertész create in his novels and how does that language emerge and evolve throughout his work? What are the objectives of “strong and precise” language – what are the various meanings of strength and precision? What are their targets? From what discourse is he struggling to remain free; or put another way, to what “white noise” is he referring? Through an analysis of the specific features of the four texts, *Fatelessness* (1975), *Fiasco* (1988), *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* (1990), and *Liquidation* (2003) and by applying various theories of genre, narrative and figurative language to those texts, I hope to answer some of these questions, not to mention some broader and more important ones: In what ways does the discomfort created in the reader of Kertész’s work impact and forward the discourse of the Holocaust? What is the nature and meaning of Kertész’s challenge to the dominant character of that discourse? What are the
This following thesis has been read and approved by:

Dr. Lisa Mulman,
Thesis Director
Date

Dr. Stephenie Young,
Second Reader
Date

Keja Valens, Associate Professor of English,
Coordinator of Master of Arts in English
Date
implications of such confrontation within a sensitive and often politically stifled discourse for future understandings of the uses of language to describe contemporary experience?

In his memoir *cum* novel, *Dossier K*, Kertész professes, “I took on my life as the raw material for my novels” (10). As such, a brief biography seems an important place to start in thinking about his work. Kertész was born on November 9, 1929 to a middle-class Budapest family. Although of Jewish descent, his immediate family members were not practicing Jews. His parents divorced at some point, and the stories he relates regarding this period of his life imply that he became a pawn in the contentious chess match of their relationship, spending several years in boarding school and then splitting time between them and their new spouses, not to mention a series of nannies. His tone in *Dossier K* while discussing these times, however, is bemused rather than bitter (the somewhat more acerbic note in *Kaddish* must be explicated as it relates to that narrative rather than to Kertész’s biography), perhaps because one catastrophic event overshadows his entire childhood: his sudden and completely unexpected deportation in June 1944. Rounded up with thousands of other Budapest Jews, among them the 18 other boys from his work detail at the Shell Oil refinery, Kertész was shipped to Auschwitz. It is important to mark that, almost contraindicating the fact that Auschwitz looms large in his work, Kertész only spent three days there, after which he was shipped to Buchenwald and then to Zeitz, where he spent the bulk of his concentration camp captivity, finally returning to Buchenwald until his liberation in 1945, almost exactly a year after his deportation (*Dossier K*, Vasvári and Tötossy de Sepetnek, Zielinski).

Upon his return, Kertész finished school, briefly joined the Communist Party, and did stints working as a journalist, a factory worker, and a ministry employee before completing mandatory military service. In 1953 he met – in true bohemian fashion in a bar - his first wife,
Albina, with whom he lived for 42 years until her death. For much of their married life, she supported them both working as a waitress so he could write. In what would go on to be represented in various iterations in his novels, Kertész discovered his vocation as a writer of fiction in a moment of epiphany around 1955. While toiling fruitlessly on several ideas for a novel, he worked episodically as a free-lance journalist, and more steadily as a translator of German literature and philosophy, including some works of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. Once he settled on the idea that would become his first novel *Fatelessness*, Kertész worked on it for the next 16 years, only to have it summarily rejected for publication by one of only two state-sanctioned publishing houses in Hungary. Fortunately, it was accepted years later by the other house and finally published in 1975, although to little notice in Hungary or elsewhere. In truth, despite producing a prodigious body of novels, novellas and essays, it was only after he was honored with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2002 that Kertész’s work has become more widely read (*Dossier K*, Vasvári and Tőtösy de Sepetnek, Zielinski).

Perhaps one of the most intriguing elements of Kertész’s *curriculum vitae* is his relatively prolific career writing musical comedies with a friend as a means of economic survival. I bring this seemingly unimportant detail up last on purpose, as a means to illuminate a crucial character trait of the man, rather incomprehensible given his personal history: his stubbornly optimistic *weltanschauung*, a surprisingly sunny existential philosophy. It is difficult to imagine what other psychological factor could account for the ability of an Auschwitz survivor to bend his artistic talents – so prodigious as to earn him the highest of literary honors – to light and frivolous entertainments. Although Kertész’s writings betray occasional personal battles with the possibility of suicide, his long-time friend, the Hungarian writer György Spiró notes, “his temperament was his salvation; I have met few other writers who took as much transparent
pleasure in the delights that life offers, whether women, food, drink, pretty scenery, good books, or good music, as Imre Kertész, a hedonist at heart, despite all the decades spent in near hermit-like privation, seclusion, and deliberate solitude” (Spiró 8). It will be crucial throughout the analysis of Kertész’s work to bear in mind this cohabitation of light and dark shades. Of course, it would be absurd to claim that Kertész is unique among authors in containing conflicting strands of thought or strains of philosophy that are worked out in the production of his work. It is merely to foreshadow that a key claim of this paper will be that, due to his dissatisfaction with existing modes of expression for the kinds of dualities he perceived in the society and culture that housed his life experiences, Kertész strove to forge a new expressive vocabulary that might better serve the purpose. The fact that it took decades for him to produce his first novel indicates how difficult the search for such a new vocabulary was for him. Thus, the first question that must be addressed is that of the nature the struggle. What specific aspects of the system of language as Kertész saw it rendered it inadequate to his project?

This question inevitably compels a discussion of genre, or more specifically, of what is encompassed by the genre of Holocaust literature. For Kertész, like other notable survivors such as Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi, his experiences in the concentration camps became, in a sense, the only topic of his writing. Quoting from his published diary _Galley Boat-Log_, he expansively states in _Dossier K_, “Whatever I think about, I am always thinking about Auschwitz. Even if I may seem to be talking about something quite different, I am still talking about Auschwitz. I am a medium for the spirit of Auschwitz, Auschwitz speaks through me. Everything else strikes me as inane by comparison” (DK 183). Kertész’s choice of the word “medium” is ironically coincidental in the context of the discussion of Holocaust literature in that there is a persistent (although gradually diminishing) disagreement among authors, readers and critics alike about
what level and forms of mediation are appropriate in writing about the Holocaust. Of particular discomfort are aesthetic or imaginative approaches to the subject, like the medium ultimately chosen by Kertész, fiction. The well-known characterization by Theodor Adorno of poetry after Auschwitz as barbaric and Wiesel’s claim that a novel about Treblinka is either not a novel or not about Treblinka seem to close off entire branches of literary production when dealing with the Holocaust. Two main rationales sustain this embargo. First is the notion that any aesthetization of the Holocaust diminishes its gravity and horror, distances the reader from the reality of the event, and introduces the possibility of a pleasurable response. One might surmise that, at a distance now of more than 70 years from the event, this concern might have faded.

However, as recently as 2011, critic J. Hillis Miller, cautiously introducing his reading of Kertész’s novel *Fatelessness*, is compelled to offer the following disclaimer: “the more I analyze, the more I perhaps may aestheticize and anaestheticize Auschwitz, that is, get further away from it” (Miller 179). Miller, here, equates art with the dulling of pain, imagination with loss of memory, and distance somehow with error. Attributing to Kertész’s artistic treatment of the Holocaust a whiff of illegitimacy, Miller perceives his own decision to analyze that treatment as slightly illicit.

The second rationale is an insistence on “objective” truth in Holocaust representation, a quality very difficult to define, and seemingly reliant, in any event, on the first rationale – the closer to the event the account is, the less figured or embellished, the truer. These beliefs encourage a preference for testimony. In a 1977 lecture, Wiesel claimed, “our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony” (qtd. in Bachmann 79). In Wiesel’s conception, this literature can only be written by the witness – the survivor – it is only the witness whose testimony can claim the truth of the cataclysmic events of the twentieth century (83). Perhaps
due to Wiesel’s eminence as a foremost chronicler of the Holocaust experience, this claim appears to have resulted in the belief, to some extent, in its inverse: that only through testimony itself can the truth of the Holocaust be conveyed. It is as if, for an event as traumatic and horrific as the Holocaust, only testimony is a safe mode of expression. For example, at a 2001 Nobel Foundation conference, literary critic Horace Engdahl voiced a “clear objection to coupling testimony with literature” because literature, contrasted with “true evidence,” may distort reality “without being accused of lying” (qtd. in Bachmann 81). Miller takes a different tack to address this problem, posing the question, “Is it possible to bear witness to the Holocaust in a work of fiction” (Miller 181)? Kertész has declared multiple times and in no uncertain terms that *Fatelessness* is neither autobiography nor memoir but a novel. Miller, uncomfortable with the idea of approaching the work merely as a fictional treatment of the Holocaust, maintains that the text is “an almost direct act of bearing witness, even though it is a fictional one” (178). It is highly instructive that two esteemed literary critics, Miller and Engdahl, are anxious that their subject of study—literature—is incapable of representing the reality and the truth of the Holocaust. What is essential to notice, and what I will argue is of critical concern to Kertész, is that these objections to literary representations of the Holocaust rely on epistemologically fuzzy conceptions of “truth” and “reality.”

In his seminal article, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” historian Hayden White explains similar arguments regarding the appropriate historiographical approach to the Holocaust. To illustrate the contention of some historians that the Holocaust demands a uniquely non-narrative historical form, White paraphrases in particular Berel Lang’s claim that “only the facts must be recounted, because otherwise one lapses into figurative speech and stylization (aestheticism). And only a chronicle of the facts is warranted, because otherwise one
opens up oneself to the dangers of narrativization and the relativization of emplotment” (44).

Lang seems to believe that there is a finite list of literal facts of the Holocaust and only one way of saying them that conveys truth. He worries that using storytelling techniques or figurative language to describe the Holocaust destabilizes the limits of the reality of the event, opening its meaning to interpretations that are relative to choices made in turning it into a narrative. But, as White reminds us, all writings are “linguistic entities and belong to the order of discourse” (37). In other words, any representation of the Holocaust in language is of necessity emploted, through selection, combination, and organization, and in some cases, figuration. The mere fact that any given account is emploted cannot, in and of itself, decide its truthfulness. Truthfulness may inhere in facts, but the truthfulness of any particular narrative account relies on judgments about how meaning is derived from this particular array of facts in this particular form. It is the notion that there is an objective and fixed truth of the Holocaust that is embodied by a set of facts that causes some historians to resist narrative accounts. This detour around the crisis of Holocaust historiography is important in that it mirrors that between “testimony” and “literature,” where the former is understood to represent the “true” facts, while the latter risks possibly “false” interpretations.

Ironically, in her book Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History (with Dori Laub), Shoshana Felman argues that it is just this sort of fixed and definitive truth that testimony is unable to provide. She writes, “What the testimony does not offer is [sic] a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constatation of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge” (5). Testimony, like other speech acts, is an event of discourse – its truth is created during and through its performance. Furthermore, like
narrative histories and imaginative fictions, testimonies are discursive. As such, while testimony may make claims to a sort of first-hand or memorial truth, those truths are no less reliant on the medium of language than are other types of narratives. Basic semiotics reveal that language in and of itself is relative, words taking their meanings from their relations with other words and to the contexts in which they are used. The Holocaust, however, exploded existing understandings of reality, the context in which language was embedded. In other words, the Holocaust could not be encompassed in any recognizable frame of reference in which words would mean what they had always meant. In his book *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*, Robert Eaglestone explains that survivors felt that the events and experiences of the Holocaust are simply not representable using any medium of communication in a way that could make them comprehensible:

“Language is not enough” (18).

This crisis of language explains Kertész’s professed need to create a new language for his work. In his Nobel Prize speech he states, language “had simply become unsuitable to convey concepts and processes that had once been unambiguous and real” (“Heurika!”). For Kertész, the inadequacy of language has this peculiar cast to it: it is not only that language cannot represent the reality of his experiences, it is also that his reality has become unreal. He freely admits that the bulk of the plot elements of both *Fatelessness* and *Fiasco* conform exactly to events from his own life, but he is “unable to interpret what happened as reality, only as fiction” (DK 71). Using his life as “raw material for [his] novels,” (DK 10) Kertész still rejected the idea of writing an autobiography or memoir. His reasoning is instructive:

while autobiography is a recollection of something, fiction creates a world of some kind...The world of fiction is a sovereign world that comes to life in the author’s head and follows the rules of art, of literature. And that is the major
difference that is reflected in the form of the work, in its language and its plot.

An author invents every aspect of a fiction, every detail.” (DK 8-9)

Much could be said about the psychological consequences of trauma that give rise to altered perceptions of reality, but the key point here is that it was impossible for Kertész to testify – to write down his experiences as they appeared to his memory. It was the creative dimension of fiction that allowed him to write. What he could not comprehend as real, he had to subject to his powers of imagination. Thus, his memories are still mediated through language, but in reverse. Rather than writing what he remembered, he remembered what he wrote. Indeed, in a 2010 interview, Kertész professes, “Creation is a path to remembrance” (The Holocaust as Culture 51).

This notion is not as outlandish as it may appear. In Testimony, both authors attest to the productive quality of testimony. Felman argues that knowledge does not precede testimony, nor is it derived from testimony, but is immanent in it. “This knowledge does not exist, it can only happen through the testimony” (51). Laub reinforces this notion of testimony as a happening: “Knowledge in the testimony is…not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine advent, an event in its own right” (62). What these authors emphasize as essential in testimony, however, is its dialogic nature. Felman specifically rejects that this testimonial knowledge can become an object, separate from the event of its telling (51). In this sense, Kertész’s works do not qualify as testimony. One of his fictional avatars, the protagonist of Fiasco, will proclaim (speaking of himself in the third person), “He had transmuted my person into an object, diluted my stubborn secret into a generality, distilled my inexpressible truth into symbols – transplanting them into a novel” (78). In this formulation of what can be accomplished in a novel, Kertész seems to be arguing that the conception of the speech act as
knowledge-creating event is not confined to the act of testimony but is inherent in the nature of all discourse, and not least of all in its literary form. Furthermore, all utterances, by virtue of being said (or written) become externalized from the event of their occurrence, and therefore become objects subject to interpretation. This actuality collapses the binary opposition between testimony and literature, truth and art. Felman writes, “literature... henceforth will be considered as primarily [an] event of speech,” and its “testimony will be understood as a mode of truth’s realization” (15). Literature creates its own truth, a truth no less legitimate than those derived from epistemology, historiography or witness testimony. Literature is the mode through which Kertész forges his truth.

I believe these disputes, hushed and polite as they may be, collectively represent the “white noise” surrounding the subject of the Holocaust to which Kertész was loath to contribute. In response to Adorno’s injunction against poetry after Auschwitz, Kertész fumes, “I consider that statement to be a moral stink bomb that needlessly pollutes air that is already rank enough as things are” (DK 106). He is incredulous that Adorno could imagine that “art would renounce portraying the greatest trauma of the twentieth century” (107). Kertész rages in Dossier K and in other writings against moralists of all stripe, viewing moral judgments about how the Holocaust is to be treated as a subject as a form of elitism aimed at limiting ownership of its memory and representation. An ill-defined morality does seem to hover over all of the anxiety about appropriate genres and modes of expression for the Holocaust. Hayden White contends that many of the arguments about requirements for “factual” or “literal” Holocaust historiography rather than “narrative” forms have been about “socially sanctioned standards of morality and taste” (41). I share his concern that indeterminate and shifting definitions of this morality, and the resulting fear of crossing these barely visible moral lines, can lead to a version of the position
that the Holocaust is “virtually unrepresentable in language” (43) that rests not on witnesses’ inability to find language to describe their experiences, but on commentators’ fear that language they use to analyze and explore the Holocaust may be somehow politically incorrect. This notion explains the kind of disdain with which Kertész’s work was initially met: the rejection letter from the publisher to whom he initially sent the manuscript of Fatelessness lamented the presence of many “passages in bad taste” (Fiasco 35). Kertész’s manuscript did not conform to expectations.

In this thesis I will argue that it is Kertész’s intention to work against this web of expectations regarding what a Holocaust survivor should write and how. As has been described, he needs to work in an imaginary mode to formulate truths that he cannot access in his memory and to describe the unreality of his experiences. But, in addition, he consciously appropriates many elements and formats of more typical Holocaust writing in order to disrupt the prevailing discourse. Eaglestone opens his book with the sentence, “Maurice Blanchot writes that the accounts of Holocaust survivors are ‘not read and consumed in the same way as other books’” (The Holocaust and the Postmodern 15), highlighting the primary importance of expectations in the experience of reading these works. Kertész takes advantage of the reader’s different way of approaching works such as his. In both Fatelessness and Kaddish for an Unborn Child, as well as in some portions of Fiasco, Kertész adopts the first-person narration typical of witness autobiographies to intentionally lure the reader into thinking she knows what she is reading. Eaglestone notes it is in particular the “affect of testimony” that people are looking for when they pick up these texts – an opportunity to identify with the experience of the writer (The Holocaust and the Postmodern 16). Kertész’s work discourages this kind of identification. He writes of Fatelessness, “As the story progresses, the sense of being abandoned increasingly takes hold of
the reader; there is a growing sense of losing one’s footing…” (DK 9). Causing a loss of footing is an apt metaphor for the body of Kertész’s work. It is by subverting the conventional discourse of the Holocaust, not only its affective qualities, but also its customary narrative and generic structures, that he works to create understanding of its impossible reality.

As it is the task of this thesis to investigate the specific ways in which Kertész accomplishes this goal, I wanted to find a theory of language or narrative that could be applied to Kertész’s work in an instructive way. A few studies do acknowledge the fact that Kertész intentionally works against type. For example, Eaglestone, in his article, “The Aporia of Imre Kertész,” points out that the work is best understood “in comparison to the huge array of Holocaust testimony and fiction,” because Kertész “reuses the often-implicit generic tropes of Holocaust testimony to reach his conclusions” (39). As will be described in detail in Chapters II and IV, these tropes include a resistance to identification with the witness, fragmentation, disruptions of time, and a lack of closure, among others. However, while Eaglestone’s perspective aligns with my own and offers some helpful narrative analysis that I will return to later, his essay ultimately focuses more on thematic development in the narrative than on the use of language. My goal is different; I want to delve deeper into the specific mechanisms of language put in play, to understand what the appropriation of these tropes says about how language functions in Kertész’s work. Kertész has called his work “allusive” (“Heurika!”), and his novels seem to adopt particular generic forms as if to allude to conventional understandings of those genres while simultaneously subverting them. Thus, in Fatelessness, he recounts the events of his life in a testimonial style, but stubbornly insists that the work is fiction. It is as if the form chosen for the texts presents a set of literal meanings, but implies that there is a different – or missing - set of meanings inherent in these texts at the same time. The narratives
as a whole, then, present themselves as a sort of figure. This mechanism of using a figure to
describe or name something missing - or something indescribable with existing language – is
called metaphor, and it is to the theory of metaphor of French literary critic and philosopher Paul
Ricoeur to which I turn for assistance in understanding how Kertész’s language works.

The subtitle of Ricoeur’s magisterial and exhaustive book The Rule of Metaphor is
“Multidisciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language,” and in this work, he surveys,
analyzes, and synthesizes previous scholarship on the mechanisms of metaphor from Aristotle
through mid-twentieth century linguists and literary critics. He covers the range of analytical
frameworks through which to understand metaphor, from semiotics through semantics, and
ultimately to hermeneutics. In the introduction, he cogently states the conclusion he will reach
300 pages later:

The passage to the hermeneutic point of view corresponds to the change of level
that moves from the sentence to discourse properly speaking...the issue is no
longer the form of the metaphor as a word-focused figure of speech, nor even the
sense of metaphor as a founding of a new semantic pertinence, but the reference
of the metaphorical statement as the power to “redescribe” reality. (6)

Here, Ricoeur stakes a claim that metaphor is far more than simply an ornamental flourish used
at the level of the word to add color to language. Rather, metaphor opens language at all levels –
word, sentence, discourse as a whole - up to a range of meanings that subject themselves to
interpretation. The assertion that metaphor possesses the ability to “redescribe” reality implies
two assumptions: first, that reality needs redescription, and second that non-metaphorical
language is not up to the task. Furthermore, throughout his analysis, Ricoeur emphasizes the role
of “living metaphor” to create new language. The term living metaphor refers to those entirely
new figurative expressions, creative ways writers discover to describe objects, moods or speculative ideas that have no means of expression in existing language. The objects of living metaphor can be either new concepts or old concepts for which a writer seeks more precise delineation. These types of metaphors are contrasted with "dead metaphors," which are those that have been so widely used that their meanings have been absorbed into common language—they have lost their creative power.

These ideas about how metaphor works align neatly with the work of Kertész. When he decided he wanted to write, he was unsatisfied with the existing body of work taking experiences similar to his as a theme. He disdained "adding yet another book to what already back in the Sixties had swollen into a library of, how should I put it...Lager literature" (DK 7). For example, he says of the celebrated novel The Long Voyage that Jorge Semprún had "chosen the wrong technique" that was "spectacular" but "just not true" (Zielinski np). In a sense, to Kertész, existing Holocaust literature could be seen as a "dead metaphor." Somehow, for him, various modes of expression used to describe the concentration camp experience, from straight testimony to experimental narratives such as Semprún's, were stuck using language whose references insufficiently reflect reality as he sees it. Kertész nods to this problem of established reference near the end of Fatelessness. When a journalist asks the young survivor, Györgi, to compare the concentration camp to hell, he replies, deadpan, "I was not acquainted with hell and couldn't even imagine what that was like... I could only imagine a concentration camp" (248). Through Györgi, Kertész argues that the metaphors in common usage to describe the Holocaust are meaningless. Language, as currently constituted, fails to describe the (un)reality he knows. I will argue that Kertész coopts this existing language—the standard tropes and genre conventions of Holocaust literature—as the ground upon which he builds living metaphor with the body of
his work in a way that redescribes reality and creates a new language of the concentration camp experience.

In *The Rule of Metaphor*, Ricoeur conducts a methodical examination of the history of theories of metaphor, gradually building a case for his positioning of metaphor as a key tool of hermeneutics. He starts by expanding the realm of metaphor from a word-centered operation to one that functions at the level of the sentence. He explains that, according to Aristotle, metaphor is a meaning borrowed to fill a semantic void or absent proper term (17-18). While many linguists since Aristotle have similarly taken metaphor to operate at the level of the word, Ricoeur argues that, because metaphor rests on an operation of comparison, it is a discursive phenomenon (22). Therefore, metaphor cannot be explained by structural semiotics, where the relationships of words to other words are primary, but, at a minimum, must be considered through the lens of semantics, or how words contribute to the meaning of the sentence. Ricoeur notes, “only at the level of the sentence, taken as a whole, can what is said be distinguished from that of which one speaks” (74). This is the important dialectic between the sense of language and its reference. The sense is bound up in the relationship between signifier and signified, while reference allows language to escape itself out into the world. There is a great deal more to say about this dialectic, but an important point to emphasize here is the essential function of metaphor to fill a gap in language. Whether at the level of a statement’s sense or at the level of its reference, one thing is substituted for another, almost in the manner of a mistake resulting in a strangeness or discomfort. Aristotle notes that one of the pleasures of metaphor is in its surprise: it instructs us by “suddenly combining elements that have not been put together before” (*Rhetoric* 1410 b 10-15 qtd. in Ricoeur 33). This notion provides the first bridge between a theory of metaphor and the work of Kertész. As has been noted, the style and syntax of his
books seem not to mesh with his subject matter. They seem strange. The impropriety and seeming bad taste of his tone surprises, priming the reader to seek instruction. "Ordinary words," Aristotle tells us, "convey only what we know already." (Rhetoric 1410 b 10-1 qtd. in Ricoeur 33). Metaphor allows us to learn something new.

Ricoeur’s engagement and analysis of the work of several key linguists and rhetorical scholars help unpack the various planes of language in which metaphor can be understood. First, I.A. Richards, in his book The Philosophy of Rhetoric highlights the importance of context in the operation of metaphor. He attacks the notion that in metaphor, a borrowed meaning is substituted for a proper meaning, challenging the notion of a fixed or proper meaning itself. He argues instead that meanings are all determined through the process of discourse, i.e. meanings are contextual. Richards posits a concept of “delegated efficiency,” where words derive their meaning from a gap in context. Ricoeur paraphrases this idea as follows: "Words are not at all the names of ideas present to the mind, they are not constituted by any fixed association with data, whatever that data might be. All they do is refer back to the missing parts of the context" (78). Thus, each word in a sentence relates to each other and also in their combination in such a way that their meanings create and are created by the context at the same time. Ricoeur calls this a "thesis of the interanimation of language" (79). Given this theory that meaning relies on missing parts of contexts, metaphor is a particular type of discourse wherein it “holds together within one simple meaning two different missing parts of different contexts of this meaning” (80). Taking Fontanier’s definition of metaphor as “present[ing] one idea under the sign of another,” Richards calls the underlying idea the tenor and the other idea through which the underlying idea is understood the vehicle (80). I highlight Richards’ theory because I think it is applicable, not only at the level of the sentence, but also because it can be enlarged to encompass
a whole text. Later, I will show how Kertész sets up different contexts with gaps that need filling, and that he fills them with material that creates new meanings. Although arguably put too simply, the reality he is trying to express is the tenor, the strange worlds of his novels are the vehicle.

Next, Ricoeur turns to a seminal article, “Metaphor,” by Max Black, which repeats the concept of a tension between two ideas, but with a slightly different formulation. For Black, a metaphor occurs when some words in a sentence are used metaphorically while others maintain their literal meanings (84). He calls the metaphorical word the focus and the rest of the sentence, the frame (85). When a new word or phrase can be substituted for the focus without a change in meaning, this is essentially an instance of catachresis or paraphrase. However, when a direct substitution is impossible, and a word or phrase is selected through a comparative operation, “it carries new information; briefly, it tells us something” (87). The way the interaction of two ideas to create new meaning is grounded, according to Black, is on general understandings of words as commonly used and webs of associations that arise when words are used. When one object or idea is spoken of in terms of another, the web of associations of the second object adheres to the first, giving rise to an “insight.” Ricoeur summarizes, “Organizing a principal subject by applying a subsidiary subject to it constitutes, in effect, an irreducible intellectual operation, which informs and clarifies in a way that is beyond the scope of any paraphrase” (88-9). This theory, again, is appealing in its application to the work of Kertész. Just as I will show the gaps that Kertész creates as opportunities to forge new meanings, I will also illustrate how he employs networks of associations that derive from certain events, ideas and objects in order to ask them to describe others.
The literary critic Monroe Beardsley, in his book *Aesthetics*, moves the analysis of metaphor forward by embedding it in an overall theory of discourse. He emphasizes the distinction between primary signification, or denotation, and secondary signification, or connotation. The former is what a sentence “states”; the latter is what it “suggests” (90). He argues that all sentences have some proportional mixture of explicit and implicit meanings and that “a literary work is a discourse in which an important part of the meaning is implicit” (qtd. in Ricoeur 91). Again, this idea is attractive in its potential application to the work of Kertész. Although, as Beardsley acknowledges above, all literature has implicit meaning, understanding Kertész’s novels to be intentionally saying one thing while meaning another will be instructive. What is essential to understand, here, is that in the realm of literary criticism (at least as defined by Beardsley), the sense of the words (their denotative meaning) must be split off from their reference (their connotative meaning) – they are considered as two separate planes of meaning. This separation is crucial to how I want to approach Kertész: there must be constant awareness of and attention to different planes of meaning that are placed in tension with each other, as it is the resolution of this tension or attempts thereof that result in new language. Ricoeur agrees, stating, “literary criticism brings into view a conflict, which was invisible at the level of the sentence alone, between two modes of understanding: the first (which becomes the ultimate) having to do with the world of the work, the second (and most immediate) concerning the work as discourse, i.e. as a configuration of words” (93). In fact, Beardsley himself takes the consideration of metaphor as a potential model for a consideration of works as a whole. While he will be looking at poems as works, I would like to apply these concepts to the novels of Kertész.
A key element of Beardsley’s formulation of metaphor is the “logical absurdity.” This concept will be extremely useful in looking at Kertész, as his work seems full of moments that defy logical understanding. In metaphor, Beardsley notes that the metaphorical term, what he calls the modifier, in its customary meaning, is incompatible in some way with the term that it modifies. This situation obliges the reader to scan the range of possible connotations of the modifier that might be able to make the entire statement meaningful. The reader naturally seeks to find the sense of the statement, and it is the flexibility of language that makes this possible. Ricoeur writes, “A significant trait of living language...is the power always to push the frontier of non-sense further back” (95). Beardsley next addresses the question of how the reader chooses the “right” connotation for the modifier to make meaning. This process involves two principals. First is “fittingness”: the reader selects from among all possible connotations for those that possess the possibility of making sense. Second is “plenitude”: all connotations that are fitting are attributed to the statement (96). This second principle is exciting in the context of hermeneutics, because it explains the multivocality of the metaphor: the utterance means all the things it can mean at once (96). Through the process of applying seemingly inappropriate connotations to existing things, those things take on new properties – “a creation of language comes to be at that moment, a semantic innovation” (98). Words take on new meanings through this process, and expand their descriptive and expressive capacities. I cannot explicate this process better than Ricoeur: “Metaphor is a semantic event that takes place at the point where several semantic fields intersect. It is because of this construction that all the words, taken together, make sense. Then, and only then, the metaphorical twist is at once an event and a meaning, an event that means or signifies, an emergent meaning created by language” (98-9). The attributes of metaphor described by Beardsley will be crucial in looking at the metaphorical
nature of Kertész’s work: making sense out of non-sense, finding fitting language to attribute to existing expressions that are inadequately descriptive, and crossing semantic fields as an event of discourse that creates new and multivocal meanings.

At this point, I have sketched two tensional theories of metaphor, the first being the tension between borrowed and proper meanings of words, and the second the tension between semantic fields of meaning. It seems important to ask here what quality of language allows these tensions to exist, and what creates the dynamism of shifting and growing meaning. Ricoeur turns to the semantic analysis of Stephen Ullman to provide some answers to this question. Ullman’s work is sophisticated and highly technical, but a central feature of his explanation of semantics is the general “vagueness” of language. Despite continuous efforts to categorize and pin down words and their meanings, lexical precision “always demands that a further discrimination be made on the basis of actual context” (113). Almost counterintuitively, the example of synonomy is instructive in understanding this vagueness in ways that will aid in looking at Kertész. Synonyms, which sometimes can operate as direct substitutions and other times can only approximate identical meanings, prove that language cannot be entirely explained through the principle of opposition: “it points to the overlapping of semantic fields” in which words not only oppose each other but “trespass on each other” (114). Thus, Kertész’s technique of presenting situations that are quite similar but not quite the same reflect this affordance of language in which “identity and difference can be accentuated...in the notion of partial semantic identity” (114). This vagueness of meaning opens up language to the possibility of semantic innovation as new attributions adhere to words or phrases through the processes of figuration such as metaphor. These innovations manifest themselves through the psychological mechanism of association, embedded in the social nature of language (117). This analysis (pared to its
essential elements) brings us back to the expectations of readers who believe they are reading
texts that belong to a particular genre. Genres are constructed over time in the dynamic
interrelationship between writers, texts and readers, ultimately settling (though never irrevocably
fixed) on a set of conventions, formats and styles that become definitional. Enlarging Ullmann’s
analysis of the overlapping of associative fields in the semantics of the metaphorical statement to
apply it to a text as a whole, the act of applying a new set of associations to a text assumed to
belong to the genre of Holocaust literature can be seen as a mechanism of innovating language in
a broader context.

Another set of theories that assist in understanding a tensional conception of metaphor
belongs to the work of the new rhetoric of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The key theme here is
a deviation of figurative language and a corresponding drive toward reduction of deviation.
Figurative language is to be compared to a language that would be considered its opposite,
designated degree zero. As this completely “neutral language does not exist” (138), some
thinkers, such as Jean Cohen, advocate measuring figurative language against the closest
language to degree zero as possible, like scientific language. This idea will be useful for my
analysis of Fatelessness, in particular, as Kertész seems to have chosen language for that novel
that is neutral in the extreme. A reading of the nature of that neutral language along with the
deviations in the narrative from it will be instructive. This degree zero language represents what
Berel Lang seeks, as described earlier: a completely literal language that passes the reader right
through to the reference. The new rhetoric holds that figuration calls attention to discourse,
objectifies it in a way, giving it a “quasi-corporeal” quality, makes it somehow visible” (145-6).
This characteristic of figurative language, through its opacity, partially blocks the passage to
reference, thereby focusing meaning within the text itself (147). Jean Cohen, in conceiving
metaphor as a mechanism to reduce deviation, elucidates how this opacity can be transgressed by
the creation of new fields of reference. Ricoeur quotes, “The ‘destructuring’ done by the figure
is followed by a ‘restructuring’ of another order” (150). This operation relies on a notion similar
to Beardsley’s logical absurdity. Cohen posits a code of speech called the “semantic pertinence,”
whereby words must be combined only in the ways that make the sentence understandable.
Deviation from this code results in a “semantic impertinence” that can only be eliminated by a
change in meaning of one of the words through the use of metaphor. Ricoeur explains, “Change
of meaning is the answer of discourse to the threat of destruction posed by semantic
impertinence” (152). Somehow, discourse must find a way to find common ground between
terms that rightly belong to different fields of meaning. A key to this process is the function of
resemblance.

Ricoeur explains that metaphorical meaning is the “new pertinence” found that resolves
the clash of semantic fields. This new pertinence comes about through a sort of semantic
“proximity” discovered in two terms that overcomes their “distance.” (194). In other words, the
two terms must be similar in some way. These resemblances can be of “quality, structure or
locality, of situation, or, finally, of feeling” (189). While Ricoeur is at pains to precisely
describe how this resemblance is perceived, he settles on the psychological element of intuition:
“a sudden intuition in which the new structure emerges from the obliteration and modification of
the prior configuration” (196). In other words, when encountering metaphor, the reader notices
the difference between the terms and, simultaneously grasps some way in which they are similar.
Through the holding together of these two terms, new meaning is created in which difference and
the same coexist. Ricoeur points out that not only can new meanings be created through this
process, but also previously hidden resemblances can be uncovered (197). The consideration of
resemblance will be important in looking at Kertész—both at the level of language and at the level of whole texts. As I will explain, in each of his four novels, Kertész breaks open the meanings of words through this metaphorical operation of holding similarity and difference within those meanings in tension. Metaphor is a key tool he uses to interrogate the very functioning of language. At the broader level of discourse, Kertész’s work resembles the corpus of Holocaust literature in some ways, but differs radically in others. The attempt to make meaning out of texts that hold similarity and difference in tension brings about new seeing and new saying.

Ricoeur describes a third interactive or tensional notion of metaphor, this time at the level of ontology and hermeneutics. Hermeneutics takes place at the level of the text as a whole and thus focuses on the “world” of the work, rather than its structure (220). Ricoeur wants to challenge the following formulation: “The production of discourse as ‘literature’ signifies very precisely that the relationship of sense to reference is suspended. ‘Literature’ would be that sort of discourse that has no denotation but only connotations” (220). If we were to accept this claim, then literature, in its reliance on imagination and creativity rather than on clear reference to some notion of an actual reality, forfeits its claim to truth. This is the idea encompassed by the work of the New Critics. The text refers only to itself, and its elements only relate to the whole, not to a world outside the text. Ricoeur proposes instead a different formula: “the literary work through the structure proper to it displays a world only under the condition that the reference of descriptive discourse is suspended” (221). To wit, literature creates a kind of truth that eschews reliance on pure reference. Imaginative discourse creates a world—Ricoeur calls it a virtual world—a world whose reference is to possibilities of reality. What must appear, he argues, is a “more fundamental mode of reference, whose explication is the task of interpretation” (229).
How does interpretation complete this task? Metaphor shows how. In metaphor, an attempt at a literal interpretation destroys the meaning of the statement— as described in many ways already, a literal interpretation of a metaphor will not make sense. This failure of a literal interpretation subverts the primary reference. The semantic innovation, allowing a change in meaning that rescues the sense of the statement, also gives rise to a new reference – the metaphorical reference (230). Thus, Ricoeur describes the split reference: a reference that holds in tension a destroyed literal meaning and a virtual metaphorical meaning.

How, then, does metaphorical reference relate to truth? This question is of the utmost importance to the effort to apply these various theories of metaphor to the work of Kertész, because a particular notion of the truth of Holocaust representation is essential to understanding his narrative strategies. Ricoeur introduces a concept of metaphorical truth in his critique of a general framework of denotation developed in Languages of Art by Nelson Goodman (1968). This system is challenging and steeped in the arcana of theories of symbols. For my purposes, a basic grasp of metaphorical truth will suffice. His idea is that metaphorical truth involves borrowing predicates or properties of something and transferring them to something else (232). In simplest terms, this means applying a mistaken label, which results in a literal falsity, but is then morphed into a metaphorical truth by reassignment of the label (235). This formulation has a familiar ring to it, resembling similar theories already described of Richards and Beardsley. By adding to Goodman’s formulation a theory of the function of theoretical models in scientific inquiry, Ricoeur arrives at a conception of metaphor as a redescription of reality that alters the framework for judging truth. He writes, summarizing Max Black’s “Models and Archetypes” (1962): “The central argument is that, with respect to the relation to reality, metaphor is to poetic language what the model is to scientific language. Now in scientific language, the model is
essentially a heuristic instrument that seeks, by means of fiction, to break down an inadequate interpretation and to lay the way for a new, more adequate interpretation” (240). This explanation is uncanny in its similarity to Kertész’s goal with his work – to use fiction to access a more adequate interpretation of his experience. Mary Hesse explains that the use of models in scientific exploration is essentially an operation of metaphorical reference: things are “seen as” some new possible things, using the (re)descriptive language of the model” (qtd. in Ricoeur 243). For the purpose of my goal of applying this theory to the work of Kertész, I am taking liberties with this concept. Ricoeur argues that the metaphorical statement itself is not the model, but rather the “constitution of the metaphoric universe as a network” (243). While he goes on to delimit the specific cases and types of metaphor to which this model idea can appropriately be applied, I will be attempting to consider Kertész’s fictions as heuristics through which to redescribe reality.

Ricoeur offers a final caveat – a last tension – which must be kept in view in thinking through the relationship between metaphorical truth and reality. This tension is that inherent in the copula, the “is” in the metaphorical statement. In one way, the copula is relational, simply connecting the semantically inappropriate predicate to the subject. In another way, however, the copula is existential; it constitutes the redescription as referring to a state of affairs that actually exists (247-248). As per his custom in this exhaustive study, Ricoeur approaches the implications of this function of the copula dialectically, eloquently denouncing the notions of naïve ontology or mythology that would assert the literal impossibilities in metaphor to be literally true or literally believed in. The end result is a paradox, implicit in metaphorical truth: “there is no other way to do justice to the notion of metaphorical truth than to include the critical
incision of the (literal) ‘is not’ within the ontological vehemence of the (metaphorical) ‘is’” (255).

I have tried as economically as possible to describe Paul Ricoeur’s commitment to a conception of metaphor that encompasses four separate but interrelated instances of tension. The first is at the level of the word (semiotics). The second is in the semantic plane through the clash of impertinences that render literal readings impossible. The third is in the relationship of resemblance through which metaphor works to hold together similarity and difference. The fourth is in the world of reference — where the existential nature of the copula manifests a world that both “is” and “is not.” I include all of these levels because I see parallels and intriguing and instructive connections with each to the work of Kertész. I believe his work as a whole is metaphorical in nature, if metaphor is understood as the specific element of language that holds these tensions together. He needs to develop new meanings of words. He rejects the genre of Holocaust literature as a semantic plane in which literal descriptions make any sense. He describes worlds that are eerily similar to those with which we are familiar, and yet at the same time, somehow radically different. He attempts to create his own truth — a metaphorical truth, so to speak — which both “is” and “is not” true.

In *Dossier K*, Kertész admits, “I was looking for a usable metaphor” (123) in the attempt to accurately describe his conception of the true nature of totalitarian dictatorships. In the remainder of this thesis, I will argue that he did not find just one, but rather an astonishing array of metaphors that he employs throughout his four novels. Furthermore, I will analyze the manner in which these metaphors enact the full range of tensional functioning described by Ricoeur. I believe a thorough grasp of the variety of ways in which metaphor works in Kertész’s novels is crucial to their interpretation, because it is the very breaking up of language by
metaphor in these narratives that grants access to a broad spectrum of meanings. Chapter II will
address the (un)real language of Kertész’s first novel *Fatelessness*. Here, Kertész pointedly
inverts neutral and figurative language in order to reveal the descriptive deficiencies of ordinary
language in the context of the totalitarian world of the concentration camp. In addition, he
intentionally invites specific expectations on the part of the reader through the use of a variety of
generic conventions, only to flout those expectations in order to shift the frame in which meaning
is created. These strategies combine to form a metaphorical world that refuses to conform with
the boundaries of reality as commonly constituted and to uncover a metaphorical reality that
advances Kertész’s particular understanding of the concept of fate. Chapter III takes a look at
Kertész’s second novel *Fiasco*, in which he uses a confounding multi-layered and circular
structure in order to conduct a meditation on the meaning of his fateful decision to become a
writer. In *Fiasco*, Kertész employs an elaborate network of embedded metaphors within a
variety of heterogeneous narratives to manifest a world in which totalitarian power both
objectifies the individual and corrupts the proper functioning of language. The only available
solution to these problems, the novel suggests, is to exercise free will by becoming a speaking
subject through writing. Finally, Chapter IV investigates Kertész’s continuing preoccupation
with the writing life as evidenced in his final two novels *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* and
*Liquidation*. In *Kaddish*, Kertész conducts the most pronounced interrogation of the meaning of
words, in the manner of Derridean deconstruction, as exists in his work. He then deploys those
words in a remarkable chain of metaphors that explains how Auschwitz is inextricably connected
with his notion of existence. Yet the novel also makes the case that existence is enclosed in
writing, a notion expanded upon in *Liquidation*. In his final novel, another heterogeneous
narrative, Kertész creates a metaphorical world in which existence is completely enclosed in writing. Through the materiality of writing, he considers the endurance of existence.

Throughout these works, in a variety of alternately obvious and subtle ways, Kertész steadfastly adheres to a conviction that Auschwitz is an ever-present element of contemporary society. Auschwitz has always already and always will exist as a fact of civilization, and he deems acknowledgement of this fact to be essential to any possible understanding of the meaning of existence. He chose a writer’s life – a life of language – in order to express this reality, and his works evidence his vigilant efforts to forge a language equal to the task. His persistent examination of the meaning of words, his appropriation and subversion of generic conventions, and his extensive and multifaceted use of metaphor are testaments to a truth I have come to hold through protracted engagement with his work: Auschwitz has formal consequences.
“Yes, the next time I am asked, I ought to speak about that, the happiness of the concentration camps” (Fatelessness 262). This third to last line in Kertész’s first novel Fatelessness confirms for the reader that he has been ensconced in a strange and unfamiliar world where words do not always retain their customary meanings. This sentence is uttered by the 15-year old Hungarian narrator, György Köves, as he winds up the story of his yearlong internment in three concentration camps, a recounting that has been virtually devoid of affect. Fatelessness is in many ways Kertész’s most confounding work. The facts and events of György’s story are Kertész’s own, but they are told in a fictional mode. Memories that must in any conceivable context be horrific and painful are related in blunt, matter-of-fact, rather antiseptic statements. Emotional outbursts are few, and confuse even the narrator. Value judgments are wholly internal to the text; there are no attempts to embed the events of the novel in the sweep of history or to invest them with universal meaning. And, attributions of people, places and events are predominantly at odds with conventional language. Thus, by the end of the novel, the phrase, “the happiness of the concentration camps,” seems of a piece with what has gone before. A characterization that would normally seem fantastic, no longer surprises.

It is shocking nonetheless. Established usage within the specific system of language ordinarily used to describe the Holocaust would assume a radical disjunction between the
terms "happiness" and "the camps." That Kertész instead emphasizes a positive relationship between these two terms demands a rethinking of their meaning. There is no indication in the narrative that György is happy to be home. Happiness is a term used to modify concentration camps, not home. A psychological reading of this linguistic phenomenon might argue that after a year in captivity, György is simply more comfortable in the camps – that he sees them as his home now. However, I believe that such an explanation dramatically misinterprets the philosophical understanding Kertész means to transmit in this novel. More importantly, it also seriously underestimates his achievements with language throughout the narrative. It is this phrase, "the happiness of the concentration camps," perhaps more than any other, which turned me to the complex workings of metaphor for a framework through which to analyze the novel. It is impossible to believe in the literal truth of this phrase; it opens the door to an alternative set of correspondences between words. There must be another sort of implicit truth to be teased out of it, a metaphorical truth. In this chapter, I will look closely at the unique vocabulary of Fatelessness, using the interactive models of metaphor as a guide, to illuminate how Kertész places several planes of language in tension to overcome what he deems to be the incapacity of traditional language to express reality as he understands it.

**Invisible Language Made Visible**

Kertész's own commentary on what he had to do to language in order to write Fatelessness is an instructive place to begin the analysis. When he says, "My first challenge was to create a language, a form" (Zielinski np), the emphasis is on not on words, but on the ways in which they were being used. In other words, the conventions or current forms of Holocaust narratives were inadequate for his project. He struggled to find a semantics that
would “illuminate the novel’s fundamental principle – my having to craft a new language” (4). In order to foreground the language, he settled on “declarative and unspectacular” sentences, such as “I like the turnip better than the carrot” (3). This strategy seems counterintuitive: in Chapter I, I discussed the theory of Jean Cohen, in which neutral language serves as the foil against which figurative language operates, calling attention to discourse, making it visible. But, Kertész eschews, for the most part, the use of what we would call figurative language, opting instead for the language Cohen would refer to as degree zero language. This sort of “anti-figuration” would seem to make language disappear, rather than call attention to it, as Kertész claims as his aim. For example, György describes his arrival at Birkenau in this declarative, unadorned way:

Yet, what with being among all those people and also in that blinding light, I was not really able to gain a truly accurate picture; I could hardly even discern the distant low-lying buildings of some sort, a scattering of raised platforms here and there that looked like game-shooting hides, a corner, a tower, a chimney. *(Fatelessness 82-3)*

Elie Wiesel, in his celebrated novel *Night*, uses similar declarative sentences to describe his own arrival at Birkenau: “In front of us, those flames. In the air, the smell of burning flesh. It must have been around midnight. We had arrived. In Birkenau” (28). However, Wiesel’s description takes on a figurative cast in its realization of the cries of a madwoman on the train “Look at the fire! Look at the flames! Flames everywhere...,” repeated half a dozen times in the three pages before the arrival scene. Wiesel uses retroactively constructed language, with pathos and aesthetics in mind, to heighten the drama of the scene. It feels like an embellishment of memory. Conversely, Kertész’s description hews closer to degree
zero language, seemingly meant to pass the reader straight through to the reference. It is the unmediated language of a boy seeing gas chambers, guard towers, a crematorium and not knowing what they are. The reader does know what they are, and knows that the author, by the time of the writing, does also. Therefore, this very plain, straightforward language actually calls attention to itself, creating an intense sense of dramatic irony. Time and history disappear, leaving language alone on the stage.

It is precisely because the reader knows this novel is a thinly veiled fiction about the actual events of the author’s Holocaust experience, that he expects figurative language to highlight the emotional content of such a pivotal event as arriving at Auschwitz. Its absence, then, becomes a figure in itself. Kertész intentionally resists layering the significance he must later have invested in these events over the narrative of the avatar of his younger self, who relates them in the naïve, detached voice of a 14-year-old boy. This withholding results in “a sarcasm inherent in its language that strains permitted bonds,” as Kertész later comments (DK 183). In a sense, then, Kertész inverts the split reference described by Ricoeur in the workings of metaphor as described by the new rhetoricians. Instead of using figures that cannot be understood literally, Kertész employs literal language that cannot be understood literally, thus transforming the literal language into a unique form of metaphor.

Two examples of literal language used to describe György’s reaction to his father’s deportation help to illuminate this operation. György quashes his own potential rise of emotion when his father strokes his head after a difficult conversation on the eve of his departure. György bluntly comments, “I would rather my father had no longer been here” (Fatelessness 15). As Miller notes, “an expected or ‘normal’ emotion is deflected,” making it
Sullivan 34

seem ‘trivial’ or unnecessary” (180). It is challenging for the reader to accept this statement as literal truth. This admission seems cruel, unlikely for a first person narrator to put in writing. There must be some other truth hidden here. György continues to display this youthful cluelessness about his father, unencumbered by any authorial editorializing: “All the same, I thought, at least we were able to send him off to the labor camp, poor man, with memories of a nice day” (26). The inclusion of the endearment, “poor man,” eliminates the possibility that György himself is being ironic in his characterization of the event. Furthermore, unlike the description of his arrival at Birkenau, this scene is devoid of dramatic irony. Although this comment does ring true for a disaffected boy who has no real grasp of his father’s situation, its callousness nevertheless makes the reader uncomfortable. This discomfort is a main thrust of Kertész’s intent. He confesses, “I wished to traumatize the reader. The conception of my work is based on the premise that the fear, the loss of footing, which is cited as lacking in the narrator, should be found in the reader” *(Magyar Narancs)*. What he wishes to create, then, is a virtual world in which what is actually said, in figureless unadorned language, is one term of a metaphor, the reference of which is a world with a different meaning entirely, a metaphorical meaning. This world is a heuristic, aiding in creating a new interpretation of the events of György’s young life. The use of degree zero language is insufficient, in and of itself however, to create such a world. It is merely the basic unit of the architecture. We must investigate the ways in which Kertész works with this restrained vocabulary in order to fully explicate the metaphorical world of *Fatelessness*.

First of all, it is important for Kertész that the reader notices the flatness of the language of *Fatelessness* – to palpably comprehend the detachment of the narrator. In
order to effectuate this realization, relatively rare examples of figuration are scattered throughout the narrative that serve as counterexamples to the predominant literality of the language. Interestingly, these instances are restricted to three topics: György’s family and friends in Budapest, objects of fascination during his deportation, and the weather. In a painful and tension filled scene depicting György’s father’s last night at home, four different family members are described figuratively. His stepmother’s mother possesses “two withered flaps of skin dangling from her neck, which gives her the appearance of a very alert, discerning hunting dog” (16). His stepmother’s sister has “a face like an astonished doll” (16). His grandmother’s eyes “through the thick, steamed-up, tear-smudged lenses of her glasses looked just like two peculiar, perspiring insects” (24) Finally, when leaving the gathering, György’s grandfather “draw[s] attention to himself when he presse[s] his tiny, sharply defined bird’s head for no more than an instant, but really fiercely, almost crazily, to the breast of my father’s jacket” (24). Throughout the novel, there are no descriptions whatsoever of the appearance of György, his parents or his stepmother. Although György frequently describes features of both fellow deportees and various Hungarian and German functionaries, none of those are executed with this sort of verve he reserves for his family members. Notice in the descriptions of his grandparents, there is a keen juxtaposition of unflattering features – his grandmother’s insect eyes, and his grandfather’s bird’s head – with small details that telegraph the emotion of the scene. He does not say his grandmother has been crying – but mentions the tear-smudged lenses of her glasses. He refuses to state how devastated his grandfather is at the parting, but mentions the press of the head to his son’s chest. It as if the balance created in the sentence keeps György well insulated from the heightened emotions. His relatives’ odd features are placed at equal
importance with their despair, through their striking figuration. In this way, Kertész inverts conventional metaphorical structure – what is granted a figurative attribution is in truth a diversion from the primary meaning of the sentences. Highlighting elements of subsidiary importance actually points directly at the more plainly stated heart of the matter.

In similar fashion, Kertész uses quite lyrical descriptions of physical landscape and certain objects in contrast to matter of fact recitation of what should be dramatic events. When interned at a brickworks near the beginning of his journey to Auschwitz, György describes a “cylindrical implement that basically struck me as a joke, somewhat reminding me as it did of a cook’s rolling pin,” carried by a “walrus-moustached gendarme” (62). That György metaphorizes a police billy club, intended as an instrument of submission, as a harmless household implement underscores his utter misunderstanding of his situation. The very fact that this object is of absolutely no concern to György causes the reader heightened anxiety. After the arrival at Birkenau, György’s attention is diverted to something “lodged in the milky vapors of a sky that, though cloudless, was nevertheless almost bleached of color” (83). The reader is immediately on alert for something resembling Elie Wiesel’s mournful remark, “Never shall I forget the small faces of children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a brilliant sky” (Wiesel 34). Instead, Kertész presents something much more mundane: “an immobile, elongated, severely gleaming body – a dirigible to be sure” (Fatelessness 83): a barrage balloon – not the vaporous remains of human beings. The dramatic irony created by this focus on what should be peripheral detail is acute. Finally, György frequently refers to his physical surroundings in glowing terms, only to follow these evocations with blunt and bloodless
descriptions of the events that take place in these spaces. One of the most evocative passages in the novel is György’s description of the entrance to Birkenau, glimpsed from the window of the train: “it first solidified before my eyes into its true contours, then mutated from gray to mauve, and at that moment, its windows also gleamed ruddily as the first rays of sunlight struck them” (76). This lovely image is succeeded by György’s uncomprehending reading of the words painted in gothic letters on the building, “Auschwitz-Birkenau.” The reader is understandably horrified by a retrospective knowledge of what is symbolized by those names, but György has no such knowledge; he is “sleepy” and “quickly drop[s] off again” (76). A more dramatic scene takes place during another arrival. Immediately following his sketch of the Buchenwald train station as a “cozy country halt,” György blithely explains how the guards organize their further transportation: “a few brusque barks...a few blows, a few whip cracks, an intermittent swing of the boot, an intermittent rifle jab, a number of muffled cries of pain, and our column had been formed and was already on the march” (121). Again, the relatively insignificant detail of the charm of the locale is highlighted with figuration while the brutality of the deportee’s treatment is related with equally brutal spare language. These sorts of juxtapositions abound throughout Fatelessness. The elements of the narrative that are figured flow into elements that are not figured in a way that creates a new metaphor. The benign ways in which objects and locations are described relative to their purported function in the narrative create the gap in context described by Richards as the basis for metaphor. Children should not be beaten in a “cozy country halt,” – the correspondence is wrong. Thus, the reader is encouraged to conjure up a world in which these disparate contexts actually function together.
This sort of blurring of context most frequently occurs when György is talking about the weather. Although I am not intimately familiar with the predominant meteorological patterns in Eastern Europe, it is unlikely that throughout the year of György’s ordeal the weather would be so unremittingly fine. Given that the weather is frequently used for the literary device of foreshadowing, a first reading of *Fatelessness* led me to the conclusion that the weather is used simply to elevate the overall ironic tone of the novel. However, a closer look reveals more of the sort of clash of contexts I have been describing. “It was a clear, balmy morning” the day György prepares for his father’s deportation (5), and it later transforms into an “indigo-hued, humid spring evening” (22). When György and his young compatriots are removed suddenly from their busses to work and detainted, it is “a clear summer morning, with the sun already starting to warm the grass, as we could feel when we lay down against it” (41). More figurative, and at an arguably far more significant moment, is the weather when György arrives at Auschwitz: “The dawn outside was cool and fragrant, with wraiths of gray mist lying on the wide stretches of meadow, from somewhere behind which, a bit later, a sharp, thin, red shaft of light appeared, unexpectedly like a trumpet blast” (75). His arrival at Buchenwald is met with similar, although less dramatic, natural beauty: “clear, sunny weather that was kept cool and fresh by patches of scudding cloud and flurries of light wind” (121). There are no day-to-day descriptions of the weather – they are reserved only for the moments in the novel that should be the most filled with pathos. Singled out for figurative language, we might expect dark, somber or even frightening weather metaphors at these junctures to reflect the nature of György’s predicament. The fact that Kertész uses language that emphasizes the spectacular beauty of the weather irrespective of what is happening to György proves that
the natural world cannot be used as a metaphor for human activity. Nature is indifferent to what humankind gets up to on Earth, and is certainly not implicated in or complicit with it. By insistently refusing to use familiar weather metaphors, Kertész undoes the conventions of metaphor typically used in Holocaust narratives and reconstructs a world embodying a different metaphorical truth: that the Holocaust, like language, is a man-made catastrophe. Leave nature out of it.

There is only one instance in *Fatelessness* in which the weather is used in a more typical metaphorical fashion. And yet, my reading of this scene reveals that Kertész is flipping the metaphor on its head yet again. György has been transported back to Buchenwald from the Zeitz concentration camp where he has been ill from festering wounds caused by malnutrition. His health is dire, his will to live fading. He is deposited on the loading dock in the rain with other bodies, a few barely alive like him, but many already dead. This passage contains, in my estimation, the loveliest language to be found in the entire novel:

the low, gray, impenetrable sky, for instance, or to be more precise the leaden, sluggishly moving wintry cloud-cover, which concealed it from view. Nevertheless, every now and again it would be parted by an unexpected rent, with a more brilliant gap arising in it here and there for a fleeting moment, and that was like a sudden intimation of a depth out of which a ray was seemingly being cast on me from up above, a rapid, searching gaze, an eye of indeterminate but unquestionably pale hue – somewhat similar to that of the doctor before whom I had once passed, back in Auschwitz. (186)
Within the next few lines, György is plucked off the loading dock, and thrown over German shoulders; he believes he is headed for the gas chambers. Instead he is taken to a hospital ward for children and installed in a real bed with a plump straw mattress and not one, but two blankets. This most unambiguously metaphorical description of the light of the sky at just the moment in which György seems to teeter between life and death, in actuality creates its own enigma. It is possible to read the penetrating sunlight as the hand of God, choosing György for survival. Yet the purposeful and shocking comparison to the selection at Auschwitz could be a red herring implying that György has been selected for death – certainly György himself reads the portent that way. The two readings co-exist and overlap; although the fact that a third of the novel remains after this scene cues the reader that it will be life for György, the “selection” metaphor is a reminder that the outcome is decidedly arbitrary. Nature cares no more for György than the Auschwitz doctor. If the sun represents any sort of higher power, it is just as indifferent to György’s fate as are his captors. As in Beardsley’s theory of metaphor, either reading is fitting, and both are included in the meaning. A reader determined to find some reason for György’s survival may look at this ray of sunlight as Providence. But, this reading is made exceedingly difficult by the comparison to Mengele. Kertész leaves the metaphor there, unexplicated, asking the reader to ponder whether God or man picks the winners and losers in the context of the Holocaust. At the end of the novel, with an incident mentioned in Chapter I when György refuses to compare the concentration camp to hell, Kertész subtly opines on the question of how to read the metaphorical rays of sun. György says, “I was somewhat acquainted with what [the concentration camp] was, but not hell” (248-9). He will only tolerate comparisons – or metaphors – using things with which he is familiar. When lying
on the loading dock in the rain at Buchenwald, György selects a metaphor from the limited range of his personal experience, the arbitrary and cruel Nazi selection.

In summary, then, Kertész paints his canvas with a markedly drab palette, only occasionally inflected with dollops of colorful figuration. The effect of this narrative technique is the opposite of what one would expect. Language describing dramatic events is so unremittingly plain that it makes itself visible. The language calls attention to itself by divesting itself of interest or aesthetic. Furthermore, because the periodic flashes of creative language modify trivial or peripheral matters, the content of the plain language is foregrounded even further. This strategy is one building block of the metaphorical reality Kertész creates in *Fatelessness*. The degree zero language acts as the focus of the metaphor. We must continue to look at other elements of the novel to ascertain what he intends to be its frame.

**Genre Games as Metaphorical Frame**

*Testimony*

Thus far I have illustrated how austere, unadorned language, interrupted by occasional fillips of figuration, is the building material of *Fatelessness*. The next task is to investigate the novel’s generic positioning. In essence, Kertész works against type. When an actor with a long career playing serious dramatic roles suddenly shows up in a comedy, expectations are challenged; the change draws close attention to his method and comparison to his body of work. In a similar way, Kertész uses the conventions of the genres of literature in which he is expected to be writing as the foil against which his narrative operates. He mimics, at times, the genres of testimony or testimonial memoir, autobiography, *bildungsroman*, and the existential novel, such that the divergences from
these genres are accentuated. By means of this strategy, Kertész creates an imaginative world that holds the similarities with established genres and differences therefrom in tension – to wit, a metaphorical world. It is the hermeneutic work of the reader to resolve these tensions to forge a new interpretation of the world she thinks she knew. With a thorough understanding of how Kertész plays with various genre conventions, I will explicate how the text of *Fatelessness* acts as a metaphorical model to be used as an aid for seeing the reality of the Holocaust in new ways.

The assertion that Kertész appropriates many of the features of the genre of testimony to his own particular ends is a commonality among the relatively meager critical analyses of *Fatelessness*. In my mind, a key reason he is able to so masterfully manipulate this genre is a certain indeterminacy about its boundaries. Felman’s discussion of the genre illuminates the difficulties of defining testimony. She opens her treatment with the following: “A ‘life-testimony’ is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can *penetrate us like an actual life*” (Felman and Laub 2). This notion suggests an overlapping of the life of the reader and the life of the witness through the text – all three actors are involved in the testimony. In a sense, she is arguing here that testimony grants a sort of access to the life of the witness in a way that is almost physical. In fact, she will later claim that the function of literary testimony is to allow the reader to feel what is happening to the witness “*in one’s own body*” (108). Discussing the testimonial poetry of Paul Celan, Felman emphasizes the primary importance of language in this process: “it is to give reality one’s own vulnerability, as a condition of exceptional availability and of exceptionally sensitized, tuned in attention to
the *relation between language and events*" (29). Again, she characterizes testimony as an opening, a welcoming in, an invitation to share – all through the medium of language.

However, elsewhere, Felman contradicts this notion, when she claims that testimony makes us “encounter *strangeness,*” that it is “quite unfamiliar and *estranging*” (7). Robert Eaglestone takes up and explains the nature of this strangeness as the rejection of identification that he sees as a key component of the genre of testimony. While in his book, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern,* Eaglestone explores this concept in depth, synthesizing the work of a variety of commentators, he sums the position up succinctly in a subsequent essay:

> testimony aims to prohibit identification on epistemological grounds (a reader really cannot become, or become identified, with the narrator of a testimony: any such identification is an illusion) and on ethical grounds (a reader should not become identified with a narrator of testimony, as it reduces and “normalizes” or consumes the otherness of the narrator’s experience and the illusion that such an identification creates is possibly pernicious). (“The Aporia of Imre Kertész” 39)

Furthermore, he argues that survivors neither seek nor desire this sort of identification – it is not the purpose of their testimony (*The Holocaust and the Postmodern* 28). Thus, the genre of testimony contains at least two simultaneous but contradictory aims: the drawing in of the reader in attempt to merge his life with the life of the witness and the pushing away of the reader in an insistence that such a merger is impossible. It is this dialectic, I believe, that accounts for the incessant refrain that Holocaust testimony is an attempt to speak the unspeakable, to describe the indescribable, to make real the unreal. Even
Kertész, through György, acknowledges this enigma when he vows to “continue my uncontinuable life” (Fatelessness 262). What is crucial is that Kertész continues his life through language, and we must attend to this language to ascertain if and how it performs this dichotomous element of the testimonial genre. As Felman admits, “the more we look closely at texts, the more they show us that, unwittingly, we do not even know what testimony is” (7). Kertész takes advantage of this confusion in his narrative by playing with conventions from within and without the oblique borders of the testimonial genre.

Both Eaglestone and Miller assert categorically that the character György Kőves resists identification, and therefore fulfills the estranging requirement of Holocaust testimony. The former focuses on two elements of the narrative: the relation of events, that although conducted in the first-person, are so devoid of emotional content or personal agency that they read as though reported by an indifferent third-person narrator (“Aporia” 39-40). The latter devotes significant analysis to the overall ironic tone of the narration and the distancing this stylistic element enforces on the reader (Miller 188-97). My reading of the text rather confirms that both alienating and welcoming language coexist in the narrative. As I described above, the predominant degree zero language of the novel is off-putting, and, as Eaglestone says, it makes the reader wonder whether the narrator could possibly be talking about himself. A stark example of this effect is when György discusses the beatings he receives at Zeiss: “I had my fair share of them too, naturally, no more but also no less than normal, the average, the ordinary, like anyone, any one of us” (Fatelessness 168). Yet, a simple and compelling psychological interpretation might argue that this statement reflects the gradual grinding down of the individual personality, the dehumanization that occurs in the concentration camp. The language is alienating because
the character has become alienated from himself. Indeed, earlier in the novel, György records the first time he is struck by a guard very differently. He notes the “sting” on his cheek and forcefully elaborates his emotional state: “I was extremely angry as, after all, I was not used to being hit,” and he makes sure to exhibit “passable signs of that rage” (130). The language György uses to describe his physical being charts his journey from dehumanized automaton to nascently recovering psyche. When he first lands in the hospital with suppurating boils on his hip, he undergoes surgery without anesthetic. He disinterestedly describes two incisions and expression of pus without reference to any physical effects whatsoever (174). A bit later, however, a second operation spurs a different reaction, albeit still related as though György has not much to do with it: “I found myself obliged to act a little bit vocally” (177). That his screams force the doctor to abandon the procedure indicates the understatement of György’s description. The more care György receives, the more he returns to his own body. In Buchenwald, he lives in unprecedented luxury: “Your body sinks into a plumped-up straw mattress...Under the nape of your neck too you feel an unwonted, far from unpleasant pressure coming from a well-stuffed straw pillow” (200-201). However, the fact that Kertész reverts to second person narration at this moment underscores that a certain reserve is maintained. György may be able to feel again, but he understands his state of affairs rhetorically, almost hypothetically, as it does not conform to his sense of the reality of the concentration camp.

Thus, in at least some aspects of the narrative, the degree zero language can be seen to be metaphorical in itself, tracing and performing György’s shifting psychological condition. At the beginning of the novel, György’s language enacts his characterization as a typical detached teenager, one whose affect has been flattened by a difficult family
situation. Before the scales fall from his eyes at Auschwitz, his continued disinterested narration belies the believable naïveté of a young boy. As Kertész remarks later, one almost imagines with a chuckle, “You know, it is not so easy to dampen the joie de vivre of a fourteen-year old boy, especially if he is surrounded by pals of the same age” (DK 11). As György’s humanity evaporates, so does his language. As it returns, language reclaims some vitality. Although the language is not figurative in the explicit sense, it embodies an implicit figure. In the words of Beardsley, what the language states is different from what it suggests. A surface reading of Fatelessness may suggest a lack of feeling, but that flouts Kertész’s own estimation of his work: “I tried to depict the human face of this history” (Zielinski np). Kertész makes the language embody humanity as it undergoes its ordeal. In a sense, the language metaphorically undergoes the ordeal as well. It is in this function that the language of Fatelessness both conforms to and diverges from the conventions of testimony.

I have taken pains to gain a more nuanced understanding of the function of the distancing language, but we must also take note of points at which Kertész more aggressively invites the reader into the narrative. He executes this trick primarily through the use of rhetorical language. The following example is instructive as it combines a specific invitation to identification with some overt figuration. György describes the challenges of his bowels while on work detail:

let us suppose they do exist – suppose one’s guard is well disposed and grants permission once, grants it a second time; but then I ask you! – who is going to be so rash, so desperate, as to test that patience a third time? The only thing left at a time like that is mute turmoil, teeth clenched, bowels
continually quaking, until the dice have rolled and either one’s body or one’s mind wins out. *(Fatelessness 168)*

This tactile evocation of the agony involved here, and the direct hailing of the reader, opens György up in his vulnerability. György is begging “you”, the reader, to empathize with him in his degrading struggle with a most basic function of the human body. Surely the reader can identify with this one small aspect of György’s otherwise unimaginable situation.

Another instance when the narrative voice shifts to the rhetorical “you” was alluded to earlier, when György describes his first experiences in the children’s hospital at Buchenwald. The second person narration here, like most of the language in *Fatelessness* carries a dual function. First, it evokes the complete unreality of the situation for György – he simply cannot believe neither that this comfortable ward exists in the camp, nor that he has had the good fortune to land there. Thus, he cannot describe it in the first person – but only by speaking about himself as if from outside himself. Nevertheless, the hailing function of the term “you” encourages the reader to put himself in György’s place.

“You”(György/the reader) can virtually feel “the cool white layer” of the bedsheet (200), “you” can see the color of the floorboards “caressing your eyes” (200), and “you” can consider it all a “joke” (203). This sense of unreality mixed with reality and the overlapping experience of György and the reader gets summed up in György’s rumination, who could exhaust, indeed even sift through, all the innumerable multitude of notions, escapades, games, tricks, and plausible considerations that, were you to summon up your entire knowledge, might be set in motion, implemented, effortlessly converted from a world of the imagination into reality in a concentration camp (203).
Kertész implies that György recognizes that his reality, although exceeding both his imagination and the reader's, is nonetheless reality. The reader may be invited to identify with certain common aspects of György's experience, but by no means can the reader participate in the reality of the novel as a whole. That György speaks to "you" of this reality only re-emphasizes that it is a reality that only exists in language – in the imaginary world of fiction. This uncertainty about the nature of reality pervades the novel, and is highlighted by language that performs a similar dual function to the rhetorical passages. These are the nearly constant interjections of such phrases as, "if I may put it that way," "I can tell you," "I have to say," and other such conversational patterns. On one hand, György is again talking to you, the reader – anxious that he is to be understood. On the other hand, these phrases indicate that György himself is uncertain about whether or not the reality he relates makes any sense. I would argue that the language of Fatelessness refutes the notion that identification with a Holocaust victim (at least a fictional one) is either epistemologically or ethically challenging. If György does not fully comprehend the nature of what happens to him, Kertész wishes to transmit his knowledge of that fact. By hailing the reader in a variety of ways, Kertész is overtly demanding identification with György.

Thus the narrative of Fatelessness executes the push and pull of the language of testimony in an ebb and flow that metaphorically mimics the narrator's state of mind. Eaglestone claims that if Holocaust narratives, particularly those written in the first person, possess no "markers of fiction," they will be read as testimony (The Holocaust and the Postmodern 125). Kertész, I think, relies on this fact to underscore one term of the metaphor: the actual events that happened to him. Barbara Foley claims that Holocaust writers are not interested in "epistemological relativism" (322) – they want the facts to be
the facts. The existing body of Holocaust testimony, therefore, sets a generic expectation that the survivor is telling his own true story exactly as it happened. Kertész, however, works within the tension between epistemological certitude and hermeneutic flexibility. The facts are what they are – but their meanings must be interpreted. The facts do not refer to a stable denotable reality, but rather to a virtual reality constructed through the language of fiction. As such, there are, in fact, markers in the narrative of *Fatelessness* that indicate that it is not a standard testimony. For example, testimony frequently incorporates documentary evidence, external to the story itself, in order to pin down that epistemological certainty of truth. In *Fatelessness*, there is nary a sentence that originates outside the strict point of view of the narrator. In theory, the entire novel could be the product of György's imagination, a possibility Kertész allows to linger in the reader's mind. Testimony also often includes tangents or side stories, including skips in time and place, as events and connections occur to the witness. (*The Holocaust and the Postmodern* 42)

*Fatelessness* adheres to a strict linear temporality, aside from a few minor occasions, as when György thinks back to his school days, specifically to note that rather than studying useless subjects, they should have taught him about nothing but Auschwitz (*Fatelessness* 113). Even that short flashback relates tightly to the context in which György is currently ensconced. Many Holocaust witnesses refer to their experiences as "dream like" (*Foley* 340). Although György is constantly "amazed," "astonished," "surprised," and "confused," at the events that occur to him, he relates them in such concrete, precise language that they take on a decided solidity. As in the quote above, he acknowledges forthrightly that the product of his imagination is "converted" into reality. Finally, Foley notes that many Holocaust memoirs end with a "chilling silence" (229), while Eaglestone describes their
common lack of closure (*The Holocaust and the Postmodern 42*). *Fatelessness* ends with a strong note of hope and forward momentum. That the narrative includes elements that mimic testimony and those that signal its fictionality places the reader in a liminal space between the two frames of reference. The reader must hold together in his mind that the novel both is and is not testimony - both is and is not fiction - and construct a metaphorical meaning that can encompass this reality. A look at how *Fatelessness* butts up against two other genre types will help illuminate further what that metaphorical meaning might be.

*Bildungsroman*

In many ways, *Fatelessness* reads like the classic *bildungsroman*, the story of the education of a young person through the trials and tribulations of his young life. As we have seen, the György of the first half of the novel is incredibly callow. He has the snarkiness of a teen batted around in a custody battle between his parents, the ennui of adolescence, and the false bravado of a boy on the cusp of adulthood. Kertész uses language in the early part of the novel that emphasizes György's naïveté. He remarks that his teacher didn’t raise a “peep” about his missing school for his father’s departure (3). When his stepmother encourages him to act appropriately, he snorts, “I had no clue what I could say to that, so I said nothing” (4). After a short lecture from her, he intones, “It was awkward. After that, I was allowed to go” (4). Throughout the first two chapters, György dismissively describes his various family members, complains about the boredom of waiting while his parents sort things out, is sidetracked by a youthful romance, finds the expressions of sorrow of adults acutely embarrassing, and presents himself as utterly unaware of the gravity of what is happening to his father, and its implications for himself.
Positioning György as a character with such a complete lack of understanding of the situation sets expectations for the reader that György will gradually be educated until, at the end of the novel, he will have learned important truths about his life. Although this story arc is executed through the narrative, it is in surprising fashion – György’s learning curve is flat for long stretches of time, with spikes of epiphany here and there, and his realizations about reality by the end of the novel flout expectations in ways that further metaphorical tensions.

One of the best examples from the novel of how Kertész sets up expectations that Fatelessness is a sort of bildungsroman only to work against the type is György’s relationship to his Jewishness. At the beginning of the novel, György notes that his yellow star amuses him when he is on his own, but embarrasses him when he is with his family (10). He implies that in its essence, he finds his Jewishness silly – it has nothing to do with him; wearing the star is like wearing a mask to hide his true identity. That its significance in the family embarrasses him indicates that he is befuddled by this heritage that binds his family in a way that means nothing to him. This seemingly insignificant detail could simply be filed away as yet another of György’s naïve statements. But, in another sense, it could be seen as foreshadowing that György’s understanding of the meaning of being Jewish will undergo radical change through his ordeal in the camps. This foreshadowing gambit is strengthened when György’s devout Uncle Lajos tells him he is “now part of the shared Jewish fate.” György remains outside the circle; he does not understand “their sins, and their God” (20). Yet, when Uncle Lajos asks if he has prayed for his father, he feels “it as a burden” (21). Agreeing to pray, his good intentions provide no aid in the alienation he feels from the faith: “all that remained with me of what we mumbled was the sight of those
moistly wriggling, fleshy lips and the incomprehensible gabble of a foreign tongue” (22). Not only does Kertész position György firmly outside his Jewishness, but he also stresses the boy’s derision of it. The effect of this language is so pronounced, the reader is led to believe that there will be an arc of learning after which György will indeed comprehend and accept the importance of his Jewishness.

What comes to pass, however, is quite different, and the language György continues to use concerning Jews clashes with expectations. Arguing with a young girl about the nature of the hatred towards Jews, György does not “see any of it as being all that important” (36) and “none of it meant anything” (38) to him. Surely György knows it is his father’s Jewishness that resulted in his deportation, and yet he remains indifferent. Reading this as just another example of György’s naïveté is to miss Kertész insistence that György will not be blaming events on his Jewishness. When interned in the brickworks, György pays close attention to the gendarmes, who will have an effect on what happens to him, while he dismisses the rabbi’s assurances that through faith they can receive God’s mercy. György scoffs, “I did notice that he failed to say...how we might actually achieve this” (66). Kertész wants to separate György from the possible comforts of religious faith. Even more shocking, when György arrives at Auschwitz, a group of Jewish prisoners, denoted by their yellow stars, enter the train. “I had all but forgotten about that entire business,” György admits, then conducts the following bigoted assessment: “Their faces did not exactly inspire confidence either: jug ears, prominent noses, sunken, beady eyes with a crafty gleam. Quite like Jews in every respect. I found them suspect and altogether foreign-looking” (78). Clearly by this point, no learning has taken place. Thinking about planes of meaning, there is no sense in which this passage is “fitting” to the context at this point.
György has lost his father, been rounded up, nailed into a boxcar and shipped off to Auschwitz. It defies logic that, even at fourteen, he would view Jews so callously, and as so different still from himself.

This statement seems to me the most pointed semantic impertinence in the novel, marking it as Kertész telling us something intensely important. There will be no acceptance on György’s part that being Jewish has anything to do with his deportation. How is this logical? This blatant contradiction of the factual truth of history makes us look for a metaphorical truth – some plane of understanding where this makes sense. I think that for Kertész, György’s powerlessness is of far greater significance than the reason for it. As I will show below, the objectification of the human being in totalitarian systems is the major theme of this novel. It is irrelevant whether or not power is exerted over Jews in particular, as can be seen in a subsequent episode. At Zeitz, György is shunned by The Finns, a group of orthodox Jews, for not speaking Yiddish. To them, he becomes a “non-person” (139), and remembering what he felt at home with his yellow star, he analogizes that it makes him “feel as if I were somehow Jewish” (140). Being a Jew when you do not feel like one makes you Jewish. Not being a Jew when you do not feel like one also makes you Jewish. It all depends on the context and who is in a position to exert power over you. This is the metaphorical truth Kertész creates with György’s relationship to his Jewishness. His actual opinion and feeling on the matter changes not a whit throughout the narrative, but his context does, and thus the consequences shift as well. This metaphorical truth is underscored one last time in the novel. When other hospital inmates at Buchenwald make fun of György for being Hungarian, he is hurt. He sees the irony of the fact that, “Hungarians did not consider me as one of them” and it is “unfair, that it should be me, of all
people, who was being looked at askance on their account" (197). In this passage, György does not even acknowledge the reason Hungarians do not claim him – his Jewishness – but latches onto it as a way to avoid granting power to others for yet another element of himself he has not chosen. That any sort of growth toward a mature understanding of his relationship to his Jewishness has categorically not taken place is a clear rejection of the arc implied by the foreshadowing of the first chapter and the sly implication that this narrative would conform to the conventions of the bildungsroman. I would argue that without the heavy-handedness of the portrayal of György's alienation from his Jewishness at the beginning of the novel, the lack of resolution of this relationship would not produce the sort of metaphorical meaning created by the clash of expectations. Logic would tell us that György's ordeal has everything to do with the fact that he is Jewish; Kertész makes sure we understand that, in his reality, Jewishness is not relevant. György states this truth baldly at the end of the novel, “I would now be able to tell her what it means to be “Jewish”: nothing, nothing to me at least” (258) He is powerless regardless.

Existential Novel

György's relationship to power, specifically the question of whether or not he has any, is at the heart of the metaphorical world Kertész creates in Fatelessness. This theme gradually emerges through a complex interaction of some of the narrative strategies already described. The alternation between degree zero and more lyrical language focuses attention on the language itself, and through that language, on the character of the narrator. This language reveals a character who is naïve but not innocent, who sees the world through a virtually emotionless dry wit, and who seems to drift along on currents,
accepting rather unquestioningly the things that happen to him. This will not be a standard autobiographical Holocaust novel in which we watch the humanity ground out of a vivacious and promising youth by the Nazi machine. The sort of language György uses, the things he cares about, and his relative indifference to pretty much everything makes us question his humanity right from the get go. We calculate that he must be so strange and detached at the beginning so that we can see him emerge from his concentration camp experience a more connected and caring person. Essentially, we are set up for two contradictory expectations, neither of which pan out; midway through the novel, we are still wondering what is going on with this character. If we are paying attention, though, there is actually a third tip-off about what sort of novel this will be, one that is closer to the aim of the author, and one that synthesizes the language strategies already discussed to perform the theme of the novel.

The first line of *Fatelessness*, “I didn’t go to school today,” (3) is a blatant riff on the first line of an iconic piece of existentialist literature, Albert Camus’ *The Stranger*. I read this nod to the existentialist canon as an opening salvo in the creation of the metaphorical world of the novel – a first clue as to the way in which György will relate to his experiences. From the very beginning of the narrative, as seen in the non-action of this first sentence, events simply happen to György; he is almost exclusively the object of action rather than its agent. Of course, he goes places and runs errands and sees and remarks upon events, but his overall mien is pointedly passive. In the second paragraph of the narrative, Father tells Mother, “I can’t let you have young György today,” (4), highlighting György’s lack of control over his situation. György’s frequent references to his intense boredom during this momentous day in his family, his role as observer during the intense family dinner, and his
entrapment in prayer by his Uncle Lajos, are further emphases that he is virtually powerless to act. György continues to exhibit his own powerlessness even before being deported. Following an uncomfortable interview with his mother, he remarks, “it bothered me that again I could do nothing for her today” (31). Kertész explains his intentions in opening the novel in this way: “From the very first lines, you can already get a feeling that you have entered a strange sovereign realm in which everything or, to be more accurate, anything can happen” (DK 9). He may as well add the phrase, “to György,” as virtually nothing happens that is planned and executed by György.

In his Nobel Prize speech, Kertész baldly states his philosophy, “If the world is an objective reality that exists independently of us, then humans themselves, even in their own eyes are nothing more than objects” (“Heurika!”). This belief is the direct result of his personal history: tossed by the Nazis as a child into a concentration camp, he returned to a Hungary that, by the time he was a young adult, had devolved into a different but no less totalitarian system, continuing the deprivation of personal agency of its citizens for decades. He has gone so far as to assert that had it not been for his life under the communist dictatorship in postwar Hungary, he never would have come to understand his concentration camp experience. As such, the persona Kertész creates for György is not meant to alienate the reader, but to convey through the character the objectification of the human being in the concentration camp system in the most concrete way possible. Kertész has written, “I would never call Fatelessness a Holocaust novel because the Holocaust, or what people mean when they use that word, can’t be put into a novel,” and further, “I was writing about the camps, the experience of the camps” (The Holocaust as Culture 27). It is important to him that the experience of the camps, and not just the mass killings, are
comprehended in the notion of objectification exemplified in Nazi totalitarianism. György, then, is a metaphor for the objectified Nazi victim, and he lives in a world that is a metaphor for the world under any totalitarian system. Alvin Rosenfeld writes “Auschwitz is not a metaphor for anything else” (qtd. in Young 90). *Fatelessness* is the concrete proof that Imre Kertész does not share that opinion.

Thus, the form of *Fatelessness*, while containing elements of testimonial memoir and *bildungsroman*, is finally essentially that of an existentialist novel. Events happen to the protagonist that he coolly observes as though from the outside – he has no agency. He is constantly aware of the absurdity of his situation, a hallmark of existentialism. This knowledge is deeply reflected in the language of the novel: György is constantly referring to events as a “joke,” and he is perennially “amazed,“ “astonished,” “surprised,” by things that happen to him – because they are inherently ridiculous in any kind of sane reality. This existentialist stance also deepens the account of György’s relationship to his Jewishness: the dominant French strain of existentialism is atheistic in nature, as a higher power might explain things or grant meaning to things that have no meaning. That György’s opinion of his Jewishness remains stubbornly unchanged throughout the novel, a fact emphasized as noted by its surprising flouting of the *bildungsroman* tradition, makes perfect sense in the existential context. Once again, however, Kertész is crafty in his use of the nod to Camus at the beginning of the novel in that the two books end so differently. While Merseult unapologetically heads off to his death in *The Stranger*, György emerges from the concentration camp with a new understanding of reality and a new energy to take control of his life. The reader is again operating on one plane of language, while Kertész slips off onto another. Arguably the two most important tactics he uses to create this
alternate plane are the choices he makes about the temporality of the novel and the pervasive language of indeterminacy. These turn out to be two sides of the same coin.

The novel is told in an odd mash-up between present and past tenses. The bulk of the sentences are constructed in the past tense, but with odd modifiers that make it seem as if the action is happening right now. Thus the first sentence, “I didn’t go to school today,” and the first lines of the second chapter, “Already two months have passed since we said good-by to Father. Summer is here” (27). This strategy works in complex ways. On one hand, it reinforces the sense that we are reading a testimonial memoir or even a diary, in the sense that it seems to be written the day of the occurrences. As Miller notes, this awkward temporality serves to “plunge the reader into a kind of eternal ‘today’ the happening and re-happening” of the story (Miller 180). This sort of eternal recurrence marks the narrative as testimony, in the sense that it is not a “completed statement,” Felman’s words (Felman and Laub 5). As Jacques Lacan explains, with trauma, “reality continues to elude the subject who lives in its grip an unwittingly undergoes its ceaseless repetitions and reenactments” (qtd. in Felman and Laub 68). Kertész’s construction of this strange, intermittent but recurring present tense reflects this elusive reality, and not only for György. In his Nobel Prize speech, Kertész asserts, “Nothing has happened since Auschwitz that could reverse or refute Auschwitz. In my writings, the Holocaust could never be present in the past tense” (“Heurika!”). In other words, the language of temporality in the novel must reflect the ongoing and recurring nature of the experience, and, furthermore, it metaphorizes the ongoing experience of totalitarianism even beyond the Holocaust.
To reinforce this temporal stance, the present tense periodically slips into the narrative. For example, in the middle of a page, the narrative suddenly shifts from past to present tense, as György describes his doctor (209). This is an instructive choice, as it turns out that the doctor has been in the concentration camp system for a staggering twelve years. Eternal present indeed. In fact, Kertész explicates the temporal nature of the concentration camp in one of the few overt metaphors in the entire narrative:

Indeed, true captivity is actually nothing but a gray mundane round. It was as if I had been in a roughly comparable situation already, that time in the train on the way to Auschwitz; there too everything had hinged on time, and then on each person’s individual capabilities. Except in Zeitz, to stay with my simile, the feeling I had was that the train had come to a standstill. From another angle, though – and this is also true – it rushed along at such speed that I was unable to keep up with all the changes in front of and around me, or even within myself. One thing I can say at least: for my own part, I travelled the entire route, scrupulously exploring every chance that might present itself on the way. (135)

This passage not only provides a useful metaphor for explaining the various ways time passes in a concentration camp, but also a useful metaphor for the way the narrative is related. Just as György scrupulously travels every step of the way, so Kertész relates every step of György’s journey. He eschews the more typical narrative strategy of hitting the high points, describing only the most spectacular events that occur. Instead, we hear about every mundane thing that happens, in sequence. Nothing is omitted. In particular, Kertész is extremely careful to narrate the twenty minutes that elapse from the time György’s train
arrives at Birkenau until the selection. György must get through every one of those twenty minutes – and so must the reader. Sometimes the act of reading is like the train rushing on, at other times the train stalls. This non-metaphorical way of writing events performs the metaphor that the novel embodies – reading is an existential experience that is gotten through in time in the same way as standing on a platform awaiting a decision as to whether or not you will live or die. One is dramatic, the other banal, but here they are held together metaphorically in a way that forces the reader to resolve the dichotomy. In what kind of reality can I square that twenty minutes can be spent enjoying a book, while that same twenty minutes can be spent at Auschwitz? This is the metaphorical reality that is evoked in *Fatelessness*. It is almost needless to say that the novel ends in an unambiguous present tense.

That the reader is forced to slog through all of the mundane as well as the spectacular events that occur in György’s yearlong ordeal is a key to creating the existential world Kertész wants to describe. This is the reason for the rigid linearity of the novel. There are few flashbacks or skips in time, features relatively common in Holocaust literature. As mentioned previously, there are no breaks in the narrative for disquisitions that offer epistemological evidence of the events of the novel or place them in the context of history. The narrative doggedly traces György’s unique and individual experience taking each of his steps along with him, and remains at all times firmly within the scope of his point of view. It is highly fitting that a metaphor for action, the phrase “taking steps,” takes on eminent importance in György’s epiphany of understanding at the end of the novel that reveals Kertész’s philosophy of fatelessness. This character whose lack of personal agency has been stressed throughout the novel becomes as angry as he has been at any point in the
narrative when he returns home and some neighbors refer to events as having “come about.” Events do not come about, György realizes; people bring them about. The intransitive verb offends. György exclaims: “It’s about the steps. Everyone took steps as long as he was able to take a step; I too took my own steps, and not just in the queue at Birkenau, but even before that, here, at home. I took steps with my father, and I took steps with my mother, I took steps with Annamarie” (258), and a few lines later, “I took the steps, no one else” (259). It is taking those steps one after the other that makes up a person’s fate. The clash of hermeneutical planes reveals the metaphorical meaning. The world created in Fatelessness is one in which the individual has no power to act. And yet, György realizes he has acted anyway. “We ourselves are fate” (260) he proclaims. The novel is a testimony to Kertész’s truth that the human condition is one of fatelessness: a person’s life consists of a series of chosen reactions to a series of imposed occurrences. An individual has no control over what events he may face, but he is responsible for the choices he makes. Every action is contingent, and therefore, there is no fate – except the one that results once all the steps have been taken. Nothing is ordained and nothing is proscribed. It is a dialectic between fate and freedom.

Fatelessness, then, is a model for the world in which the metaphor “Fate is Freedom,” has meaning. The narrative is a heuristic in which Kertész drops a powerless boy in a situation that is absurd by any rational understanding in order to redescribe reality. Reality is not rational; it is contingent. The only option for György to escape this metaphorical world would have been to simply not be. But, he rejects that notion, “I am here, and I am well aware that I shall accept any rationale as the price for being able to live” (262), even one that forces him to make sense out of non-sense. He goes on, “I was already
feeling a growing and accumulating readiness to continue my uncontinuable life" (262). He will go on to take steps in a world where the metaphor "the happiness of the concentration camps" makes perfect sense.

The Language of Fatelessness

We have already seen many of the ways that Kertész uses language to create the world of Fatelessness, many of them metaphorical in nature. Lawrence Langer refutes the claims that language is somehow to blame for the inability to describe the world of the Holocaust: "The gulf between the two worlds, not the poverty of language, is what imposes silence" (51). This schism is the reality upon which Kertész relies. Old language must be used to describe new realities metaphorically, and through this process language in some cases performs the new realities, and in other cases, takes on new meanings. I would like to describe three further ways in which Kertész plays with language to create the metaphorical world of the novel.

The first of these strategies is a subversive use of irony. I have already discussed many instances in the novel that seem ironic: the persistently fine weather, György's penchant for ignoring the "elephant in the room" in favor of insignificant details, and the many, many instances of dramatic irony, in which the reader (and presumably the narrator) know far more than György. Once the theme of fatelessness is understood, however, on a second reading, many seemingly ironic passages are revealed to actually mean what they say, in the context of the contingency of the world of the novel. For example, György explains to himself why the baker cannot abide Jews, "for otherwise he might have had the unpleasant feeling that he was cheating them. As it was, he was acting
in accordance with his conviction, his actions guided by the justice of an ideal" (12). Is this statement ironic, or is it a description of a world in which everyone must fend for himself, take the steps necessary for his own survival? Earlier, György notes the “innovative twist” developed by shopkeepers for a better kind of yellow star to make them look “more attractive” (10). Rapacious capitalism seems ironic in the face of fascism. But, in a fateless world, this modifying phrase performs a semantic twist that brings the new reality to the fore. These people need to make a living too. Ethics are contingent along with everything else. A sentence such as “I am not alive on my own account but am benefitting the war effort” (28) also seems ironic until its unavoidable truth is considered. György points out this truth throughout the narrative: In a contingent world it is easy to simply decide that everything is “reasonable” or “understandable,” two adjectives György uses repeatedly to describe the behavior of his captors. In some cases, an irony becomes a completely different sort of irony. The “bad luck” man incessantly laments his own confrontation with contingency: if he had not gone back to retrieve his papers, he never would have been detained by the gendarmes: “It had all hinged on those five minutes” (61). Obviously, what seems ironic to him, is not the actual irony. The real irony is that the five minutes makes no difference whatsoever to his fate. Interspersed with these non-ironic ironies, are other instances that are ironic in either reality. Such a case is the deception that goes on after the selection at Auschwitz:

All along, I hear, everyone is very civil toward them, swaddling them with solicitude and loving-kindness, and the children play football and sing, while the place where they are suffocated to death lies in a very picturesque area, with lawns, groves of trees, and flower beds, which is why, in the end, it all
somehow roused in me a sense of certain jokes, a kind of student prank.

(110)
The use of the word “joke” causes intense discomfort. But, this word intensifies the metaphorical meaning of this passage. What is ironic in a fateless world is actually a joke in a rational one. The fact that it is not in fact a joke is what completes the metaphor.

A second linguistic technique Kertész uses is the gradual breakdown of György’s descriptive capacity as his reality destroys his understanding. A fateless world is indeterminate, where meanings shift constantly with circumstances. The language of the novel performs this indeterminacy. Kertész toys with this idea at the beginning of the novel, suggesting that some of the indistinctness of the narrative might be due to the problems of memory. Right off the bat, in the second paragraph, György says, “Though maybe it wasn’t like that after all...I don’t remember it clearly” (4). Later, as mentioned already, the memory issue is supplanted by an uncertainty as to whether language properly conveys György’s meaning. This is marked by the regular inclusion of modifying phrases: “If I may put it that way”; “In a manner of speaking”; “If I may be so bold”; “I might even call it.” Next are György’s frequent admissions that he cannot accept the reality of what he is saying. Now it is not language that is the problem, it is knowledge. He often uses such phrases as: “I was in a position to convince myself”; “my way of looking at it might be flawed”; “hard for me to prove”; “not entirely plausible.” These phrases point to the unreality of the world that is being described, and to György’s fear that he is neither understanding nor describing it precisely. György appears confused and uncertain, but not completely unmoored. Much later, however, when his story garners pity from the group of
By this point, György’s language reflects the radical instability of his world. What once would have seemed to him a normal adult reaction to a child’s tribulations, he now cannot even put into words with any certainty. As György’s epiphany of a fateless world gains steam at the novel’s end, his language loses most of its indeterminacy and invests itself firmly in the metaphorical plane where it is perfectly reasonable to use the metaphor, “the happiness of the concentration camps.”

The accrual of new meanings for words that gradually takes place as the world of *Fatelessness* becomes more fateless is the third language game Kertész plays throughout the narrative. There are countless examples of metaphors that do not make sense unless the meaning of one of the words is changed. Some have already been mentioned, such as the joke of the gas chambers. Before offering a few potent examples of the reconditioning of word meanings, it is important to delineate the rather narrow vocabulary to which Kertész restricts himself in this novel. Negative events are met with such descriptors as “uncomfortable,” “inconvenience,” “unpleasantness,” “disagreeable,” and “annoying.” Meanwhile, the positive scale of description runs to “satisfied,” “pleasant,” “appealing,” and “glad.” This restricted band of vocabulary is a primary driver of the affective flatness of the
narrative – adds to the degree zero nature of the language. There is no “despair,”
“unbearable,” or “devastated,” nor is there “euphoric,” ecstatic,” “blissful,” or indeed
“happy.” Thus, when a word outside this range appears, its significance is heightened. One
example of this phenomenon occurs when the shipment of Auschwitz inmates with whom
György has been processed finally realizes the nature of their captivity; they invariably
denote it as “Ghastly.” To this denotation, György immediately retorts, “But that is not the
word, that is not precisely the experience – for me at any rate, naturally – with which I
would truly characterize Auschwitz” (117). He neglects to relate what the precise word
might be, leaving the reader as adrift in this metaphorical world as he is. Does he mean to
tell us it is worse, better, or just somehow different? “Ghastly” makes sense to us in our
world, but not to György in his. Ultimately, György characterizes the concentration camps
as “bor[ing]” (249). Kertész has a bit of a laugh with this metaphor of the boring
concentration camp. György spends so much of the early part of the novel remarking on
how bored he is that Kertész is really pouring on the irony by making boredom his greatest
torment. However, again, this irony fits neatly into the existential concept of fatelessness –
the linearity of time, and the necessity of occupying oneself during every second of it,
makes boredom an extremely pertinent condition.

Another key element of the concept of fatelessness, the idea of complicity, is brought
to light by yet another standout word, “Hatred,” which György uses to describe his feelings
upon returning to Budapest (247). When the journalist to whom he’s speaking makes an
assumption about whom György hates, he replies, “Everyone,” at which exclamation the
journalist falls silent. This word choice is shocking at this point, as György has expressed
his severest discomforts and his most blessed relief with relatively neutered language. At
this point a reader would be forgiven for not believing György capable of hatred. That his animus is pointed at “everyone” (247) lines up with the idea of fatelessness, in that everyone takes the steps in front of them, such that everyone is implicated in all events. György tries to explain this concept to his neighbors, but upsets and offends them deeply.

In this last chapter of the novel, Kertész mimics a hallmark of testimonial literature, the allegory of failed understanding (Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* 51). As usual, however, his twist is unexpected. It is not the fact that his interlocutors have not experienced first hand the concentration camp that causes the misunderstanding; it is their unfamiliarity with the concept of fatelessness. Hating your captors makes sense in a non-metaphorical world. Hating everyone makes sense in a fateless world. Again, Kertész’s metaphors create new ethical understandings.

The word most prominently used to express the philosophy of fatelessness in this novel is “naturally.” This word appears almost 70 times in the novel, and is the source of much commentary. The meaning of the word gradually shifts as the fateless world emerges. In the first half of the novel, “naturally” signifies something on the order of “of course”, as if György is saying that what will happen next is expected to happen. On the night before his father is deported, Uncle Lajos asks if he will miss him, to which, annoyed, György replies, “naturally” (19). This utterance takes on a great deal of significance as György uses it to place his stamp of approval on the very correctness of his treatment by the police, on the “honest” behavior of the detainees, and on the crisp and orderly fashion in which he is bustled off to the concentration camp. The use of the word in these contexts intensifies the dramatic irony, but from György’s point of view, taking his steps, it is not entirely out of place. György still believes he is the agent of his own fate, while, in actuality,
the state of fatelessness is already in play. Conversely, at the end of the novel, when the journalist peevishly challenges György's use of the word, "naturally" to describe life in the camps, György replies, "in the concentration camp they were natural." Kertész steps out of the shadows here as he has the journalist come back with, "but...I mean, a concentration camp itself is so unnatural finally hitting on the right word as it were" (247). He could have left this sentence unuttered – the reader has gotten the point by now. But, the fact that he purposely inserts this truth – and has György approve of the specific language used – emphasizes the metaphorical world of this novel where the natural and unnatural are inverted.

I believe that Kertész chooses the word "naturally" for constant ironic repetition and shifting meaning with the express intention of reminding the reader over and over that the narrative is metaphorical. An unnatural world calls for unnatural language, but the only way to make language unnatural is to use it in unnatural ways. And, this is what metaphor does. It takes one semantic plane – the language used to describe the world as we know it – and crashes it into another semantic plane – one that has no words to describe its realities. The metaphorist is bound to use words that exist, and by using them in new contexts, those words take on new meanings. Among Kertész’s monumental achievements in Fatelessness is his success in using familiar language to create a world we should not and cannot recognize, but that gradually comes to seem almost normal. It is a world in which we believe that being swept up in a police action at the age of fourteen is “a slightly odd experience” (40). It is a world in which we can’t help but agree that a German soldier is “unfailingly jovial and encouraging” (94) and SS officers are not “the slightest bit intimidating” (83), while the appearance of his fellow captives is sufficient to cause György
to “recoil[]” (78). It is a world in which we can see why György reserves the word “horror” (183) for the maggots in his festering wound and the word “affection” for the other bodies, some already dead, with which he snuggles on a handcart at Buchenwald. James Young writes, “we must recognize that [metaphors] are our only access to the facts [of the Holocaust], which cannot exist apart from the figures delivering them to us” (91). Kertész does not use figurative language as we commonly know it to access the epistemological truths of the concentration camp experience. Rather, he refigures language by holding together the world that is its source with the metaphorical world that reappropriates it, creating a new vocabulary to redescribe reality.
Chapter III

Notes from an L-Shaped Corridor

*What has made them conceive that man must want a rationally advantageous choice? What man wants is simply INDEPENDENT choice, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead.*

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*

*Do whatever you will, but first be such as are able to will.*

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

Upon finishing Imre Kertész’s second novel *Fiasco*, an image springs unbidden to my mind: the ancient symbol of the ouroboros, the dragon eating its tail. For that is exactly what the narrative of *Fiasco* does. It ends where it begins, and begins again, at each moment striving to erase or eradicate what has gone before in the hope that, in the retelling, something might change – the fiasco might be averted. There are many celebrated novels, such as Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five* and Heller’s *Catch-22*, that employ a circular structure to illustrate the nature of trauma. Yet in these works, the narratives swirl and eddy around the hard nuggets of war-induced trauma that center them in a postmodern bid to mimic the psyche’s inability to face repressed memory, unbearable pain. I have mentioned before that Kertész considers Auschwitz to be the dominant and abiding concern of his writing, the preeminent and inescapable fact not only of his life, but also of modern society. The reader of *Fiasco* can be forgiven, then, for surmising that the title refers to trauma of Auschwitz. However, this is not the case. Or rather, it is and it isn’t – creating for us once again a metaphorical world.
In essence, *Fiasco* is the story of how Imre Kertész becomes a writer, specifically of how he becomes the writer of *Fatelessness*, the novel about Auschwitz that is the subject of my previous chapter. Furthermore, György, the protagonist of *Fatelessness*, reappears here as a main character. Many of the concerns of the earlier novel surface here as well, most particularly the central question of whether or not it is possible for a person to exercise free will in a totalitarian system, and, if so, how. As *Fatelessness* ends, György Köves, in an epiphanic moment, understands that the notions of fate and freedom are incompatible, in fact, radically opposed, and he chooses to step into his life and regain control of a fate that had been violently expropriated from him. The novel’s end fairly bursts with the optimism and exuberance of György who eagerly plans to “start doing something with that fate” and “to connect it to somewhere or something” (259). We know that György, known as Köves in *Fiasco*, is a proxy for Kertész, and we know that Kertész goes on to write a corpus of work that wins him the 2002 Nobel Prize for Literature. This resume seems to indicate that the protagonist’s hopes will end in success rather than in the disaster implied by the title. Yet it is important to remember that *Fiasco* is a novel, not a memoir. Although, just as in *Fatelessness*, many elements of the plot coincide with the biographical details of Kertész’s life, the narrative is fiction. Once again, Kertész blurs generic boundaries in ways that contribute to the creation of the metaphorical world of the novel. The truths submerged in this world cannot be seen as autobiographical truths, but metaphorical ones. In order to uncover these truths, I am compelled to ask: What exactly is the fiasco?

It is a perplexing question, the answer to which can only be teased out through a close reading of *Fiasco* that pays fastidious attention both to theme and to the use of language, for the two are intimately entwined in the narrative: language and the act of
writing, in and of themselves, are central themes. The world created in *Fiasco* reads like a Kafkaesque fun house (Kafka is overtly invoked very early on). There is a novel within a novel within yet another novel. The protagonist of the frame novel writes the first interior novel as a kind of interactive autobiography in a bid to rewrite his own history, but winds up back where he started. The second interior novel, supposedly written by another character, nevertheless connects eerily to ideas developed in the frame novel. Long passages of different kinds of writing – letters and journal entries – are also liberally interspersed and allow the narrative to shift periodically between close third person and first person narration. The circular, and simultaneously layered, structure of the narrative that results from the combination of these heterogeneous textual elements produces a representation of time that is anything but linear. Taken as a whole, these strange narrative elements create a good deal of confusion as to who is speaking and when, and, frankly, about what exactly is going on in the plot. They induce a feeling of vertigo, a different sort of loss of footing for the reader than that produced in *Fatelessness*. The vertiginous and unfamiliar world of *Fiasco* announces the author’s intention to continue to find new configurations of language to redescribe reality.

Boiled down to its essence, *Fiasco* possesses two central preoccupations. The first is to illustrate the ongoing evolution of a conception of the possibility of freedom within a totalitarian system from the point where Kertész leaves it as *Fatelessness* ends. The second is the promulgation of a claim that writing is necessarily insinuated in any such possibility, as perhaps the only means of asserting one’s subjectivity. In this chapter I will analyze the narrative strategies Kertész develops throughout the novel and the ways in which those strategies overlap and interact to advance these ideas. I will describe the ways in which
Kertész creates a structure and a vocabulary that both conjure the stifling and oppressive totalitarian regime in which he is writing and attest to the breakdown of language this regime begets. Concurrently, he mines the details of his own biography and exploits the porous boundaries between memoir and fiction to demonstrate the metaphorical nature of truth. Moreover, a metatextual focus on writing combined with multiple written iterations of events reinforces the metaphorical character of the narrative. I will highlight Kertész’s continued strategic deployment of multiple strata of figuration both to develop themes and to further release the connotative power of language to access the version of reality he wishes to explore. Finally, I will explain how Kertész uses a blend of all of these narrative techniques to establish an equivalence between existence, writing, and free will, though all the while lamenting the disastrous results for an individual who chooses to embody that equivalence. It is emblematic of the world Kertész creates in this novel that the outcome of his language games is an understanding of the word “fiasco” as a metaphor for freedom, and vice versa.

**Constructing a High Stakes Game**

Because the structure of *Fiasco* is so convoluted, it seems of paramount importance to understand its function in the exposition of the narrative, although it is impossible to entirely disentangle structure from other language games used in this novel. In the broadest terms, there is a frame section, in which a writer called the old boy sits in his apartment going through his old papers in an attempt to find some inspiration for a new novel, and a novel-within-a-novel section, which is purportedly the novel the old boy begins to write. This relatively simple and not entirely unusual convention is made doubly complicated by the fact that both sections essentially recount the same story – how the old
boy (Köves in the interior section) becomes a writer; thus it is a *mise en abîme*. The language, narrative style and expositional approach in each section, however, are quite radically different, a topic that I will take up in more detail later.

Adding yet another level of complexity is the fact that, like in *Fatelessness*, the story told by the old boy/Köves closely mirrors that of the real life Imre Kertész. Virtually each element of his *curriculum vitae* makes an appearance in both the frame and the embedded novel sections of *Fiasco*. Thus, once again, as in *Fatelessness*, the reader is confronted with a novelistic account of the author's life that is not autobiography. Although I outlined Kertész's life story in Chapter I, the particulars that appear in *Fiasco* are as follows. After being released from Buchenwald and finishing his schooling, Kertész worked for a time as a journalist, then at a factory, and finally at a government office before undertaking his mandatory military service, from which he was dismissed after convincingly faking a psychological illness. He then became somewhat of a freelance journalist, while writing popular light comedies for the stage with a friend. At some point during this period, he met his wife, Albina, who had been in prison on some trumped up charge or other and was working as a waitress in a bar. They lived together for the next 42 years in a one-room apartment measuring merely 300 square feet. Kertész, like the characters in the novel, experienced an epiphany of sorts in an L-shaped corridor in an office building where the offices of the railway service were located at some point in the mid-1950s: he had to write a novel. He worked on that novel, which would become *Fatelessness*, for the next sixteen years, after which it was rejected by one of two official publishing companies in Budapest. Ultimately, the other firm published the novel in 1975. (*Dossier K*, Vasvári and Tötösy de Sepetnek, Zielinski)
At the outset, I must acknowledge that using the author’s biographical details as at least one lens through which to assess a work of fiction is controversial. Within the field of literary criticism, there have been equally strong voices at different times both advocating and condemning the consideration either of authorial intention or of a broader understanding of the cultural context in which an author writes. In the case of Kertész, the author seems to invite, if not demand, scrutiny of his biography when he repeats in various interviews, speeches and writings the notion he states most sparingly in *Dossier K*: “I took on my life as the raw material for my novels” (10). This declaration suggests that a biographical reading of his work is fair game. Because my study involves an investigation into the metaphorical nature of the author’s narrative strategies, the explicit metaphoricity of texts that represent actual events simply must be addressed. In other words, to ignore Kertész’s deliberate transformation of the autobiographical details of his life into fiction would be to preclude analysis of the broadest level of metaphor manifested by his work. As explained in Chapter I, metaphor operates through the resemblance of terms as well as through the holding in tension of literal and metaphorical truths. In the case of *Fiasco*, I hold it to be essential to examine the resemblance between the author’s resume and the fictional narrative – to locate the tension between the historical facts and their creative representation – if the metaphorical truths contained therein are to be discovered.

Kertész, in his memoir, despite admitting the autobiographical basis of the characters in *Fiasco*, takes pains to emphasize the gulf between himself and them that is specifically created through creative acts of writing: “I write ‘the Old Boy’ who writes Köves.” (DK 128). Consequently, we are faced with the disruption of generic expectations that creates a base-level clash of semantic planes. The autobiographical pact is ruptured as
the characters Old Boy/Kőves both are and are not Kertész, and events that possess a historical reality are not presented as such, thus creating a metaphorical tension. Furthermore, in a narrative structure both recursive and circular, plot elements are doubled (and in some cases tripled) through the medium of the characters’ writing. Time, in the narrative, bends and circles such that the written representations of these events repeat \textit{ad infinitum}. These manipulations of genre and structure alert the reader that the author is playing games with language, creating figures in an attempt to discover whether or not writing can defer, deflect, or erase history. As I illustrate in Chapter II, the metaphorical world created in \textit{Fatelessness} ultimately serves to allow Kertész to expound upon his philosophy of the same name, that in a totalitarian system that utterly strips the individual of power, there is only a mass fate, and the individual has neither identity nor freedom. In \textit{Fiasco}, still describing totalitarian systems, albeit different ones, he must create a world that helps us understand what, if anything, the individual can do in his fateless condition. The architecture of \textit{Fiasco}, built out of many layers of writing, even while it performs the enclosure of the system, serves to implicate the act of writing in any possible answer to this question. To exercise free will in a system in which freedom does not exist, one must write. Kertész, who lives in a totalitarian system, writes the old boy, who writes Kőves, who endures (in writing) the events of Kertész’s life. As such, in a totalitarian system, Kertész seems to be arguing, the writer writes himself.

\textbf{The Writing Life = Writing a Life}

Language itself is metaphor. As expounded by Jacques Derrida, “metaphor is the lot of thought at the moment at which a sense attempts to emerge of itself to say itself, to express itself, to bring itself into the light of language” (\textit{Writing and Difference} 32). In other
words, language is actually a code we have devised to represent and communicate thought. Its signs are not identical with the thoughts they represent, but metaphorical. Metaphor manifests thought “which remains in itself unobvious, hidden or latent” (32). Throughout his work, Derrida positions writing, not as a secondary representation, but as an originary event of this system of language, a distinction that has crucial implications for the narrative of *Fiasco*. For writing is the subject of *Fiasco*, its object and its substance. Its story is of a writer writing his story, and rewriting it over and over. It is a novel about writing, through and through. That the characters, themes, and philosophies presented in any piece of writing only exist in and through the writing is obvious. Often, however, readers of fiction will forget this basic truth and will deceive themselves that the references of the writing have a reality in the material world. The unrelenting focus on the act of writing in *Fiasco* obstructs this movement, entrapping the reader in the production of the narrative, and ensuring that the very existence of the characters and events of the novel remain within the writing. In this way Kertész stresses the metaphorical nature of the narrative: existence is inexorably tied up within the metaphor of writing.

That the act of writing, the production of the work itself, will be foregrounded is signaled in the opening pages of *Fiasco*. Kertész describes the weather figuratively, “It was as if a pale azure-tinted bell jar had been overturned onto the old boy” (2), and immediately provides commentary on that figuration, “That simile, like apt similes in general, is aimed at heightening sensitivities through the associations it provokes” (3). Furthermore, the narrative is frequently punctuated with expressions that slightly less overtly call attention to the act of narration, such as “if we are going to go into this level of detail,” “this brings us to,” and “we are now in a position to.”
In one telling passage, the author’s voice intrudes in a way that alerts the reader that she should not count on words meaning what exactly what they seem to mean:

To guard against any definitive fixing of notions which no doubt have already begun to form, our hitherto neutral use of words probably calls for some clarification at this juncture”

Just as the filing cabinet, for example, was not really a filing cabinet, or, to take another example, the old boy’s side street (the Slough of Deceit, as the old boy called it) was not really a side street, the old boy was not really old. (7)

Kertész wants us to know right from the start that we are in a world where words whose referents we are familiar with – such as filing cabinet – serve to describe similar objects that have no descriptive denotative names – such as a contraption made up of an old chest of drawers wedged under a section of old bookcase. This is a trivial example, of course, and the tone of these types of descriptions is unremittingly glib, but the effect is essential to the workings of the novel. It warns the reader to pay particularly close attention to the multiple possible meanings of words, and to how important context is to those meanings.

Duly warned, the reader encounters in this frame section an extraordinary language full of brackets, cul-de-sacs, formulaic repetitions, sardonic wit and relatively heavy-handed metaphors used to evoke the sort of world in which the old boy lives. The historical counterpart of this world is the Hungary during the regime of Communist leader János Kádár, which lasted from 1956 to 1988, during which Kertész wrote this novel. This regime, typical of Eastern European soviet satellites of that time period, was repressive, disdainful of intellectuals, and arbitrary in the administration of justice. The language of
this section means to bring to life the two overriding features of this world: its confinement and its absurdity. Kertész has written of Fiasco, “The subject of the novel is enclosure, that’s for sure, and that has formal consequences” (DK 125). This reality is mimicked on a macro level by the overarching enclosure of the narrative structure, but more particularly in this section by the relentless use of parentheses. This tactic appears in both descriptive and more philosophical passages. Here is a description of the game of Bridge:

In essence (one might say, its specific feature) is that two partners sitting across from each other play against two other partners who also sit across from each other (which is why the English call it bridge) (though this altogether too simple explanation) (along with the English origin of the game) (has been placed in question) (by recent investigations in Hungary) (in accord with others abroad). (115)

This description embodies both enclosure, by the near overwhelming of the sentence with brackets, as well as absurdity, by the arbitrary positioning of the brackets. The methodology, in a sense, creates an inverted metaphor. The hyper-specific and performative nature of the language emblematizes the lack of appropriate simpler phraseology to describe the old boy’s world. Available metaphors simply cannot capture an oppression that breaks down the mimetic faculty of language to its least expansive form.

The following, more ruminative example, as the old boy is contemplating a piece of rock used as a paperweight in his filing cabinet, shows how the confining nature of the society in which the old boy lives invades even his ability to formulate intellectual thought.
(but then every lump of stone instantly entices one into prehistoric deliberations)(which are not our aim)(difficult though they are to resist)(most especially when we happen to be dealing with a lump of stone which diverts our failing imagination toward ulterior)(or rather primordial)(beginnings, ends, masses and unities, so that in the end we retreat to our hopeless)(though it is at least invested with the alleged dignity of knowledge)(ignorance...). (16)

In this passage, it is as if the old boy, aware of the intellectual fences all around him, perseveres by charging through them with all the ancillary and tangential thoughts that occur to him as he tries to form a conception. He seems determined, despite barriers everywhere, to give free rein to his thoughts. The result that seems schizophrenic and unfocused, can be seen in a different light as a bid for intellectual freedom.

The constant stifling of what freedom the old boy has is reified in the incessant repetition of certain phrases. He has a tiny square box of an apartment in which to live and work, and a repressive regime hemming him in further. Such a closed in life, with literally and figuratively nowhere to move, results in monotonous routine. Wake up, send wife off to work, try to write, eat, sleep, repeat. Again Kertész uses language to perform this reality, as phrases repeat over and over, particularly meaningless and mundane ones. In the opening paragraph of the novel we read that the time is midmorning, "(Relatively – getting on for ten)" (1) and on the next page that it is an "(early autumnal)" morning (2). These are innocuous scene-setting phrases, which should almost recede into the background. However, these phrases are repeated almost a dozen times in this frame section. Therefore, they do not recede as they should, but rather call attention to themselves. Such
reiterative mundanities perform the monotony of the old boy’s world. Minute changes to these repeated phrases occasionally crop up, evoking self-conscious attempts to break up the monotony with modifications to language. Another important repeated phrase regards the old boy’s occupation as a writer, to which is added over and over the modifiers “(or rather things had so transpired that this had become his occupation)(seeing as he had no other occupation)”. In this case, the repetition points to a more essential piece of information about the main character – how he became a writer – but it is an arduous task for the reader to distinguish which repetitions are performative and which are instructive. These repetitions continue to alternatively modify both the trivial – the airlessness of the hallway – and the essential – “Did you get any work done?” “Of course.” Taken together they produce a suffocating atmosphere and break down hierarchies of meaning. The reader just wants to get on with the narrative but is almost crushed at every turn by the almost bureaucratic inanity of this repetitious language. In Kertész’s novella *The Union Jack* he argues that the way people must live in repressive, communist Hungary is as a “formulation” (20), molding something that is not quite an identity to a set of acceptable practices in order to get by. The repetitious phrases in the frame section of *Fiasco* strike me as formulae: language that bubbles up almost reflexively in response to a given stimulus. They are evidence that the old boy’s concerted efforts to free himself are thwarted at every turn.

Other passages in this section, always full of brackets, illuminate the absurdity of the old boy’s world. An exemplary case is when the old boy decides he would like to get his wife’s name cleared of the year she spent in prison “(as is only right and proper)(if we do not wish that the mere fact of our having been punished is to be held against us as a crime
that we have committed)” (66). After conducting an investigation, a detective apologetically sums up the trouble:

“We can only clear someone’s name if a trial, sentencing, or at least a preferment of charges has taken place. But in your case...please try to understand what I’m saying...in our files there is no trace of any of that, you aren’t suffering any consequences, you don’t carry a criminal record...in other words, there is simply nothing to be cleared.”

“And what about that one year?” the (as not yet old) old boy’s wife asked.

The detective spread his arms and lowered his gaze. (68)

The frame section of Fiasco fairly teems with such inane happenstances as this overt simulation of Kafka’s The Trial: bizarre episodes regarding attempts to prove ownership of various apartments, madcap squabbles at the wife’s place of employ, and sitcom-like exchanges between the old boy and his mother. These are all told, through the brackets, in what we could call the degree zero language of this section: breezy, unconcerned, almost flip. This tone is compounded by frequent interjections of casual narration, reminiscent of similar language in Fatelessness, such as “so to speak,” “not to put too fine a point on it,” and “as it were.” Although the basic tone of the old boy is one of consternation, frustration, and ennui, he acts as though he may as well be cheerful about it. The degree zero language here is slightly less detached than in the earlier novel, but the effect remains the same. The relation of unpleasant, dramatic, even traumatic events in such plain, affectless language creates a clash between the sense of the language and its referents, cuing the reader that there is something wrong with the world that underlies both the events and the language.
used to represent them. In an insane and absurd system, irony is the rule rather than the exception.

Thus, through a combination of performative bracketing, ironic close third person narration, and the bringing of the act of writing into the frame, the reader palpably senses the claustrophobia of the old boy in his attempts simultaneously to navigate his insane world and to try to write. With this foundational world established, Kertész ups the ante significantly, through another structural fillip: the frequent interruptions of the narrative with lengthy sections of expository writing, primarily about writing. The old boy, looking for inspiration for a new novel that he “has to” write, turns to a file of his notes from 1973, immediately after his first novel (Fatelessness, metaphorically) had been completed. Told in intense first-person narration, these sections produce almost a physical release of the breath on the part of the reader in their unhindered fluency. It is in these sections that the younger version of the old boy sets forth a philosophy about writing. Whether or not it is Kertész’s philosophy remains to be seen.

Like most elements of this novel, this theme of writing begins at the end, from and to which it will circle back around repeatedly. Wrenched from the forgetfulness of writing, the objectivity of the material world assaults the note writer as he contemplates the objects of his daily life:

The adventure of writing...I supposed that in pursuing a certain path to its very end my life had altered. But nothing at all has altered, and now it is clear that with my adventure it was precisely the chances of altering that I forfeited. This twenty-eight square metres is no longer the cage from which
my imagination soared in flight every day...no, it is the real arena of my real life, the cage in which I have imprisoned myself. (27)

This is the fulcrum around which the novel revolves, the fiasco of the title. In the totalitarian system in which he lives, which turns a man into just another object like the lamp and shade in his flat, the writer only experiences subjectivity while writing. The note writer writes, “the totality of my experiences could convince me only of my superfluousness” (92). In a rather grisly summary of his beliefs about identity, he explains, “At the right temperature,” his memories “dissolve without a trace into the communal mass, unite with the inexhaustible material churned out in general hospitals and disposed of in mass graves, or, in more fortunate cases, in mass production” (92). In totalitarian systems, there is no identity – each person is a member of the herd, shepherded and shunted into fenced off enclosures. The exercise of free will or individual actualization is exactly the last thing the regime allows. The note writer (the old boy, Köves, Kertész), however, after an epiphany in an L-shaped corridor, “step[s] out of line” (92), and decides to “subjectivise my personal objectivity, to become the name-giver instead of the named” (93). The fiasco is that in claiming his subjectivity he is intentionally acting counter to his own interests. In a totalitarian society, the far easier path is to “disappear, submerge, into the anonymous mass of history” (DK 124), to accept the role of object, to not buck the system. We will learn in the Köves section as well as from Kertész’s other writings that he had an opportunity to leave Hungary in 1956, another easier path. That he chose neither of these paths comes back to an inseparable relationship, for him, between language, writing, and existence.

The paradox of Kertész’s decision to become a subject through writing is that, as we have seen, he uses his own life as an object, the “raw material” of his fiction. Furthermore,
at one and the same time, he is neither the person he writes in his books, nor does he exist as a subject when he is not writing his books, because then he returns to the objective mode to which the totalitarian system condemns him. His own existence as a subject is written as the act of writing. As Thomas Cooper remarks, “His discourse is self-reflective...and always presented as a gesture of representation originating in the moment of composition” (16). We have seen earlier how, for Holocaust survivors, “knowledge in [their] testimony is ... a genuine event” (Felman and Laub 62). For the writer of the notes, because he is writing his own memories, his own experiences, the novel is a sort of testimony, and the act of writing it is an event that creates at that moment his knowledge of himself. As he states succinctly, “I never truly believed in my existence” (Fiasco 27).

From other of his writings, it is fair to make the assumption that the note writer reflects Kertész’s own thoughts on the subject. In Galley-Boat Log, he writes of the period during which he was writing Fatelessness, “For four years I have been working on the novel – or perhaps rather on myself? In order to see? And then be able to speak once I have seen?” (98). Here he explicitly connects the act of writing to the production of the speaking subject. This blurring of the line between the author and his production exemplifies “intransitive writing,” a coinage of Barthes used by Berel Lang to describe a process in which the writing becomes itself the means of vision or comprehension, not a mirror of something independent” (qtd. in White 48). Kertész confirms that his writing often takes on this passive caste, marveling, “I had to recognize that the sentences that would appear under my hand would sometimes arrive unexpectedly: they knew more than I myself did; they would surprise me with secrets that I was unaware of” (DK 134). However, this writing of self for Kertész takes a particular form. In Someone Else, he claims that it is only...
possible for him to write “through my being able to postulate myself as being someone other than who I am...I was never able to be at one with my situation, my real life” (344). In a sense, the conception of selfhood that resides in the person Imre Kertész embodies a Hegelian dialectic in which subject and object break away and rejoin each other in a never-ending cycle. Indeed, in Fiasco, the note writer invokes Hegel explicitly. His materiality: 
settles itself in spaces that lie outside of words. It cannot be couched in an assertion nor in a bald negation either. I cannot say that I don’t exist, as that is not true. The only word with which I could express my state, not to speak of my activity, does not exist. I might approximate it by saying something like ‘I amn’t.’ Yes, that’s the right verb, one that would convey my existence and at the same time denote the negative quality of that existence. (77)

This conception of existence bespeaks a metaphorical truth or a conceptualization of metaphor as truth. The note writer only exists when he writes, and who he writes both is and is not himself. He is in a perpetual activity of becoming himself through writing, so that the truth of his existence is that derived from holding in tension the writing and the written self. In fact the note writer at one point refers to the writer of the novel (which is himself) as “the other person” who had “distilled my inexpressible truth into symbols” and who had “alienated” from him “that raw material...from which he himself had originated” (78). In this way, he is striving to explain the split within himself. Jacques Derrida argues, “If writing is not a tearing of the self toward the other within a confession of infinite separation...then it destroys itself” (Writing and Difference 76). For the note writer, he is both self and the other and he tears himself toward himself in the act of writing. This is why in so many passages in this section of Fiasco he laments the emptiness of not writing.
When the novel is done, he feels again his negativity, his non-existence. When he is not writing, he ceases tearing himself toward the other and returns to the existential condition of totalitarianism: objectivity. Derrida reminds us that “Being and Nothing” are “the conditions of metaphor” (73). If there is a truth in the existence of the note writer as a subject, it is a metaphorical truth.

Understanding this central truth of Fiasco allows us to see other games Kertész plays with metaphor in this section of the novel. In my opinion, it is a hallmark of Kertész’s writing that every single utterance is planned and calculated in terms of both plot development and linguistic form to further his themes. Thus, certain scenes that on a cursory reading seem frivolous side notes, turn out to fit neatly into Kertész’s scheme. For example, the old boy’s upstairs neighbor he dubs The Oglütz, or The Unsilent Being. “Not female, not male, not beast, least of all human” (20). The Oglütz can be counted upon to repeatedly interrupt the old boy’s “having a think” with some sort of unbearable noise, whether vapid television and radio, or banging around her apartment. Played for comedy, The Oglütz actually serves to accentuate the radical difference between the old boy’s writing life – philosophical, vital, eloquent, immersed in language, and his “real” life – disconnected, formulaic, inane, absurd. The first time The Oglütz makes an appearance, the old boy is just in the middle of reading this sentence in his notes, a preview of the philosophy that will be developed in Fatelessness: “I grasped the simple secret of the universe that had been disclosed to me: I could be gunned down anywhere, at any time” (19). The next line we read is from the old boy: “For fuck’s sake.” The reader believes the old boy is reacting to the extreme gravitas of the existential reality he learned as a boy of 15, but must slog through several more paragraphs of brackets and almost meaningless
drivel before learning that the outburst is actually in response to the insufferable nuisance that is The Oglütz, who has just turned on the radio. The old boy has a custom fitted set of ear plugs that he uses to block her out, making for a rather heavy-handed metaphor. “That tin-eared, clap-ridden, belly-dancing bitch of a whore” (32) stands in for the horrible world he lives in as a result of choosing to be a writer. She embodies a metaphor for everything mundane, empty, lifeless and formulaic about this world, not to mention for unarticulated sound. The clash of semantic planes here is at one of its most intense levels in the novel. The following two observations are juxtaposed within a sentence or two of each other. With respect to the Oglütz, the old boy fumes, “You fucking miserable, scummy, old Nazi bag.” With respect to the realization that would form the philosophy that guides the remainder of his life, that he is powerless in the face of totalitarianism, he dispassionately observes, “this, by the way not particularly original, perception disturbed me a little” (22). The contexts that occasion these two observations are intentionally flipped, creating a metaphor of the wrongness of the world, and of the distortions of language that are the result. Immediately after we learn about The Oglütz, Kertész repeats two lines in rapid succession, one of the formulaic repetitions typical of this section that underscores the truth of the insufficiency of language: “Nothing could be done about it. One had to resign oneself to it” (21). Once we have been enlightened about the radical separation between the world where the writer exists and that where he writes himself, these two lines can be considered the motto of the old boy’s life. He must resign himself to the fact that he can be gunned down any place at any time, in exactly the same way that he must resign himself to the insufferable Oglütz. That he directs his fire power toward her while remaining calm and reasonable in the face of existential erasure, is Kertész winking at the reader. “Get it?”
he seems to be saying. It is a remarkable inverted metaphor in which Kertész intentionally uses inappropriate semantics to expose the underlying impropriety. This strategy brings forth the metaphorical truth that Kertész wants us to understand. Just as in language the distance between metaphor and meaning is existentially irrelevant, in totalitarian systems it is irrelevant whether one faces niggling annoyances or mortal peril. The system does not care either way, and either way the individual is powerless. One may as well shove in some ear plugs.

In fact, all of the interruptions that occur while the old boy is reading his notes serve this metaphoric function. His mother regales him with inane stories about bureaucratic nonsense and mundane household worries, and his wife relates absurd tales of the machinations between management and staff at her workplace. Each of these interruptions pile one on top of another to build an impenetrable wall of meaninglessness around the old boy, the fiasco that he must escape by writing. Ultimately, the pressure to escape becomes so great, it thrusts the old boy out of his inertia. Having already used his experiences as the objective material for one novel, he figures he might try the same method a second time. Thus he takes up his own narrative again, from the point of his return from the concentration camps to Budapest, “looking more and more for where he lost his way” (DK 124). I have shown how Kertész’s narratives are coterminous with his existence. By looking at the embedded novel, written by the old boy about his younger self, I will show what sort of existence he writes and what it has to say about free will and its interrelationship with writing.
Appointments in an L-Shaped Corridor

I have argued that formal idiosyncrasies match thematic development stride for stride in Kertész’s work. It is not surprising, then, that the language of the Köves section of Fiasco is different again from either the circumscribed and obstacle filled world of the old boy, or the hyper-intellectual, highly literate world of the note writer (although the brackets begin to return near the end of Köves’s story as he begins to turn into the old boy). The old boy overtly invokes Kafka with a reference to Joseph K’s shame very early in the frame section of the novel (21), and it is clear that he means to evoke the sort of absurd and bewildering world encountered in Kafka’s novels in his own narrative. Chapter One begins with Köves on an airplane, having finally decided to escape Budapest after his novel has been rejected for publication. He believes he is travelling to meet his friend, Sziklai, whom we will later learn had encouraged him to leave years ago. Noting from his window that the city below looks remarkably like Budapest, he arrives at an eerily empty airfield, and is guided to an equally empty terminal by a blinding spotlight, to be met there by men in uniforms, “customs officers” he thinks. When he asks where he is, a nondescript man tells him, “At home” (122). Thus in this opening scene, the reader is thrust immediately into a world full of metaphors. The city resembles, but is not quite, Budapest, a resemblance that asks the reader to search for a reference point to anchor this place. What does it mean to be in “not quite” Budapest? Has he returned to where he started, and if so, what is the metaphorical truth in that? Remembering that this is a piece of writing, the truth may be in the painful “not quite” distance between writing and subjectivity. Köves is attempting to start over (as is the old boy who is writing him), but the events of this section will repeat the events of the old boy/Kertész’s biography. Indeed, Köves explicitly echoes his once-
removed author, Kertész, in his hopeful and earnest daydream: “If he could at least have his time over again, begin at the beginning...everything would turn out differently” (130). Although he knows this to be impossible, the fact that he has landed in an “almost” Budapest, his “almost” home, opens up a metaphorical space in which Köves will, in fact, retrace his steps to see if he can ascertain where he went wrong. The plethora of metaphors with which this opening chapter teems give us some rather overt clues as to whether or not this quest will be successful.

First, we will learn what kind of power structure prevails in this place where Köves has landed. He feels “smacked in the face” by the searchlight (120), and when later questioned by the customs officials as to why he came, he admits, “I saw a beam of light, I followed that” (135). On the one hand, the searchlight feels to Köves like an assault – he is pinned down by it, trapped, identified. At the same time, it connotes a beacon to follow, but with a sinister edge. Remarking that the searchlight’s beam plunges everything beyond it into darkness, he ponders, “Perhaps, the people here didn’t want foreign travellers to see everything clearly straight away” (121). This remark will turn out to be true in a way he could not possibly contemplate at this moment. Later Köves is reminded, “You didn’t have to follow it” and, “We are not forcing you to do anything” (123), which may be technically true, but not metaphorically true. Köves feels already, in the earliest moments of his so-called escape, that he is back in the world that is intentionally obfuscated by the powers that be and in which he has no choice. Those powers assume corporeal shape in the form of customs officers, another metaphorical image that can only be illuminated in the original Hungarian. The word for “customs officer” is remarkably close, only one letter different, from the word for “state (secret) police” (Vasvári and Tötösy de Zapetnek 16). Köves is
confused: "It's not military...nor the police...Nor is it...’ he caught himself in a thought that suddenly broke free, to which he could not have put a definite name" (Fiasco 124). Is the reference of this missing word the Hungarian secret police from his time in Budapest, or is it the SS or Gestapo officers whom he encountered in the concentration camps? The difference is of little matter to Köves, as in the manner of Beardsley, he sees that all the connotations of the word exist at one and the same time. He "almost had the impression...that this uniform had existed since time immemorial and would exist for ever more, and that at all times it moulded its transient wearers to itself" (124). In this observation, Kertész creates a parallel between the existential preoccupations of the note writer from the frame section and Köves that will become a template for the remainder of this novel within a novel. The note writer expounds rather broadly on the idea that the lessons of the concentration camp system apply equally to all totalitarian systems. Köves’s early enlightenment about the power relationships in the world in which he has landed, bear this truth out. This symmetry between the sections of the narrative makes sense, of course, because Köves himself is a stand-in, we could say metaphor, for the note writer, the old boy’s younger self. The remainder of the Köves section continually performs the philosophy of the note writer, in effect both approximating and doubling the import of Kertész’s message.

Kertész uses a second sort of doubling strategy in this chapter to demonstrate the recursive nature of this narrative. The reader knows that the old boy is attempting to re-write his own story, to start over. Yet, nothing happens to Köves as if for the first time, as one would expect if this were truly a fresh start. While sitting in the terminal, Köves gets an uncomfortable feeling "that what he was seeing he had already seen once before, and
what was happening had already happened to him once before (125), a sentiment that is repeated countless times over the first half of this section. Köves experiences this uncanny almost (but not quite) remembering sensation as he encounters streets, buildings, restaurants and people in this city that somehow resembles Budapest. His recognition of the uniforms is another example that not only embodies the ideas of the note writer, but also layers experiences from disparate periods of the character's life on top of each other. Thus right away, Kertész signals the reader that the old boy may be reliving his life by writing it rather than writing himself a new life. Writing may equal existence, but it is an existence that repeats itself. But, every writing is a new writing, even if it is the same. Because each writing is a metaphorical approximation of the old, the new reality that will be derived from this rewriting will be a metaphorical one. By writing himself as a metaphor for himself, the old boy will realize new truths.

Another key rhetorical feature of this section of Fiasco is the juxtaposition between agency and passivity. We know from the old boy that at a moment of enlightenment in an L-shaped corridor, he asserts his agency and becomes a writer, but until that event, like György in Fatelessness, Köves is predominantly passive as he moves through his new world. While he waits in the terminal to be processed, he rehashes in his mind his own life story, lamenting that as a result of his one fateful decision, his one moment asserting his own individuality, he "ruined his life, drained himself, and tortured his wife" (129). Sitting ruminating in the terminal, Köves has already reverted to the passive mode. While we know the old boy is acting by writing this story, he writes Köves's hopes in the passive voice: "Köves was suddenly gripped by a lightheaded, submissive, almost liberating feeling of being ready, all at once, to accept any adventure – come what may, whatever might
snatch him, carry him off, and engulf him, whereby his life would take a new turn” (125).
The agent that will change his life will not be him, but will come from outside of himself to
rescue him. This is the central paradox of this perplexing *mise en abîme* of a novel. From
the old boy’s perspective, it is imperative that Köves not take that step to become a writer,
as that is the source of the fiasco. At the same time, if he does not, he cannot write himself,
and hence, he will not exist. Thus the juxtaposition between passivity and action becomes
an existential battle between free will and existence on the one hand, and objectivity and
nothingness on the other. In a plot contrivance worthy of any good pulp time travel novel,
Köves falls asleep and dreams himself back in time twenty years to the time of his return
from the concentration camps. This bit of kitsch allows the old boy to attempt his rewrite
of his own history. In a metaphor so heavy-handed it might be dismissed at the reader’s
peril, in Köves’s dream, he enters a cave and sees “flaming letters as a kind of *mene, mene,
teken, upharsin*” on the wall (131). Sly Kertész adds the qualifier “a kind of” before this
listing of the “writing on the wall” from the Book of Daniel, a prophesy that has gone down
in history as a metaphor for impending disaster. I see two different but complementary
references for this metaphor. First, it refers to the fiasco that has already occurred, the one
that the old boy is trying to erase in writing. Second, it refers to the portended doom of the
project at hand. Both the note taker and Köves emphasize time and again that history is
stubborn in its unwillingness to be rewritten, and in its insistence on becoming metaphor.
In a way, *Fiasco* could end right here, once the failure of the old boy’s efforts is ordained.
All that is left for the narrative to do is to replay Kertész/the old boy/Köves’s life so that it
can circle back around to where it started, at the fiasco.
The strings that are so painstakingly stretched out in the first chapter of the Köves section of *Fiasco* are plucked over and over throughout the retelling of the story. It is as if this first chapter, performing the note writer’s philosophical beliefs, is a key that unlocks the remainder of the narrative. Chapter One is the master metaphor for the novel. For example, several incidents evoke the visceral fear felt by individuals under the power of brutal totalitarian regimes. Musicians in Köves’s favorite bar describe the “tricky numbers,” songs that, while not banned outright, really ought not to be played (147). Köves’s friend the piano player sleeps on a park bench so that “they” will not come and drag him from bed and haul him away in one of “those trucks” (153). When Köves tries to explain the mystery of his dismissal from a job he never had, his landlady implies the pervasiveness of this sort of arbitrary power with a sigh, “That’s what they usually do” (180). And, when the department head at the factory explains why Köves will be leaving for a ministry job, he proclaims with religious gestures, “Upstairs...they’ve come to a decision about you. How do you suppose you can defy that decision?” (244). Language itself is subject to this totalitarian power, even as it leaves room for an escape which we know cannot happen. This effect manifests itself in three ways. First, there are examples in which Köves simply no longer can make out what his language means, as when he snaps at a customs officer who is dragging away his building chief: “he himself was unsure whether he was on the attack or defense, or simply telling the truth” (225). Second, this disconnect between language and truth results in the use of pallid euphemisms for realities distasteful to the regime. I have already mentioned the tricky “customs officer,” but even more false is the constant use of the phrase “return from abroad” when what is meant is release from the concentration camps. In common usage, euphemism is a metaphor employed to be kind,
when the meaning of the proper word is too harsh or gruesome. In this case, however, euphemism serves a more sinister purpose, to suppress truths that the regime would prefer to forget. Finally, as in the old boy section, there are multiple formulaic sayings, most notably the phrase, “Can anyone know?” which is repeated any time Köves questions the inanity of the system. Toward the end of his section of the narrative, Köves himself, beaten into submission, uses the phrase himself.

In response to this oppressive power, Köves remains a resolutely passive being. Although in the early going, he frequently questions the passivity of others, as the narrative progresses, he begins to remark on his own. He views hours spent on the bench with the enigmatic pianist, as an “obscure struggle of which he himself seemed to be not so much a participant as merely the object” (139). In a sort of fugue state, Köves gets elbowed out of line for the tram, and he rationalizes that it was “the will he lacked, or, to be more specific, the disposition needed to will things” (165-6). When he is dismissed from the factory, he is left “feeling that he was taking part with obligatory automatism in some ceremony then in fashion” (181). Possibly the most telling example of Köves’s extreme passivity is the way in which the old boy describes a pursuit that typically requires action: “the next thing Köves caught himself doing was making love – despite everything and over and beyond everything that he had shared in there, how was it possible that he had been made to forget that he was a man?” (235). This metaphorical reference - “in there” - to Köves’s time in the concentration camp, makes explicit the metaphor that Kertész makes throughout this novel: that the totalitarian system that prevails in Köves’s (not) Hungary is equivalent in some way to that embodied by Auschwitz. Indeed, Kertész elsewhere states the connection forthrightly, “After Auschwitz the virtuality of Auschwitz inheres in every dictatorship” (DK
I showed in the previous chapter how precisely Kertész uses language in specific ways to bring out the passivity and objectivity of the character György. In essence, he does the same thing here in Fiasco, with the difference that the boy has now grown into the man, Köves, and with the increased self-awareness of maturity, he is better able to stand outside himself, even while making love, and recognize that life is happening to him. He is not actively living his life. In Kádár's Hungary, as in Auschwitz, he has no ability to do so. Furthermore, we must remember that it is the old boy that is writing here, in an effort to find a way out of his own passivity. It is clear that he has thus far been unable to locate a space within language that would offer him safe passage. Still trapped, his character Köves remains so as well.

How, then, does Köves wind up in an L-shaped corridor, where he will "step out of line," break away from the herd into which he has been amalgamated by the power of the system, and become the writer who writes himself? In order to effectuate this aspect of his own history in this narrative, Kertész creates one more doppelgänger for himself, in the inscrutable character Berg. Berg is a well-built man with a "somehow crippled" (212) expression on his "fleshy oval" face (211), the boyfriend of the waitress in Köves's favorite haunt. The fact that this waitress, Alice, is a stand in for Kertész's wife, Albina, is the first clue that Berg has something to do with the author, not to mention that his physical description matches as well. In an overt nod to Proust, another writer who writes approximations of himself, Berg is obsessively attached to petits fours, a sophisticated and intentional corruption of Proust's obsession with figurative language and memory (madeleines). The scene during which Köves first converses with Berg is another Kertész masterpiece of enmeshed references and foreshadowing. Immediately before Köves sits
down with Berg, he encounters the pianist who asks him, “Have you found it yet?” but Köves no longer remembers what he said he was looking for (210). The curious reader willing to pore through the preceding narrative is rewarded with the answer. In his conversation with the pianist on the park bench where he hides out from the authorities, Köves, agitated, argues that there is something other than a choice between a park bench and those trucks. He boldly proclaims, “That’s why I’m here, in order to find it” (155), the “something that’s outside all this” (154). By now, however, far from finding a solution to the intractable problem of fatelessness, Köves no longer even remembers the question. The old boy, still in his one-room apartment writing, has not found in language a way out of language.

Köves makes it clear that, at least at this point, he has succumbed to an existence and a language entirely out of his control when he responds to Berg’s question about why he has been fired with the ubiquitous formula “Can anyone know?” That Berg will serve a unique role in guiding Köves back to this fundamental quest is signaled by his annoyed response, “Of course you know. Everybody knows; at most they pretend to be surprised” (213). What he knows is that he “has been excluded from the decision making process” (215) and mysteriously compares himself to a “certain gentleman who tasted vinegar” (216). The curious reader, willing to pursue this allusion, learns that it refers to the ancient philosopher Lao-Tzu, who smiles at the taste of vinegar, not because he finds it sweet, but because he recognizes that it is true to its own nature. In a sense, like Köves, Berg has accepted the fact that he has no control over his life, but the difference is that he recognizes the parameters of the situation. For Berg, even in a state of being excluded from the decision making process, there is a decision to be made. He imagines a room where “they”
give each person an opportunity to decide whether to go along or not. Incredulous, Köves questions the existence of such a room, to which Berg strikingly responds, “What if it exists after all, and adding to that the uncertainty over whether it does, indeed, exist? That’s enough...to permeate every single life” (218-19). Thus, in this relatively short but momentous exchange, Kertész succeeds in completing the analogy between Auschwitz and post-war Hungary. While in Auschwitz there was no uncertainty about whether the individual has any power, where Berg and Köves are now, the mere possibility that the same power structure exists makes it every bit as concrete a reality. The fear is a different sort of fear because here the “trucks” haul away only some people while, at Auschwitz, the ovens were the presumed destination for all. But fear is fear nevertheless, and it is conceivable that uncertainty about the realization of that fear can be as much of a challenge, albeit a different one, than acceptance of its certainty. There are two further clues in this scene that lead me to believe that Berg is another iteration of the author. First, at one point Köves is struck by a “queer” hunch that Berg is “also a foreigner,” (217) a moniker that implies not that Berg is not Hungarian, but that he has returned from the concentration camps. Second, at the end of their conversation, Berg asks Köves, “Life? What’s that?” (218). At this point in the narrative, this remark simply seems to refer to the lack of agency that the two have been discussing. It will take a look at their final meeting to provide the missing context that will give this comment new meaning.

Kertész begins Chapter Seven, in which Köves visits Berg at his apartment, with another small tinge of impish foreshadowing. In setting the scene, the old boy writes, “it must have been midmorning, getting on for ten o’clock” (290), the exact formulaic phrase repeated a dozen times by the narrator of the old boy section. Are we to notice that Köves
is turning into the old boy? If so, will anything have changed? The use of the formula
seems to me to be an indication to the contrary. Köves is astonished to find that Berg is
writing, but receives only cryptic responses to his queries as to what the writing is about.
Berg admonishes him that the writing is “the necessary” (293) while what is unnecessary is
“to live” (294). This exchange recalls a sentence from the old boy section that seems odd
upon a first reading: “the old boy did not have so much as a glimmer of an idea, little as that
may be, for the book he needed to write” (39). How can a writer need to write a book if he
doesn’t even know what to write about? This is yet another clue that Berg and Köves are
two halves of the person that will become the old boy.

Next, Köves reads the beginning of Berg’s necessary book, titled “I, the
executioner...” an almost egomaniacal confession of a mass murderer, meant to
methodically and dispassionately explain why his actions actually place him in a state of
grace. There are echoes here, too, of the old boy/Köves experience, for example, when Berg
writes that he feels a compulsion to “live through again – even more vividly than in reality –
things which have already happened once” (296) and further that he wants to teach others
a lesson “by the representation of myself through words and language” (304). The essence
of the extraordinarily dense prose of this piece, actually the third novel in Fiasco, is an
unsolvable paradox. In a system in which an individual’s fate is decided for him, he will
become either a victim or an executioner, regardless of whether either of these positions is
contrary to his inclination, his beliefs and his character. The grace he speaks of is derived
from performing “the duty that had been assigned” (301). Morality then, is meaningless,
because one can only fulfill one’s preordained duty. The executioner states, “I had
understood the will of the world...and, by the reality of my acts and career, I redeemed and
returned to you your consciences” (305). In other words, it is only by happenstance that some become victims and others executioners, as they are at the whim of the totalitarian power in either case. As Berg explains to Köves, “For a long time man was superfluous, but free...now...man is just superfluous, and he can only redeem his superfluousness by ... the service of order” (311). It strikes me that Berg expounds nothing other than a more cerebral and more nihilistic version of the philosophy of *Fatelessness* that Köves/Kertész will one day write. What is radically different, here, is that grace is conceived as a blessed yielding, letting go of the fierce resistance of the individual personality. Berg becomes enraged when Köves mentions love. “What tyranny! What slavery!” (315). Love can only exist when a person exists – an individual. Love makes it impossible for the individual to disappear into a mass fate.

This meeting between Köves and Berg is the meeting of two halves of the person who will become Imre Kertész. When Berg asks Köves at the very beginning of their meeting what brought him there, Köves replies with one word: “Cluelessness.” Köves has been wandering around his surreal world, being batted to and fro by forces that he cannot comprehend. Metaphorically, he needs to meet Berg, because Berg represents the intellectual side of Kertész, the side that has consciously made the connection between Auschwitz and now. Berg understands the philosophy of fatelessness, but he is searching for the “definitive act” that proves the executioner’s yielding to his fate. He writes, “that pressure of external force...was not present at all – it did no more than accumulate in me, became an inner compulsion” (305). In other words, in a totalitarian system, it is not always the case that evil acts are performed under specific duress. The system’s “willing executioners” are made by the pervasiveness of the fear of wondering whether or not that
room exists where “they” decide about you, and by the wearing down over time of the individual’s ability to distinguish the difference between a grace based on moral codes that seem to have no currency in their circumstances and one based on the path of least resistance. But, a decisive step must be taken in either case, whether to become an executioner or a victim, Berg’s narrative is missing such a decisive step. Köves will provide Berg with one.

Again, the old boy uses language, in the form of a heavy-handed metaphor, to move the narrative forward. After returning from military service, Köves is restless among his old friends at the bar, and struggles to write the comedy sketches that make his current livelihood. He has a portentous dream, in which the letters of his name swirl around in a similar way as the prophesy in his earlier dream, this time spelling the words “demand” and/or “duty,” and he barely refrains from taking the “fateful jump” to save a drowning man (330). The next thing he knows, he is writing a letter, having had no intention of doing so. It is a letter to Berg, in which he donates to Berg his “definitive act.” He is required to do a stint as a military prison guard, a role for which he feels categorically unsuited. Yet, like György in the concentration camp, he recognizes a paradox: “not for a second did I consider it as being natural to be there, and on the other hand not a second could pass that I did not consider as being natural, since I was there after all” (336). It is the resonance of his concentration camp experience that haunts Köves in the prison, as he realizes that just as he had had no choice to be the victim at Auschwitz, here he has no choice but to be play the role of the one in power. After wheedling, cajoling and threatening a prisoner on hunger-strike to listen to reason, Köves punches the prisoner in the face: “The crystal-clear act...the wound that never heals” (348) of which Berg had spoken. That an act of violence
is the step Köves takes bears the weight of another of Kertész’s resonances. Much earlier in the novel, when dealing with a snotty porter in a Kafkaesque scene at a newspaper office, Köves briefly entertains violence: “What he really wished for...would have been a breakthrough to another realm, a break with all sanity: Köves wished quite simply to strike the porter’s face,” but “he was well aware that he wasn’t going to do it, not out of compassion or discipline, nor even fear, but just because he was simply incapable of striking anyone in the face” (169). The incident in the prison indicates that he is, in fact, capable of violence, and his discussion with Berg allows him to understand the specific conditions that have brought about this change, although, perhaps it is not accurate to call it a change. Like in Berg’s treatise, the character of the underlying person is not violent, is not the executioner and does not possess the capability of becoming the executioner. Yet, the paradox remains that that same person will resort to violence if his free will is eroded so much that only two choices remain: executioner or victim. In choosing to go along with this paradigm, Köves lives “concealed in the crowd, in protected – I almost said happy – insignificance” (350). In this formulation, Kertész creates a semantic innovation that reveals a metaphorical truth. A man incapable of violence commits violence. But this decisive act, rather than indicating an identity, conversely bespeaks a negation of self. In a metaphor for the Derridean conception of writing, Köves tears himself from himself. By acting, Köves erases himself. Or does he? Köves, wanting to supply Berg with the decisive act that will bring his narrative to life, runs into him in the street, stumbling after Alice with an expression that indicates that he has gone mad. Köves does not give Berg the letter, withholds his decisive step. My contention is that he understands on a subconscious level that it is the wrong step. Circling around and around an unresolvable paradox, Berg has
eaten his tail. The part of Kertész that embodies the paradox must find a means of existence that does not lead to madness. In his decisive act – his tearing himself from himself - he will not be the executioner, but the victim, and will set himself free by doing so. Thus, Köves finds himself in an L-shaped corridor.

By now, the reader is well aware of what will happen in the L-shaped corridor. There will be no rewriting of the story for the old boy. On some insignificant errand, Köves hears the marching of thousands in the echo of some flunky’s footsteps. In some of the most beautiful metaphorical language of the novel, the old boy describes the stark choice this aural experience presents to Köves. On the one hand:

The vortex of those echoing steps, the pull of the marching – this truly made him dizzy, enticed him, induced him to join, dragging him off into the flood, the ranks of the unstoppable procession...warmth, security, the irresistible, blind tide of incessant footsteps and the twilight happiness of eternal forgetting were waiting for Köves (354).

On the other hand, he sees “his uniqueness which was writhing there, his abandoned, ownerless life” (355). Kertész is pointedly emphasizing the possibility of identity, discrete identity, while simultaneously asserting the reality that identity can become separated from existence. It requires an act of will to bring the two together. In order for Köves to reclaim his life, he must find a way to unite the two; he must find a third choice in a two-choice world. He experiences what Shoshana Felman calls the appointment of the witness (3), an appointment that bewilders Kertész still: “a compulsive psychosis...categorical inner imperative...fulfillment of a task...how should I know?” (DK 135). He is appointed to bear witness to his own life, to bring it into existence in its uniqueness. As such, given the
opportunity to escape the city, he says, “I have to write a novel” (Fiasco 358). This decision to write is a monumental act of will. It is an independent choice made in a place where such an act is not possible. It may be a weak form of Nietzsche’s will to power; Köves has very little room to move. His decision anchors him at the mercy of the totalitarian system, another one of its numberless victims. But his existence will only be the metaphor. The identity will be writing and it will write itself.

Kertész contradicts himself constantly in his conception of what free will means in the context of his work. On the one hand he writes, “The word ‘chance’ doesn’t mean anything; it doesn’t explain anything. I could replace it with the word ‘inevitable’ and would be saying the same thing even though the two words bear apparently contradictory meanings” (DK 155). Something inevitable – like the novel he “had to write” is as if given to him, not created by his independent will. On the other hand, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Kertész said, “Can one imagine greater freedom than that enjoyed by a writer in a relatively limited, rather tired, even decadent dictatorship?” (“Heureka!”). If this is true, then the word inevitable takes on a meaning in the liminal space where semantic planes clash. Inevitable in the sense that this is what happened; steps were taken that resulted in this eventuality. Now that this has happened, of course it was inevitable. In this sense, this novel embodies Nietzschean eternal return: each act must be taken with the knowledge that it will return over and over, in the same way, as if inevitable. The free will is in the act, while the inevitability is in its recurrence. The narrative runs over and over the same ground, changing nothing. The one act of will, the decision to write, enacts its own inevitability. Ever living in a metaphorical world, Kertész has no particular interest in resolving this paradox. The old boy says, with what I imagine to be a grateful nostalgia,
“Freedom had set against himself and his fate, strength had drawn from the circumstances, an assault which subverted necessity – what else was a work, every human work, if not that?” (360). At the end of his memoir (fictional, of course), Dossier K, Kertész writes, “The greatest joy for me here, on this earth, was writing, language” (DK 209). What a fiasco.
Chapter IV

Writing an Antidote to Suicide

*If there is a secret [in writing], it is in the infinite relation of the one to the other which the drift of meaning hides, because in it the one seems to preserve his necessity even in death.*

Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

In his memoir *Dossier K* Kertész writes, “If I were to say that I always wanted to die, and instead of that I always wrote a book – that would be an elegant cop-out, wouldn’t it?” (164). This sage warning from the author frustrates my erstwhile plans for a way to discuss his final two novels, *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* (1990) and *Liquidation* (2003). For these two slim books are both permeated by the theme of suicide. And what is more, as we have seen in Kertész’s work before, they both incorporate, albeit in different ways, a metatextual focus on the act of writing itself. In *Fatelessness*, the narrator resists any self-referential invocation of the production of the text. Nevertheless, the highly stylized and performative nature of the narrative focuses attention on the tightly controlled and strategic use of language to construct the metaphorical world of fatelessness. In essence, he uses innovations of language to similarly innovate a conception of the reality of being. In *Fiasco*, the act of writing as a repudiation of the condition of fatelessness emerges as a central theme: the genesis of the author as one who “needs to write” in order to be, and the production of the narrative as the book he “needs to write” in order to be, act as the two foci of an elliptical, recursive narrative structure. In *Kaddish* and *Liquidation*, Kertész employs yet new narrative strategies to tease out and unravel the inextricable link between writing and being. To be more accurate, with the insistent focus on suicide in these later works, Kertész explores how the act of writing mediates the desire *not to be*. Thus, a pat and seductive reading of these two novels is the one the author embargoes in his own case:
that writing is an antidote to suicide. Through a deeper look at these two narratives, however, I want to argue that Kertész continues to challenge the capacity of language to describe reality. In these texts, he illuminates the equivocal nature of language by persistently interrogating definitions, and by doing so, resists linguistic binaries that place such words as “existence” and “suicide” in opposition in the first place. In both novels, Kertész again sets up meta-metaphors by selecting particular narrative structures that set reader expectations that are ultimately thwarted. In *Kaddish*, he deploys a deep network of metaphors that repeatedly occasion the clash of semantic fields. This strategy, in turn, opens up the possibility of shifting, or expanding, the meanings of particular words in the metaphorical context of the world of the novel. In *Liquidation*, the search for an absent manuscript produces a metaphorical question about the meanings of the concepts of presence and absence within the broader frame of the meaning of existence.

**My Pen is My Spade**

The very title *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* immediately and firmly embeds this narrative in a metaphorical world. The Kaddish is a Jewish prayer intoned by mourners, particularly by sons for parents who have died (“Jewish Prayers: Mourner’s Kaddish”). The Kaddish of the novel’s title, however, is not for a miscarried or stillborn child, but for a child that the narrator refuses to conceive. At the same time, it is also a Kaddish for himself – for his own metaphorical death. The choice of this word, then, is entirely metaphorical: one would not say the Kaddish for these purposes; the context is inappropriate. Furthermore, the text of the Kaddish contains no reference to the dead, to loss, or to grief, but is rather an exaltation and sanctification of God. It is, as such, a statement of the acceptance of God’s will rather than a prayer for the dead (“Jewish Prayers: Mourner’s Kaddish”). Again, in
Kaddish, the context clashes with the word’s accepted meaning: it is not God’s will, but rather the will of the narrator himself, that he not have a child. Moreover, far from exalting God, at one point the narrator makes the assertion, “God manifested himself to me in the image of Auschwitz” (112), one of the more shocking among the myriad metaphors that clog the narrative. Here he is arguing that it is not God that should be exalted, but Auschwitz; in a 2003 interview, Kertész proclaims, “Auschwitz is my greatest treasure” (Radisch np). This exaltation of Auschwitz illustrates the perverse logic that will be explicated throughout Kaddish in which Kertész’s experience at Auschwitz is a pivotal one for his metaphysical self-awareness. Thus, I would argue that the entirety of the narrative is a metaphor; it takes a word and an activity with very specific meanings that are deeply ingrained in Jewish mourning rituals, and asks them to mean something different. It creates a Kaddish that is a rejection of life rather than a mourning and a denunciation rather than a sanctification of God. In his metaphoric manipulation of the key word of his title, Kertész signals that, as in all his work, incisive attention must be paid to language and its meaning.

It is not only with his title that Kertész plays with readerly expectations in Kaddish. In Fatelessness, content and the author’s biography lead to the reader’s belief that the text is a testimony. In Kaddish, conversely, it is the details of the narrative structure and style that mark the text as a testimony. Beginning with the emphatic phrase, “‘No!’ I said instantly and at once” (1), the narrative consists of a monologue by a modestly successful Hungarian writer, in answer to a philosopher with whom he is walking through the woods at a writers’ retreat. The narrator, B., is an Auschwitz survivor. The question Dr. Obláth has just asked is whether B. has a child. This “No!” is repeated multiple times, with ever
increasing modifiers of panic: “‘No!’” something bellows and howls within me” (26); “‘No!’ had not been decisive enough” (87); “‘No!’ something screamed and whined within me” (90). This crescendo of pathos accompanies a purportedly stream-of-consciousness diatribe, skipping forward and backward in time, as B. marshals evidence from his life to construct an explanation of why having a child is inconceivable and horrific for him. In their analyses of Holocaust testimony, neither Felman and Laub nor Eaglestone names overt emotionalism as typical of the genre. Despite this analytical position, however, the critical essays consulted for this paper seem to suggest the opposite: they each claim that the narrative of Fatelessness mimics testimony, and, as a consequence, they note with surprise the narrative’s lack of affect (Adelman, Bachmann, Eaglestone, Miller). Kertész himself remarks, “Works dealing with the Holocaust were expected to be full of passionate outrage” (The Holocaust as Culture 29) and recalls his own determination that Fatelessness not “turn into a tearjerker” (Zielinski np). Given this keen awareness of his readers’ expectations, the shift from the dispassionate tone of his first two novels to the emotional one that floods Kaddish, coupled with the adoption of first person narration, seems to imply Kertész’s intention that this narrative mimic the testimony of a Holocaust survivor.

In addition to its emotional content, Kaddish bears many of the hallmarks of the testimonial style as elucidated by Robert Eaglestone in The Holocaust and the Postmodern. For example, Eaglestone notes that testimonies often possess “grammatical dislocations of narrative” (45), explaining that non-linear chronology and interruptions in the narrative “reflect [the] movement of memory and the problems of writing: they are shifting, uncertain” (57). In Kaddish, B. goes off on many tangents, bringing up memories as they occur to him, preventing a chronological relating of his story. Also typical of holocaust
testimonies is the employment of a frame (47), in this case, B.'s conversation with Obláth, which then incorporates other conversations and even some of B.'s previous writings. Many testimonies include what Eaglestone calls "inserted tags" (49) like those Kertész incessantly strews through Kaddish, such as "God help us!" (27) and "For Heaven's Sake" (11). In Chapter II, I explained the concept of the "allegory of failed understanding" (51-53) with respect to a particular passage in Fatelessness. Here, in Kaddish, the entire narrative can be seen as such, in that its purpose is to clear up the misunderstanding that B.'s decision not to have a child should be considered a "missed opportunity" as Obláth calls it (8). Another feature of testimonies is the epiphany (54), which we also saw in Fatelessness. In Kaddish, the phrases "flash of recognition" and "flash of self-recognition" appear repeatedly, foregrounding the fact that the writing is specifically intended to record B.'s epiphanies. Finally, every critical treatment of testimony consulted for this paper (Eaglestone, Felman and Laub, White, and Blanchot) identifies a lack of closure as the most consistent and notable feature of testimonial writing. Kaddish ends with the implication that B. will kill himself. But, of course, one cannot write one's own suicide. In this sense, there is no closure to the narrative.

I have enumerated the many features of testimony that are evidenced in Kaddish because I believe Kertész chooses this specific mode of discourse, at least in part, to continue the work he started with his first two novels: to reveal the breakdown in language that occurred with the Holocaust. As Shoshana Felman writes, in testimony, "language is in process and in trial" (5); it undergoes a "fragmentation – a breaking down, a disruption and a dislocation ... of the apparent but misleading unities of syntax and of meaning" (23). Maurice Blanchot elaborates this connection between fragmentation and
the deficits of language when he argues that, “neither unifiable nor consistent, [fragments] accommodate a certain array of marks – the marks with which thought...represents the furtive groupings that fictively open and close the absence of totality” (58). In other words, the fragmented nature of testimony announces the fracturing of the totality of language as a system that is capable of representing definitive meanings. Thus, Kertész purposely mimics testimony in *Kaddish*, as it is precisely in this performative mode of discourse, as it relates specifically to trauma, that the crisis of language is most pointedly underscored. In testimony, Felman claims, “the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him” (15). While she is specifically referring to a psychological truth, buried in the unconscious, I would argue that the inaccessibility of truth is doubled by the “absence of totality” in language described by Blanchot. Even if a psychological truth could be pinned down, the language required to express it cannot. This is why Kertész continually, and almost obsessively, resorts to metaphorical language – that language which can forge new meanings through semantic innovations necessitated by the clash of contexts - and why the testimonial form he chooses for *Kaddish* is yet another master metaphor. The narrator B. is searching for his psychological truth in this novel, but his quest repeatedly runs aground on the shoals of language. It is only through metaphorical understandings of words such as “no” and “existence” and “suicide” that B. attempts to access some sort of truth. Furthermore, B. must find this truth through writing.

B. has difficulty expressing himself from the very opening moments of *Kaddish*. The first sentence of the novel is a meandering spew of words, commanding 17 lines of typescript, which sets a pattern that will be repeated throughout the novel. Long as it is, I
reproduce this enigmatic sentence below in order to highlight its many elements that
become altogether typical of the narrative as a whole.

"No!" I said instantly and at once, without hesitating and, virtually,
instinctively since it has become quite natural by now that our instincts
should act contrary to our instincts, that our counterinstincts, so to say,
should act instead of, indeed as, our instincts --- I'm joking, if this can be
regarded as a joking matter; that is, if one can regard the naked, miserable
truth as a joking matter, is what I tell the philosopher approaching me, now
that both he and I have come to a halt in the beech wood, beech coppice, or
whatever they are called, stunted and almost audibly wheezing from disease,
perhaps from consumption; I must confess to being a dunce about trees, I can
recognize only pine trees instantly, on account of their needles --- oh yes, and
plane trees as well, because I like them, and even nowadays, even by my
counterinstincts, I still recognize what I like intuitively, even if not with that
same chest-thumping, gut-wrenching, knee-jerking, galvanizing, inspired, so
to say, flash of recognition as when I recognize things I detest. (1-2)

The first word of the text, the interjection "No!" sets up a clash of semantic planes right at
the outset. Although it does not become clear for five more pages what the word is in
answer to, the ironic tone of the remainder of the paragraph and its seemingly irrelevant
tangents are mystifying in the context of mourning implied by the title Kaddish. Thus, right
away, the reader is alerted to language. I confess to being compelled to read this paragraph
multiple times each time I begin this novel in a vain effort to orient myself. Following the
fragmented, stream-of-consciousness style of the wording is a struggle such that attention must be paid to each word.

The inserted tags Eaglestone describes are here in the phrases, “so to say.” In Kaddish, Kertész constantly inserts these sorts of phrases, and they are, in virtually every case, cues that language has somehow failed. Phrases such as “to be more precise,” “or one might call it,” and “if we are going to use grand words” frequently appear along with more specific indications that B. is continually struggling - to no avail - to make himself clear using available language. Thus, the inserted commentary in Kaddish, while serving to lend authenticity to the chosen testimonial style of the narrative, also undermines confidence in both the univocity and the representational capacity of language. Later in this first paragraph, B. writes, “as long as we don’t look too closely at the meanings of words, because if we do look, then words have no meaning at all, do they?” (2). This is a sly move on Kertész’s part because a great deal of what he does in the narrative, and what he forces the reader to do, is look very closely at the meanings of words. Later, he figuratively elaborates on this challenge: “You know as well as I do that under certain circumstances, at a certain temperature, metaphorically speaking, words lose their substance, their content, their meaning, they simply deliquesce” (43). In this statement, Kertész invokes metaphor overtly with respect to an obvious figuration used to denigrate language. However, at the same time, he is playing with language in an opposite sense where words have supplemental meanings: the word “you” in this sentence must be seen as a metaphor as well. B. purports to be testifying to or praying for his unborn child - “you” – but, by using the second person singular, he also surreptitiously addresses the reader. This metatextual
gambit permeates this narrative; regardless of the fictional setup, Kertész is metaphorically speaking to the reader.

This idea of extra meaning is invoked in another way, when B. interrupts himself: “I shall break off this exegesis as I sense that the letters and words are carrying me away and carrying me away in the wrong direction at that” (5). He implies here that language has its own intrinsic force – that it is out of control and creates meanings independent of the author. The digressive, often frantic, nature of the narrative, as exemplified in its opening paragraph above, embodies this notion of being “carried away” by language. And yet, B.’s resort to silence marks his effort to seize control. Indeed, it can be unclear, at times, which is in charge: the writing or the writer. In his essay, “Getting Started with Imre Kertész,” Gary Adelman comes down clearly on the side of the writer. His reading positions the writing as a tool and as a reflection of B.’s psyche. He claims B. is a man “who writes to impose silence, by making a continuous background noise that soothes his agitation” (270) and who “buries [his self-recognition] under an avalanche of words” (269). This implication that language and writing is derivative – that it is merely a device employed by B. to resist speaking seems to me to miss the point Kertész is trying to make about language. On the contrary, B. describes the “compulsion to speak, to me so abhorrent and yet irrepressible, that always grips me when I have nothing to say for myself” (2) as “vocal silence, verbalized silence” (32). Dori Laub writes that silence “speak[s] mutely both in silence and in speech, both from behind and from within the speech” (Felman and Laub 58). In this sense, silence is not separate from language but is part of its system. Silence and speech are not binary opposites, and one does not cancel out the other. Far from imposing silence, B.’s writing gives voice to his silence.
In another passage, B. explicitly acknowledges his inability to control his writing: it is “as if someone were constantly jerking back my pen when it is poised to set down certain words, so that in the end my hand writes other words in their stead” (7). Therefore, writing is not exclusively a secondary reflection of B.’s thought, but an autonomous yet integrally entwined part of his identity. B. claims writing is an “absolutely indispensable demonstration of myself” (29), and, even more starkly, he writes, “as long as I keep working, I am, whereas if I didn’t work who knows whether I would be or not” (3). His being and his selfhood are indistinguishable. This conception of writing conforms to what Roland Barthes calls the middle voice. He explains, “in the modern verb of middle voice to write, the subject is constituted as immediately contemporary with the writing” (19).

Furthermore, to write “is to effect writing by affecting oneself, to make action and affection coincide, to leave the scriptor inside the writing” (18). Therefore, what Adelman dismisses as B.’s “maniacal compulsion to explain things” (269) can be seen as B. simply being, and while being, his attempt to understand what is the meaning of his being. Since his being coincides inexorably with language, his interrogation of language similarly coincides with his interrogation of his existence. In the phenomena of language that appear in Kaddish – tortured, tangential sentences that lead nowhere combined with a persistent pointing out of both the unruly nature of language and its descriptive insufficiencies - we see Kertész’s insistence that the particular themes of his novels have formal consequences. The narrative of Fatelessness is linear because, in order to illustrate his philosophy of fatelessness, György has to live through events externally imposed upon him step-by-step, in linear fashion. In Fiasco, in order to depict an enclosed and suffocating world, language must be similarly fenced-off with brackets and cul-de-sacs. Here in Kaddish, as B. struggles
with the meaning of an existence inexorably tied-up with language, language must be seen to struggle as well.

Looking back again at the first paragraph reproduced above, we can see this interrogation of language in the proposed synonymy between the words “instincts” and “counterinstincts” and in the profession and then immediate retraction of the implication that B. is joking. B. conducts this sort of Derridean deconstruction of words throughout Kaddish, continuing to hammer away at a vocabulary that is failing him. He is forever pairing words with their opposites. For example, early on, B. examines his own penchant for explanations: “life itself, that inexplicable complex of being and feeling, demands explanations of us...until in the end we succeed in annihilating everything around us, ourselves included, or in other words, explain ourselves to death” (2-3). In the usual sense of the word, explanation would imply a confirmation of something, but here, juxtaposed with its opposite – inexplicability – explanation negates. At this early stage, B. is contemplating whether explanation provides self-understanding or eradicates the self altogether. As the narrative progresses, B. increasingly rejects the binary opposition implied by the question: self-recognition will be equated with self liquidation. Thus, the word explanation encompasses both affirmation and negation at the same time. At times during these disquisitions on the meaning of words, B. explicitly points out the problems of language as used by others. At a cocktail party, in response to the universal agreement on the part of the guests with the statement, “There is no explanation for Auschwitz,” B. textually sputters, “as if this declaration to nip all declarations in the bud was actually declaring something, though you do not have to be a Wittgenstein to notice that in point of linguistic logic alone it is flawed...has no declarative value whatsoever” (33-4). B., for
whom language constitutes selfhood, is thus constantly compelled to pin down what
language means. If the text of this novel is to be seen as B.’s attempt to explain himself, he
wants to make sure meanings of words are clear – frequently, they are not. In key
instances, B.’s concern about the meaning of words turns to the meaning of writing. In a
hopeless attempt to explain his need to write, B. gets lost in his own circular logic:

this was the only solution open to me, even if it solves nothing, on the other
hand at least it does not leave me in a position of – how shall I put it? –
unsolvedness that would compel me to regard it as unsolved even in its
unsolvedness and consequently torment me not only by virtue of
unsolvedness but also by the shortcomings of this unsolvedness and
dissatisfaction over that. (29)

By repeatedly invoking the meaninglessness of binary oppositions, B. positions himself in
the liminal spaces in between, ricocheting back and forth between two poles of meaning
that do not satisfy him in their denotive power. Sense is not adequately conveying
reference, as B. sees it. The reality that he wants and needs to express cannot be molded
into a shape that ordinary words can describe. And, this is in part due to the equivocity of
words to which he obsessively draws attention. To resolve this dilemma, B. turns to the
redescriptive power of metaphor.

Unlike in the narratives of _Fatelessness_ and _Fiasco_, where the use of metaphor is
craftily hidden, in _Kaddish_ metaphor is front and center. In fact, Kertész seems determined
to foreground metaphor by using particularly florid examples. Dr. Obláth is described as
having a “kneaded and already risen dough face” (3). As his future wife walks across the
room to meet B. for the first time, she “leaves behind her the dolphin’s slit open body” (18).
B. charges his father with tormenting him with the intent of making him “pervious as a dessicated sponge” (110), during the “carbuncle of my childhood” (108). At dusk, on a summer night, the sun pours “like yellow, sticky fermenting grape must...the gates murkily yawning like scraps of impetigo” (92). Through these almost macabre metaphors, Kertész signals that figurative language is very much in play in this narrative. In Dossier K, Kertész confirms this strategy, expounding, in Kaddish “Everything is tipped on its edge. The narrator is exaggerating, but because this is a novel, every figure of speech has to be distorted to fit that exaggeration” (54). This need to resort to metaphorical language to explain things extends to the most intimate areas of B.’s life. Describing the love of a woman, he writes that she enters his heart:

whereupon she takes a look around with a charming and inquisitive smile,

delicately touches everything, dusts down one thing and another, airs the musty crannies, throws out this and that, stores her stuff in their place, and nicely, tidily and irresistibly settles in until I finally become aware that she has completely squeezed me out of there. (48)

Somehow, for B., it is not enough to simply say that he feels crowded out of his own being by love. Rather, he marshals the connotative power of this extended metaphor to more sufficiently characterize love’s invasive quality for him – how it separates him from his own heart. The language employed in the narrative of Kaddish, then, strays as far away from Jean Cohen’s degree zero language as we have yet seen in Kertész’s work. Recalling the discussion of Cohen’s theories from Chapter I, the idea is that figuration, by creating a visibility of language, blocks access to reference and focuses meaning within the text itself.

The passage quoted above is paradigmatic of this phenomenon, creating an intensely visual
representation of love. According to Cohen, this sort of metaphor works to create new fields of reference as the reader attempts to reduce deviation from degree zero language – to see through the opacity created by the figuration to a new reference. With the elaborate metaphors strewn throughout *Kaddish*, Kertész further emphasizes the fact that ordinary language does not suffice to express his reality. These metaphors are not inserted in the narrative as ornamental flourishes, to make it more colorful or interesting. Rather, they are signals from Kertész that it is only through the use of figurative innovation that the failure of language may be overcome. For him, manipulations of language, including metaphor, inaugurate the possibility of conveying meaning. Armed with this understanding of how language is being used in the narrative, the reader is open to the several larger metaphors Kertész constructs to forward the major themes of *Kaddish*.

In *Dossier K*, Kertész admits that when he went back to read *Kaddish* years later, he was “taken aback by the frankness of the death wish which was the original stimulus, the guiding principal for the novel” (159). In a figure repeated throughout the novel, B. creates a metaphor that adds self-understanding as a second, but equivalent, guiding principal: he strives for “true clear-sightedness, or in other words, towards knowingly known self-liquidation” (14). In degree zero language, these phrases would not be connected by the phrase “in other words.” They are expressions from different semantic planes that are mystifying when combined by an implied copula. This clash of semantic fields requires the reader to work hard to see through to the metaphorical truth that is being expressed, but, at a minimum, the “death wish” Kertész notes pervades the novel with an almost sensible presence. It is underpinned by a nihilism that exceeds the singular question of B.’s existence. He derides those who engage in rationalizing Hitler or euphemizing Auschwitz,
scoffing, “just so as not to see the yawning chasm, the nothingness, the void, or in other words, our true situation” (39-40). The entirety of the narrative, in my opinion, can be seen as an attempt to limn the margins of that “true situation,” one that B. will determine to be the superfluity of his existence as attested to by the abiding fact of Auschwitz. For my purposes, it is most important to notice that his efforts to gain this self-understanding – in what he repeatedly (metaphorically) refers to as his “dark and all-illuminating night” (80) – persistently operate through the action of metaphor.

As a non-religious Jew who has survived Auschwitz, B. must explore his relationship to his Jewishness. To do so, he resorts to one of the most vivid and outlandish metaphors of the novel. As a child, he visits the country home of some more observant Jewish relatives. Unaware of the tradition of orthodox Jewish women to shave their heads and wear a wig, he is revolted when he accidently sees his bald aunt wearing a red negligee. Glossing over the implicitly proto-sexual nature of his sense of horror and repulsion (he sees her as alternately a “corpse” and a “harlot” [21]), this indelible image implants itself in B.’s mind as symbolic of Jewishness. He writes, “later on, when it started to assume increasing importance that I too was Jewish, since ... this generally carried a death sentence...I suddenly realized that I now understood who I was: a bald headed-woman seated in front of the mirror in a red negligee” (22). B. repeats this metaphorical understanding of himself throughout the novel whenever the issue of his Jewishness comes up. He insists that his Jewishness, “an obscure circumstance of birth” (112), means nothing to him in terms of its Jewishness (the metaphorical image), but “in terms of experience, everything” (88). We learn much later what he means by this equivocation. He “bawls” at his wife, “to have had the opportunity of being in Auschwitz as a branded Jew and yet,
through my Jewishness, to have lived through something and confronted something...I will
not relinquish, will never relinquish” (118-9). Thus, he affirms the very element of his
identity that he claims is so foreign to him, his Jewishness, only in the sense that it grants
him the experience so essential to his self-understanding. For, it is paradoxically through
the necessarily absolute relinquishing of his own will while at Auschwitz that he learns the
necessity of asserting his will. His exaltation of Auschwitz, then, encompasses both a
relinquishing and a refusal to relinquish his will. This example illustrates how Kertész
creates these metaphors as lenses through which B. views himself, and then continually
weaves them in and out of the narrative, constantly honing them and at the same time
prying them open to reveal their multivocal meanings. For B. his Jewishness is
simultaneously nothing and everything; meaningless and yet the cause of the most
meaning-filled experience of his life. The bizarre metaphor of the bald-headed woman
bespeaks the radical otherness B. feels, both from outside and from inside his Jewishness.
It is both categorically foreign to him and an ineradicable part of his identity. In his essay,
"The Aporia of Imre Kertész," Eaglestone argues that the novel is called a Kaddish in order
to affirm the Jewish community. He writes, B.’s “Jewishness exists in a negative sense, and
his affirmation of the community is its denial” (47). Although I am not convinced that the
text bears out this claim, I am interested in the fact that here again, in a critical examination
of the novel, Eaglestone points to a meaning that arises from both the metaphorical nature
of the title, and from a dialectical understanding of the openness of meaning. Whatever we
can conclude about B.’s relationship to his Jewishness, it is mediated by a metaphor that he
both identifies with and rejects.
The denial of community Eaglestone identifies is epitomized by the metaphor of the unborn child of the title. As mentioned, all of the almost audible interjections of "No!" represent B.'s emphatic refusal to have a child. Furthermore, this decision enforces the rejection not only of the Jewish community, but also of a future of B.'s existence. Again, B. continues to mediate his understanding of his existence through metaphor, through language. In this case, the metaphor is variously presented. First, explaining the question Dr. Obláth has asked him, B. states, "you are that question; or to be more precise, I am, but an I rendered questionable by you" (4). Here, the terms "I" and "you" are placed in tension as two terms of a metaphor, each of whose existence is explicitly affected by the other. A bit further on, B. refines this notion: "your non-existence viewed as the necessary and radical liquidation of my own existence" (31). In this configuration, B.'s equation of clear-sightedness with suicide takes on a new cast. His liquidation does not necessarily mean the active taking of his own life, but at a minimum requires that his existence end with his death. This metaphor is, of course, the raison d'être of the narrative as it is the figure that allows B. to delve into the meaning of his existence by trying to explain himself to this hypothetical child. Moreover, B. exhibits considerable bravery in his determination to round out the metaphor. He raises the stakes markedly by fleshing out the children he will never have: "Would you be a brown-eyed little girl, with the pale specks of your freckles scattered around your tiny nose? Or else a headstrong boy, your eyes bright and hard as greyish-blue pebbles?" (14). The poignancy of these descriptions evokes the mourning of the title. Despite B.'s steadfastness in his decision, it is clear that it is not without a measure of regret. These meager wistful ruminations, however, are overwhelmed by B.'s almost violent disquisition on the reasons for his refusal.
These reasons emerge via the spawning of a network of subsidiary metaphors that, taken together, equate fatherhood with Auschwitz. B. intimates this notion early in the narrative, by posing a stunning equivalence: “my existence viewed as the potentiality of your being, or in other words, me as a murderer” (4). Unmoored from any particular frame of reference, this statement seems nonsensical. The disparate semantic fields that include the terms “father” and “murderer” do not commonly cross in ways that allow the reader to create meaning by borrowing from one field to the other in either direction. At this point, the reader is not yet aware of the particulars of B.’s history that might cause him to place these fields in relation to each other. Clearly these words have referential fields for B. that are broader than what ordinary language would include. It is only much later in B.’s story that he creates a chain of associations that connect these words. In describing a childhood that includes a domineering father, an authoritarian boarding school, and a stint in Auschwitz, B. reveals the unfolding of a word view that places a suffocating paternalism as the guiding principal of contemporary society. Put simply, B. quotes from among some scribblings of his younger self, “the domination of terror in all cases signifies a paternal domination” (94). Although scant in detail or anecdote, B.’s relationship with his obdurate father is whittled down to its essence: “the power he wielded over me” (101). His futile attempts to escape his father’s domination result in nothing other than a radical aloneness, and subsequently a constant search for that which he has lost: “I had need of a tyrant for my world order to be restored” (111). The world obligingly supplies such replacements, first through the tyrannical behavior of the shabby and unimpressive headmaster of his “father-usurping” school. This martinet tugs on a door handle “like the Gestapo” (106) and conducts a weekly report session “like an Appell at Auschwitz, not for real, of course, just in
fun” (108). Here already, the notions father, school and Auschwitz are melded in the nexus of a "warmhearted paternal rule of terror" (109). It is then a short leap to a more condemnatory equivalence: “Auschwitz...manifests itself to me in the image of a father; yes, the words father and Auschwitz elicit the same echo within me” (112). Through this metaphorical network, then, B. completes a sort of word ladder - terror to father; father to school; school to Auschwitz – such that his belief that becoming a father would inevitably make of him a murderer makes sense.

Far from containing the simple meaning of bodily homicide, moreover, this metaphorical murder encompasses the psychological truth that Kertész has been developing throughout his work: the truth that authoritarianism kills freedom. This part of the metaphor is rather subtle in Kaddish, hinted at in two passages in particular. First, B. nominates “accommodation as the sole possibility of surviving, obedience as drill, lunacy as the final outcome” (101). In this assertion we find the necessity of “taking steps” of Fatelessness and the “go along to get along” mentality of the denizens of Fiasco. The individual has a circumscribed space in which to maneuver – no freedom either of body or of mind. B. elaborates on the choice this reality engenders, when he screams at his wife, “it is our bounden duty to rank our capabilities as to whether or not we are able to carry out total assimilation” “to the extant, the extant circumstances and existing conditions” (118). B. recognizes his inability to “surviv[e] survival” (119), meaning that he may have physically survived the most extreme form of paternalistic authoritarianism dreamt up by humankind, but maintaining his own freedom has meant rejecting life as constituted in contemporary society, a life over which the individual continues to exert no control.
Gaining this understanding of B.'s rejection of existence requires a look at yet one more metaphor, that of the ever-present nature of Auschwitz:

Auschwitz has been hanging around in the air since long ago, who knows, perhaps for centuries, like dark fruit ripening in the sparkling rays of innumerable disguises, waiting for the moment when it may at last drop on mankind's head, for in the end what is is, and the fact that is is necessary because it is. (36)

In his Nobel speech, Kertész asserts, "Nothing has happened since Auschwitz that could reverse or refute Auschwitz. In my writings, the Holocaust could never be present in the past tense" ("Heureka!"). And, so it is for B. He proclaims, "everything is nevertheless exactly the same as it was, indeed even more so" (92). This idea completes the web of associations that equates the exclamation "No!" with Auschwitz. No, B. will not bring a child into a world in which Auschwitz always already exists and always will exist. It is challenging, if not impossible, to discern the meaning of Kertész's Nobel speech declaration outside of the complex and intertwined network of metaphors he constructs in Kaddish. Thus, this narrative performs a remarkable feat of language, expanding the vocabulary required to explain the enduring meaning of the Holocaust for Kertész.

One task still remains, however. That is, to complete the circle that encloses B.'s existence within language. It is not enough for B. to equate self-liquidation with the decision not to have a child. He must also, paradoxically, liquidate himself through writing. A final metaphor sprinkled liberally throughout Kaddish is that of the grave in the sky that B. is digging for himself. In the same way as the metaphor of his Jewishness, this figuration, while seemingly conveying consistent meaning, possesses its own sort of ambiguity. The
first few times this metaphor appears, it refers simply to B.’s abiding fears and occupations. They are “the first scoops of the spade towards the much, much deeper trench that I still have to dig out, clod by clod, from one end to the other, for there to be something to swallow me up (though maybe I am not digging in the ground but rather in the air because there one is unconfined)” (6). This metaphor, which appears more than a dozen times, soon becomes entwined with B.’s writing. He looks up “at the clouds in which I am digging my grave with my ballpoint pen” (34). While in Fiasco, I argue, the old boy writes himself, here B. writes his own death, his “self-liquidation” as he intently refers to it. As noted above, B. equates self-realization with self-liquidation. Thus, if the act of writing this narrative is B.’s active striving toward self-realization, it is simultaneously a bid for death.

The writing is death; the pen is the spade with which he digs his grave. This equation, however, is steeped in irony. B.’s wife gently cajoles him to use his skills to be a more successful writer, but he resists: “How could my wife, or anyone else, wish for me to put to use my spectacular self-liquidation...so that I might thereby sneak, like a thief with a skeleton key into some sort of literary or other future...with the self same strokes of the grubbing hoe with which I must dig my grave bed in the clouds?” (85). In his final novel, Liquidation, Kertész deals more explicitly with the undeniable objective materiality and lasting quality of written text. But, here, the irony seems lost on B. While B. categorically rejects his writing as any kind of future of his existence, Kertész writes and publishes this novel in his voice. B. exists in the writing 25 years after its production. While he digs his grave with his pen he also inks himself into a more permanent existence. As such, the metaphor B. employs to explain the meaning of his writing to himself also serves to undermine this understanding. While B. proclaims his self-liquidation, we can only imagine
him through language, through his writing. He exists because we read him through his
writing. The most overt indication that B. will commit suicide occurs at the very end of the
novel, when he pointedly rejects a subjectivity the reader has come to know intimately:
“my life, on the one hand as fact, on the other as a cerebral mode of existence,” which
demands “that it be formed, like a round, rock-hard object, in order that it persist...which I
shall put an end to and liquidate, however, as fact” (119). Here he asserts a Cartesian mode
of existence, where mind and body are distinct. Rather than seeing his mind as his
subjectivity, however, he objectifies it. He insists that he will re-combine the two and do
away with both in order to eradicate any semblance of a speaking subject. If the writing is
the embodiment of his mind as object, it makes sense, then, that in the final sentence of the
novel he implies that he will carry his life – which I imagine as the manuscript I am reading
– with him under the water. This act fulfills the metaphor of pen as grave digging tool, but
the paradox of the narrative itself remains. This paradox leaves the ultimate truth of this
metaphor in question. One possibility seems to me to be the truth that once existence has
announced itself in language, it cannot be denied. This enclosure of existence within
language is a central theme of Kertész last novel, Liquidation, which I would like to explore
next.

But I Believe in Writing – Nothing Else

The work that would eventually be published in 2003 as the novel Liquidation began
Kertész proclaims that in his new play, “in the role of the suicidal protagonist, I will mourn
my own creative existence” (330). Throughout “Someone Else,” Kertész almost laments the
end of the oppressive regime under which he jealously guarded the solitude he required in order to work. One can imagine the fear that grips him as he writes the words, "Do I still want to write?" (327). In Kertész's typical embracing of irony, he eventually decides to encapsulate the ebbing of his creative existence in yet a new creative effort. In its eventual form, *Liquidation* does seem to be a recap of sorts, a summing up of the abiding concerns that flow through Kertész's entire body of work. All of the familiar themes are here: the withering portrayal of the inanity of a society forged in the crucible of totalitarianism; the forcible accommodation of the individual to the imperatives of such a society; the incompatibility of fate with freedom; the objectification of the self and its transformation into a theoretical universal; the metatextual attention to language, and above all, the eternal presence of Auschwitz. These themes are articulated in similar ways as in the three preceding novels, through expository passages, colorful descriptions and evocative metaphors. What is different in *Liquidation*, however, is the way in which writing itself is thematized. Although, as I have shown, the act of writing is a central focus of both *Fiasco* and *Kaddish*, in *Liquidation*, Kertész develops his stance on the relationship between writing, existence and reality in a new way. This late novel has the wistful sensibility of an author who believes he has already cheated death once, and who knows he will not do so a second time. Perhaps it is the approach of the inevitable end of his writing life, synonymous with his life as a whole, that leads him to turn his attention to the materiality of writing – to what it comprehends and to how it endures. These are the central preoccupations of *Liquidation*.

There are actually two suicidal protagonists of *Liquidation*. One is Kingbitter, a burned out literary editor, whose philandering and overwhelming existential disgust
destroys his marriage, and whose eroding belief in literature leaves him unmoored and hopeless. The other is Bee, a client whom Kingbitter considers to be the only great writer he has ever known and whose writing gives Kingbitter a reason to live. Bee is a version of the character B. in *Kaddish*, telling some of the same stories and sharing much of the same philosophy. This Bee, however, was not interned in Auschwitz, but was born there and was secreted out, his survival more perfectly exemplifying the belief in the radical contingency of life that runs through all of Kertész’s work. Kingbitter encourages Bee to write his story, but Bee demurs, arguing that it would only be kitsch: “It happened, yet it’s still not true. An exception. An anecdote”(33). At its heart, *Liquidation* seeks to discover a way to tell this story in a way that is true. To succeed in this endeavor, Kertész experiments with a variety of voices, switching from a close third person focus on Kingbitter to passages in which Kingbitter speaks in the first person to a lengthy section in which B.’s ex-wife Judit speaks in the first person. Interspersed throughout are *mise en abîme* sections of Bee’s play, titled *Liquidation*, which positions Bee as possessing supernatural clear-sightedness. For Bee has committed suicide before the action of the novel begins, yet his play enacts the action of the novel. Kertész plays many of the same games with language in *Liquidation* that appear in his other work, but the heterogeneous narrative here seems to mark a new slant on the question of the meaning of writing. If elsewhere he has argued the equivalence of writing with self, what happens to the writing when the self has been liquidated? Does it have a meaning, or even an existence, for those who remain? The centrality of these questions is further reinforced through Kertész’s experimentation with genre – *Liquidation* is a mystery story, as Kingbitter first posits the existence of a missing novel he insists Bee must have
written, and then searches for it. The ultimate resolution of this mystery furthers the
discourse about writing that Kertész began in *Fiasco*, but foregoes definitive conclusions.

*Liquidation* performs the notion that existence and reality are enclosed in writing
from the opening line of the narrative: “Let us call our man, the hero of this story,
Kingbitter” (3). Invoking an authorship that is outside of the text, he soon collapses the
distinction between outside and inside by noting certain biographical details about
Kingbitter and asserting, “that, therefore, is the reality” (3). He first marks the narrative as
a text and then embeds reality within that text. Although all fictional worlds exist only
within texts, in this novel that is fundamentally about texts, Kertész ensures that the reader
not lose sight of this crucial fact. Further complicating the construction, Kingbitter next
qualifies it with the phrase, “so-called reality” (4). In this way, Kertész embraces two
paradoxes: one created by his assertion and immediate denial of a reality outside of the
text, and the other that further rejects the notion of a settled reality within the text. This
second paradox receives further reinforcement by the repeated use of the word “story” as a
way of describing a person’s life. When a person elects to tell his story, we infer that he
means to relate the details of his life or of a particular event in his life. But the word “story”
can also be interpreted to imply a fiction, or worse, a lie. Kingbitter’s persistence in
referring to his own and to Bee’s lives as stories leaves the reader in this liminal space
between reality and fiction, between truth and untruth – precisely the space in which all of
Kertész’s work lives. In any event, the stories are inside the text.

The fact that some of the action of the narrative occurs within the text of Bee’s play
highlights this notion that all stories are texts. Furthermore, although it would seem
counterintuitive, I would argue that the additional fact that the play’s author writes it
before the action takes place accentuates the irrelevance of the author in determining the meaning of a text. The text performs a reality the author could not have known; the text itself is the reality. This is a somewhat rich assertion for Kertész, considering that his own biography provides much of the material for his own work. But, it emphasizes his claims that the person in his novels is not he, but is a radically separate entity that only has reality within the text. I argued earlier that both the old boy in Fiasco and B. in Kaddish create themselves through the act of writing, and that their existence is in various ways contemporary with the writing. In this way, Kertész’s work contains a major contradiction: the existence of the writer is incorporated in the writing at the same time as the writer and the writing are infinitely separated. “But then, I take delight in contradictions,” proclaims Kertész in the closing line of Dossier K (210). It is in this embracing of contradictions that I see the essentially metaphorical nature of the work. Because the action of the play takes place after Bee’s suicide, Bee no longer exists, but the play remains. If it is not Bee’s existence written in the play, whose is? A clue is provided in Kingbitter’s reluctance to throw the play away: “If he were to be rid of the play, he would, in some sense, also be getting rid of himself” (13).

Kingbitter’s existence, then, is wrapped up in Bee’s writing. This notion and this narrative seem to me to be a bid by Kertész to extend his thinking about writing and existence. This may be why Kingbitter is a literary editor – the character needs to be someone steeped in language with a deep understanding of the methods and goals of literature. As such a person, he sees his life as a story, yet “his story had reached an end, but he himself was still here, posing a problem” (10). Kingbitter does not write, so he cannot mediate his existence through writing, as the B. of Kaddish does. Without a story, he
grasps hold of Bee’s, “living parasitically off of his words” (41). “If I wish to see my own life as a story,” Kingbitter says, “then I would have to tell the story of B.” (27). Since Bee writes the play *Liquidation* which contains the action of the novel *Liquidation*, Kingbitter’s continuing existence was written by Bee long ago. But, he intuitively recognizes that his existence is trapped in the structure of language. He lives through Bee’s story; Bee writes his story. Kingbitter explains, “That was why I had to go after his vanished novel. Because it probably contained everything I needed to know, everything that can still be known at all” (26). Ironically, however, it is just at this juncture that the narrative slips into the first person. In other words, Kingbitter starts writing.

It takes a character that deeply understands language to articulate the problematic nature of Kertész’s lifelong project:

> I beg my own pardon for being constrained to put down claptrap like this on paper; only now do I see how difficult it must be for my clients, so-called (or perchance genuine) writers, to wrestle with unvarnished matter, objective reality, the entire phenomenological world, in order to reach the essence that glimmers behind it – that is, if any such thing exists, of course. (27)

I believe that the glimmering essence Kingbitter refers to here can be seen as the whole range of metaphorical truths Kertész strives to uncover throughout his work. These truths are trapped in their own totalitarian system – language – a controlling structure that needs to be broken open in order to let them out. “In what language,” Kingbitter ponders, “could I have told [sic] Bee’s story” (26). That the affordances of the available system of language are incommensurate with his truth is a like gospel to Kertész. Kingbitter later describes both a problem and a solution which sound strikingly like Kertész’s own: “our story, like
every story, was incomprehensible and irrevocable, had...been engulfed, and we no longer had anything to do with it, just as we have hardly anything to do with our lives. It entered my head that only writing can restore this process” (95). It is only through writing that lives, and the language in which they are written into stories, can be reanimated. By continually working on language, as Kertész does, the vocabulary required to describe reality expands and the range of meanings able to be represented by language broadens. Kingbitter claims that to create a world, you need writing. “I believe in writing – nothing else; just writing” (97).

The problem of the novel, however, is that Kingbitter does not believe in his own nascent attempts at writing, but continues to base his own existence on Bee’s writing. Following an extensive portion of the narrative that is written from Kingbitter’s first person point of view, he becomes afraid, remarking, “I sense that I’m slightly departing from...what indeed? Reality?” (85), whereupon the narrative shifts back to the third person. This seems to imply that in order to adequately capture reality, Kingbitter must be written in someone else’s narrative. In fact, this idea is more explicitly elucidated early on in the novel, when the third person narrator remarks upon Kingbitter’s feeling of admiration for “his own, so to say, remorseful determination to identify with his prescribed role and stick to the story” (10) as written in Bee’s play. Because Bee’s writing produces Kingbitter’s existence, the missing novel must exist, because Kingbitter still does. Kingbitter makes this connection explicit, hoping to learn from Bee’s manuscript “whether, now that he is dead, it is permissible – If I may put it this way – for me to go on living” (40). Despite the repeated insistence on the part of all the other characters in the novel that this manuscript does not exist, not to mention his inability to locate it, Kingbitter doggedly maintains that it does
exist. Trapped in Bee’s language, Kingbitter must find “the synoptic work” (97) that encloses him.

The resolution of this mystery is an enigmatic one: the manuscript is located, but only in its absence. Before his death, Bee entrusts the manuscript to his ex-wife, Judit, and asks her to burn it along with a note in which he writes, “I revoke Auschwitz” (121). Bee evidently believes that by liquidating both himself and his manuscript, his story will disappear, and Auschwitz along with it. Happily remarried with children, Judit believes that she has escaped Bee’s story, which had almost killed her, bringing her down to an “Auschwitz mode of existence” (110) of radical contingency and hopelessness. The burning of the manuscript, however, does not release Judit. As soon as she finishes relating the story of her relationship with Bee and her carrying out of his wishes, we are back in Bee’s play, in which Judit’s husband says, “No one can revoke Auschwitz, Judit. No one, and by virtue of no authority. Auschwitz is irrevocable” (123). Thus, Judit cannot escape Bee’s story, and neither can a world defined by Auschwitz. The burning of the manuscript has not vitiated the structural power of language. Although the manuscript has been destroyed, the play continues to write the existence of Judit and Kingbitter. Their existence continues to be constituted in language, written language. When Kingbitter asks Judit why Bee wanted her to burn the manuscript, she replies, “From it being our secret compact, the consummation, the higher sense, the apotheosis of our relationship” (104). This pact performs Blanchot’s formulation that writing is “entrusting yourself to him who will henceforth have as an obligation, and indeed as a life, nothing but your inexistence” (64). Bee no longer exists, nor does the writing, but by entrusting its destruction to Judit, he ensures its permanence through its negation. In her person, charged with affirming his
non-existence, his continuing existence is assured. He has written his own suicide and its antidote as well. Kertész makes sure we know that Judit reads the manuscript before incinerating it. If at least one person has read it, the writing has a materiality that endures both in presence and in absence.

The ending of Liquidation makes one more crucial point about writing, and that is that the materiality of writing it concretizes does not similarly solidify meaning. Kingbitter reads notes left by Bee that constitute an alternate ending to the play, an ending which offers a glimmer of hope that, through love, there might be an escape from a world in which Auschwitz looms. As long as language exists, Kertész seems to be saying, new endings can always be written and new meanings can always be found. Even if the book’s destruction has not released its characters from its enclosure, this does not mean that there is only one interpretation of its meaning. Blanchot writes, “the absence of a book, that which is exterior to any book, makes what it surpasses heard” (100). Although Blanchot is using the word “absence” here to refer to that sort of absence that remains as the vestige of a traumatic experience, Kertész riffles on this notion by causing the book itself to be absent. The absent book leaves a trace that cannot be erased and that will continue to be heard. It is specifically in the void left by the book that new meaning can arise. By virtue of having being written, the book releases meaning. This occurs not only through the disappearance of the book, but also in the act of writing itself. “To go toward the other,” Derrida argues, “is also to negate oneself, and meaning is alienated from itself in the transition of writing. Intention surpasses itself and disengages from itself in order to be said” (76). Therefore, in writing, meaning is free-floating, disconnected from its origin. For Derrida, the absence Blanchot refers to is the enforced withdrawal of the author’s intention. He calls it a
moment of "infinite separation" (76). As such, writing creates the space between the
author and the reader in which metaphorical meaning arises. The liquidation of the self
and the liquidation of the book are the genesis of meaning. As such, in *Liquidation*, Kertész
writes an antidote to suicide.
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