Rage Is the Subtext
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Imre Kertész was born in Budapest on November 9, 1929. In 1944 he was deported to Auschwitz and then sent to Buchenwald. He spent one year as a prisoner, returning after liberation to Hungary, where he worked as a journalist until he was dismissed by his newspaper in 1951 “after it aligned itself with the Communist Party.” He served in the military for two years before he began to support himself through his writing and by translating German texts into Hungarian. Presently he lives in Budapest and Berlin.

In 1975 Kertész published his first novel, Fateless, which in 2004 was retranslated into English as Fatelessness. In the novel’s opening pages Gyorgy Koves, a fourteen-year-old Hungarian boy, spends a final day with his father, who has been called to labor service. Gyorgy’s parents are divorced, and, in obedience to his father’s wish, Gyorgy plans to remain with his stepmother rather than returning to live with his mother. But he never puts his plan into effect, because shortly after his father’s departure, Gyorgy is picked up on the streets of Budapest and sent to Auschwitz, where he is held for three days; he is then transported to Buchenwald and on to Zeitz. During his internment, Gyorgy’s physical

and mental condition deteriorates to the point that he becomes a *Muselmann*, but he survives nevertheless. After a year of camp imprisonment he is liberated. Before he returns home, he has a series of jarring, alienating conversations with strangers and former neighbors about his experiences in the camps, and these reveal a fundamental tension between the way in which he views his persecution and the way in which his community resists his view. In speaking with his neighbors, he learns that his father has died in Mauthausen and that his stepmother has remarried. The novel concludes with Gyorgy’s anticipating that his mother is awaiting his return with joy and with plans for his future.

Kertész began writing *Fatelessness* in 1955; it was published nineteen years later. When it finally appeared in Hungary, it was greeted with “compact silence,” which one critic attributed to a perception of the novel as “a cynical provocation, a book about the Holocaust that refused to wear the accepted robe of victimhood; it declared everyone, perpetrators and victims, had taken their own steps towards their future.”

Jeffrey Prager focuses on the negative social implications of the reception Gyorgy receives upon returning to Budapest, arguing that it attests to the community’s failure to participate in Gyorgy’s healing process:

George seems to know intuitively what is required to be mentally healthy: remembering, not forgetting; memories that do not return *sub rosa* to undermine one’s own sense of the continuity of life, of a sense of oneself moving forward into a creative and productive future, of an ability to experience, whatever his or her fate, happiness. Yet he is also prescient; recognizing the precariousness of his quest for mental health among those that cannot understand his experience as he lived it.

According to Prager, it is the community’s responsibility to provide a “corrective emotional experience” in the present, analogous to the analyst’s relationship to the analysand. When it fails to do so, the survivor suffers further traumatization. That is why, according to Prager, trauma describes the failure of members of the community to contain against disappointment the memorial experience of the person. In this sense,

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3. “Imre Kertész—Biography.”
4. Evans, “A Man Apart.”
6. Ibid., 413.
psychological trauma is both a disease of the contemporary moment as well as a social one, when an individual’s capacity to engage the world presently and orient herself autonomously to the future is insufficiently enabled by the environment. When these conditions prevail, memory intrudes and a traumatic past dominates.  

Prager reads Gyorgy’s conversations directly after his liberation with the people of his community as forecasting a future bereft of the societal support necessary for the working-through of his traumatic memories. As a result, Gyorgy will be forced to forget his past; “[i]ntrusive memories or flashbacks may instead prevent his moving forward into a creative and productive future.”

Prager lays out the crucial social component of the survivor’s recovery from trauma, and he emphasizes how the absence of a supportive community in itself constitutes a contemporary iteration of trauma. Departing from Prager’s analysis, my question concerns how the novel itself conceives of the community’s role in Gyorgy’s process of healing. Is Gyorgy’s relationship with the witnessing community comparable to the relation between analysand and analyst as Prager suggests? In view of the importance of dialogue in the healing process as Prager discusses it, what are we to make of the fact that most, if not all, of the novel consists of dialogue—not dialogue between Gyorgy and others, but dialogue occurring within Gyorgy’s mind? Even the direct quotations of his exchanges with others are embedded in larger narrative paragraphs that subordinate them to the cohesive framework of Gyorgy’s thought process. As such, the novel could be viewed as a continuous internal dialogue that incorporates the voices of others. I understand this structure as indicating Gyorgy’s attempt, through the creation of a dialogical testimonial narrative, to reestablish both the intersubjective borders of his identity as well as the intrapsychic borders that Freud discusses in terms of primal repression. Perhaps only through such a marking of borders will Gyorgy will be able to regain the autonomy destroyed in the camps, where the voice of the other was indistinguishable from the threat of annihilation.

A scene in the novel that marks a turning point in Gyorgy’s survival in the camps exposes the mortal threat posed to the Holocaust victim by a relation that knows no borders. Forced to carry cement bags on his back, Gyorgy accidentally drops one of the bags. A camp supervisor, “not . . . an SS serviceman . . . but . . . a yellow-overalled member of a more shadowy semimilitary ‘Todt’ organization,” witnesses this and proceeds to beat Gyorgy and to make him lick up the spilled powder.\(^\text{10}\) Swearing at Gyorgy and then dragging him to his feet, he is determined to “teach” Gyorgy a lesson (169):

From then on, he personally loaded a new bag onto my shoulders each time it was my turn, bothering himself with me alone; I was his sole concern, it was me exclusively whom he kept his eye on, following me all the way to the truck and back, and whom he picked to go first even if, by rights, there were others still ahead of me in the queue. In the end, there was almost an understanding between us, we had got the measure of one another, and I noticed his face bore what was almost a smile of satisfaction, encouragement, even, dare I say, a pride of sorts, and from a certain perspective, I had to acknowledge, with good reason, for indeed, tottering, stooping though I might have been, my eyes seeing black spots, I did manage to hold out, coming and going, fetching and carrying, all without dropping a single further bag, and that, when it comes down to it, I would have to admit, proved him right. On the other hand, by the end of the day I felt that something within me had broken down irreparably; from then on, every morning I believed that would be the last morning I would get up; with every step I took, that I could not possibly take another; with every movement I made, that I would be incapable of making another. (169–70)

The Todt supervisor’s lesson is that even after the torture ends, the torturer’s life-negating power remains active inside Gyorgy. It assumes the form of the broken-down “something within” that makes Gyorgy think each morning, step, and movement will be his last.

In his Nobel Banquet speech, Kertész conceives of the survivor as a contributor to society who has his own lesson to teach:

The . . . survivor . . . asks the question: what is he bequeathing, what is his spiritual legacy? Has he enriched human knowledge with his tale of

\(^{10}\) Imre Kertész, *Fatelessness*, trans. Tim Wilkinson (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 168. Subsequent references are included in the body of this text.
suffering? Or has he only born witness to the unimaginable degradation of the human being, in which there is no lesson, and which ought to be forgotten as quickly as possible?

. . . if you now ask me what still keeps me here on this earth, what keeps me alive, then, I would answer without any hesitation: love.  

Kertész’s comment suggests that we read his novel not as a gratuitous depiction of “unimaginable degradation” but as an enriching bequeathal of a “spiritual legacy.” How then can we understand *Fatelessness* as Kertész’s legacy and as an indication of his enduring capacity for love? This is the question I will take up in what follows, arguing that the specifically dialogical structure of Kertész’s representation of his past transforms the degradations depicted on the level of plot into a narrative about a livable future, and it does so by marking and crossing certain internal and external borders.

Before he became a writer, Kertész was visited not by a literary but by an “existential” inspiration. In his Nobel Lecture he asks,

> Why do we write? Here, too, I was lucky, for it never occurred to me that when it came to this question, one had a choice. I described a relevant incident in my novel *Failure*. I stood in the empty corridor of an office building, and all that happened was that from the direction of another, intersecting corridor I heard echoing footsteps. A strange excitement took hold of me. The sound grew louder and louder, and though they were clearly the steps of a single, unseen person, I suddenly had the feeling that I was hearing the footsteps of thousands. It was as if a huge procession was pounding its way down that corridor. And at that point I perceived the irresistible attraction of those footfalls, that marching multitude. In a single moment I understood the ecstasy of self-abandonment, the intoxicating pleasure of melting into the crowd—what Nietzsche called, in a different context though relevantly for this moment too, a Dionysian experience. It was almost as though some physical force were pushing me, pulling me toward the unseen marching columns. I felt I had to stand back and press against the wall, to keep me from yielding to this magnetic, seductive force.

I have related this intense moment as I (had) experienced it. The source from which it sprang, like a vision, seemed somewhere outside of me, not in me. Every artist is familiar with such moments. At one time

they were called sudden inspirations. Still, I wouldn’t classify the experience as an artistic revelation, but rather as an existential self-discovery. What I gained from it was not my art—its tools would not be mine for some time—but my life, which I had almost lost. The experience was about solitude, a more difficult life, and . . . the need to step out of the mesmerizing crowd, out of History, which renders you faceless and fateless.  

In this visionary moment, Kertész gains an insight into himself that appears to originate in the outside world, a discovery via indirection, of his “faceless” self. Kertész links his facelessness to a loss of individuality and personal destiny resulting from the impersonal operations of “History” upon him. There is also a more intimate experience associated with being fateless and faceless: that of shame, which, as the following passage indicates, is closely related to the interruption of Kertész’s connection to his past. Kertész continues, “To my horror, I realized that ten years after I had returned from the Nazi concentration camps, and halfway still under the awful spell of Stalinist terror, all that remained of the whole experience were a few muddled impressions, a few anecdotes. Like it didn’t even happen to me, as people are wont to say.” A decade after liberation, Kertész’s past had become inaccessible to him: he had forgotten most of it, and what he remembered he was dissociated from—his memories seemed not to belong to him: “[I]like it didn’t even happen.” Kertész links his sense of loss to the forgotten traumatic events and to the feelings those events later give rise to.

“[S]peaking of the twenty minutes spent on the arrival platform of the Birkenau extermination camp—the time it took people clambering down from the train to reach the officer doing the selecting,” Kertész writes,

I more or less remembered the twenty minutes, but the novel demanded that I distrust my memory. No matter how many survivors’ accounts, reminiscences and confessions I had read, they all agreed that everything proceeded all too quickly and unnoticeably. The doors of the railroad cars were flung open, they heard shouts, the barking of dogs, men and women were abruptly separated, and in the midst of the hubbub, they

13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
found themselves in front of an officer. He cast a fleeting glance at them, pointed to something with his outstretched arm, and before they knew it they were wearing prison clothes.

... I came upon a series of photographs of human cargo arriving at the Birkenau railroad platform—photographs taken by an SS soldier and found by American soldiers in a former SS barracks in the already liberated camp at Dachau. I looked at these photographs in utter amazement. I saw lovely, smiling women and bright-eyed young men, all of them well-intentioned, eager to cooperate. Now I understood how and why those humiliating twenty minutes of idleness and helplessness faded from their memories. And when I thought how all this was repeated the same way for days, weeks, months and years on end, I gained an insight into the mechanism of horror; I learned how it became possible to turn human nature against one’s own life.\textsuperscript{15}

The parallels between the past and his present situation enabled Kertész to understand the disappearance of “their”—read: his—humiliating memories. Of living in socialist Hungary, he writes, “I saw how an entire nation could be made to deny its ideals, and watched the early, cautious moves toward accommodation. I understood that hope is an instrument of evil, and the Kantian categorical imperative—ethics in general—is but the pliable handmaiden of self-preservation.”\textsuperscript{16} The evocative present historical moment set Kertész on the path of “discovering”—rather than remembering—his prior experience of accommodation. In an interview he stated,

I don’t see a difference between autobiography and fiction. When I begin to narrate what happened to me, it already becomes something different than what actually happened. It begins to develop a shape. My memories change and so do I. The writer is really a deceiver: He narrates what he experienced and changes in the process. Through this exchange of matter between himself and reality he frees himself from injuries that others carry around with themselves for life.

To survive the concentration camp, I must follow its logic. This voluntary or involuntary collaboration is the biggest shame of the survivor; he cannot admit it. The writer can. For literature possesses a special honesty. Those are simply good sentences, you know. Good sentences

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
are more important in this case than my own shame. *Fatelessness* is not a cheerful novel, but I experienced much joy while writing it.\(^\text{17}\)

Kertész’s description of his shame as an “injury” recalls the breakdown Gyorgy suffers when the gaze of the SS’s man becomes installed within him. Insofar as shame is an internal iteration of this hostile external relation, it reveals the virulence of the hostile other, which produces new versions of itself long after the literal cessation of persecution. The exchange of matter between the writer and reality, which is a translation of “*Stoffwechsel* [metabolism],” indicates that Kertész’s well-constructed sentences do not heal his “wound” of shame so much as “free” him from it by changing its location through externalization, the very process that also characterized Kertész’s “existential self-discovery.”

In what follows I will trace how Kertész’s narrative unfolds in three stages, each of which represents a distinct form and moment of externalization. Taken together, they chart the trajectory of Gyorgy’s progress toward successful metabolization of his shame. As we will see, when considered in relation to shame, the novel indicates the power of symbolic forms of expression to contain the survivor’s self-subverting emotions in ways that will enable Gyorgy to satisfy his preeminent need to regain his autonomy and to establish bonds of love.

J. Hillis Miller points out the “disjunction [in the novel] between the language of the experiencing I and the language of the narrating I.”\(^\text{18}\)


This disjunction is temporal. It implies the existence of a gap or delay between Gyorgy’s experiencing of the events and the time of their narration. In what I designate as the first stage of Gyorgy’s metabolizing narrative, Gyorgy restricts the focus of his “narrating I” to the immediate present, that is, to the time of the events as they are occurring. In other words, the “narrating I” comes as close as possible to merging with the “experiencing I,” which enables it to avoid reflecting upon the later emotional impact of those experiences. This flight into the past aligns the narrative perspective with the temporality of the narrated events. As was also the case in Wilkomirski’s text, the focus on the past is a means of avoiding present emotional conflicts that are the by-products of past trauma. At the same time, the draining of affect from the scene brings into view what is not named: the cutting of ties to one’s fellow humans that in retrospect becomes a source of shame.

This first stage of externalization is characterized by dissociation and spans the time before and during Gyorgy’s persecution. It exemplifies the defensive response to traumatic events that Judith Herman has analyzed in her study of survivors of trauma. Herman writes that through dissociation,

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\text{[e]v\text{e}nts continue to register in awareness, but it is as though these events have been disconnected from their ordinary meanings. Perceptions may be numbed or distorted, with partial anesthesia or the loss of particular sensations. . . . The person may feel as though the event is not happening to her, as though she is observing from outside her body, or as though the whole experience is a bad dream from which she will shortly awaken. These perceptual changes combine with a feeling of indifference, emotional detachment, and profound passivity in which the person relinquishes all initiative and struggle.}^{19}
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Gyorgy relates the events leading to and during his incarceration stripped of all affect but the feeling of wanting to avoid feeling. In this sense his narrative captures the dissociation by which Gyorgy survived the individual moments that made up the continual trauma of his persecution. At the same time, the disassociation Herman identifies as a response to trauma as it occurs has implications for the trauma of the aftermath as Prager has analyzed it. Specifically, the absence of reflection by Gyorgy’s “narrating I” upon the “experiencing I” can be read as illustrating not only the

defense mechanism that enabled Gyorgy to survive traumatization as it was occurring, but also the erasure of the affect of shame that develops when past situations are perceived through the lens of the present.20

Consider, for example, Gyorgy’s account of the day and evening before his father’s departure for labor service, when neighbors and family members, including Gyorgy’s paternal grandparents, come to say their good-byes to Gyorgy’s father. Gyorgy describes his stepmother’s expressions of grief: “She even moved a hand in my direction, and I half feared that she might perhaps be wanting to hug me. She didn’t do so in the end, just let out a deep sigh, with a long, tremulous release of breath. I noticed her eyes moistening as well. It was awkward. After that, I was allowed to go” (4). Gyorgy confines his description to his stepmother’s physical actions and reactions, divorcing them from their emotional content, which he clearly does not want to register. He also does not indicate what role he might have played in discouraging his stepmother from reaching out to him. He narrates the farewell scene between his father and himself with a similar detachment:

I found myself enfolded between his arms, his hug catching me off guard and somehow unprepared after all he had said. I don’t know if my tears stemmed from that or simply from exhaustion, or maybe even because, ever since the first exhortation that I had received that morning from my stepmother, I had somehow been preparing all along to shed them unfailingly; whatever the reason, it was nevertheless good that this was indeed what happened, and I sensed that it also gratified Father to see them. (26)

Gyorgy’s tears become a springboard for intellectualization. He speculates on their occasioning circumstances, which could be his psychological state of lowered defensiveness (“his hug catching me off guard”); his physiological condition (“exhaustion”); or his predilection for defensive anticipation (“I had somehow been preparing”). Judging his tears is also a mediating activity, because judgment itself is an intellectual act and because it enables him to assume what he imagines to be his father’s point of view. Each of these responses enables Gyorgy to divorce himself emotionally from his father’s departure as it is occurring. His need to do so is urgent; it trumps his desire for his father. Of the time when his father

20. This is the very experience of forgetting that Kertész described in relation to situations such as the photographed Selektion.
strokes his head, he writes, “At that touch, for the first time today, something choked in my throat too, though it was not tears, more a kind of queasiness. I would have rather my father had no longer been here” (15).

Commenting on his grandfather’s behavior, Gyorgy notes, “What stayed with me as maybe the strangest experience of that entire evening was Grandfather’s sole act to draw attention to himself when he pressed 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. His entire body was racked by a spasm” (24). Comparing his grandfather’s actions to those of a bird and restricting his focus to his grandfather’s physical movements creates a distancing effect. Nevertheless, that the scene stays with Gyorgy in spite of his attempt to emphasize its “strangeness” indicates that there is something too familiar about it; it hits too close to home. Try as he may, Gyorgy fails to titrate all of his emotion from the scene: the diminutive, “tiny,” expresses Gyorgy’s perception of his grandfather’s vulnerability, while the disparity between the grandfather’s physical size and the spasms that grip him intimate Gyorgy’s awareness of a depth of anguish that is reinforced through the verb “rack,” which indicates that his grandfather’s reaction has both a physical and an emotional component. Although the grandfather’s emotions contrast with Gyorgy’s detachment, the repetitions within the two scenes of farewell invite a reading of the grandfather as Gyorgy’s symbolic other: both are small, and both are analogously positioned in relation to the father. Viewed in terms of Gyorgy’s efforts to dissociate from his potentially incapacitating emotions, the intensity of the grandfather’s reaction can be understood as a displacement of Gyorgy’s own unacknowledged despair over his father’s departure.

To summarize, the dissociated narrative tone of the above passages registers both the emotional jockeying that Gyorgy performs at the time of his father’s departure so as to avoid overwhelming and destabilizing despair, and his avoidance of the shame that later arose in relation to the memory of his earlier detachment from his father and others.

As Gyorgy’s survival becomes increasingly predicated upon the deaths of others, the potential for developing a belated sense of shame also increases. In the following scene, Gyorgy narrates his first exposure to death while on the train to Auschwitz. The opening sentence of the description literally names denial as Gyorgy’s method of surviving:

There is no denying that, from about the afternoon of the second day on, I . . . was constantly subjected to a particular voice coming from the
wagon behind us: not exactly pleasant. The old woman, so they said in our wagon, was ill and had presumably gone mad, undoubtedly from thirst. That explanation seemed credible. Only now did I realize how right were those who had declared at the very start of the journey how fortunate it was that neither small infants nor the extremely elderly had landed up in our wagon. The old woman finally fell silent on the morning of the third day. Among our lot, it was said at the time that she had died because she could get no water. But then, we were aware that she was also sick and old, which is how everyone, including me, found the case understandable, all things considered. (74–75)

Avoiding emotional response, Gyorgy describes the trauma of the woman’s death in physical terms: he cannot shut it out; it invades him aurally. His use of understatement—it was “not exactly pleasant”—opens a margin of psychological distance between the woman and himself. As in the scene of his father’s departure, he intellectualizes his reaction, construing her death as “proof” of the wisdom of his fellow passengers and from it extracting reassurance that his own powers of reason have remained intact. Representing the woman’s death as a logical outcome also shifts the focus away from Gyorgy himself; he can avoid thinking about the imminent threat he is under, for like the woman, he too is in danger of being driven mad from thirst. The anxiety that the woman’s death triggers in Gyorgy nevertheless registers in his euphemistic description of it as a “falling silent,” words that also egocentrically construe the death in terms of the relief it affords him. He had reacted similarly to the woman’s vocalizing of anguish, thinking only of his own good fortune in there being no children or elderly people present in his wagon.

Throughout his descriptions of his father’s departure and the fellow train passenger’s death, Gyorgy projects an image of himself as relatively invulnerable; others are more immediately imperiled than he. Later in the novel, when he has been taken to the camp infirmary, he must protect himself from the recognition that he directly profits from the death of another prisoner. Of the moment when Gyorgy was lying in the bunk beside a boy whose feverish body is warming him, he writes,

I was less enchanted with all his tossing and turning during the night, which, to be sure, did not always pay adequate consideration to my wounds. I told him as well: Hey! Cut it out, ease up there, and in the end he heeded the advice. I only saw why the next morning, when my repeated attempts to rouse him for coffee were futile. All the same, I
hastily passed his mess tin to the orderly along with my own . . . I later also accepted his bread ration on his behalf, and likewise his soup that evening, and so on for a while, until one day he began to go really strange, which was when I felt obliged finally to say something, as I could not carry on stowing him in my bed. (182)

Gyorgy never openly acknowledges that the boy’s death prolonged his own survival; instead he construes the death as having occurred in response to his own wishes: “I told him . . . [c]ut it out, ease up there, and in the end he heeded the advice.” Accepting the bread “on his behalf” dissimulates the fact that Gyorgy profits from the death; indeed, the phrase connotes the contrary: that he is acting in the boy’s interest. Gyorgy’s representation of himself effectively as a nonwitness to the deaths of the old woman and the boy in the infirmary thus enables him to dissociate from a potentially self-consuming guilt about having survived instead of others.

He has a more difficult time dissociating when his own body is invaded by agents of death. Of the time he was lying on a bunk with suppurating wounds on his hip and knee, he writes,

Still, the biggest surprise of all was the consternation, then horror, of feeling a sudden tickling sensation on my hip and then, on lifting the paper bandage, seeing they [the lice] were now on my open flesh there, feeding on the wound. I tried to snatch them away, get rid of them, at least root and winkle them out, compel them to wait and be patient at least a little bit longer, but I have to admit that never before had I sensed a more hopeless struggle or a more stubborn, even, so to say, more brazen resistance than this. After a while, indeed, I gave up and just watched the gluttony, the teeming, the voracity, the appetite, the unconcealed happiness; in a manner of speaking, it was as though it were vaguely familiar to me from somewhere. Even so, I realized that, to some extent, and taking everything into account, I could see it their way. In the end, I almost felt relieved, even my sense of revulsion very nearly passed. I was still not pleased, still remained a little bit bitter about it, understandably enough I think, but now it was somehow more generalized, without acrimony, in acquiescing to a degree in nature’s larger scheme, if I may put it that way; in any event, I quickly covered the wound up and subsequently no longer engaged in combat with them, no longer disturbed them. (183)

The horror of this scene is not only that Gyorgy is being eaten alive, but
that he feels and sees that he is being eaten alive. The feel and sight of the infested wound is horrifying, because it reminds him of his helplessness as a victim and also of the hopelessness of his situation. When he gives up struggling against the vermin and instead just watches them, the spectacle is “vaguely familiar,” which suggests that he sees an image of himself in the vermin. This may be because the spectacle mirrors his own dehumanizing struggle to survive, which, as has been discussed, requires that Gyorgy, like the vermin, feed off other prisoners’ lives. In this sense the spectacle reveals to Gyorgy a divided image of himself; he is both victim and victimizer, wound and vermin. I understand the “bitterness” that remains as a sign of the difficulty he has dissociating from feelings of anger and shame because of this division. In this regard Gyorgy’s covering of his wound is emblematic of the performative impact of Fatelessness, insofar as the text “covers” the injury of Kertész’s emotions by displacing them into a narrative about a fictional other.

Also while in the infirmary where he discovers his vermin, Gyorgy finds himself in the position of owing the continuation of his life to the death of another boy. An orderly substitutes the other boy for Gyorgy when Gyorgy has been summoned, presumably to be murdered because his injury will make it impossible for him to participate in the evacuation of the camp on foot. Gyorgy rationalizes the situation by invoking an abstract ideal: “it had all happened in due accord with justice (that was my opinion, at any rate), as I had been longer in the room, after all” (233).

Toward the end of the novel, the concentration camp is liberated, and Gyorgy sets off for his home in Budapest. With liberation, “something loosened up inside,” as a result of which he becomes more reflective than he could be as a prisoner (236). Once he reaches the city, he begins to describe his camp experiences to the people who engage him in conversation. In the course of these conversations, it becomes evident that with this “loosening up,” the feelings that emerge in relation to his fresh memory of his persecution threaten to hamper his successful return to a place in the community.

In his first exchange, Gyorgy is mostly reactive. He responds to a Holocaust denier’s queries about the gas chambers. The man dictates the terms in which Gyorgy speaks about his experience. Given that he holds his first conversation with a stranger, it is understandable that Gyorgy does not challenge the man’s point of view. As a result, the man easily extracts from Gyorgy the confirmation he seeks that the gas chambers didn’t exist.
In the next discussion, Gyorgy’s engagement deepens. The name of his first destination symbolically indicates that his coming home will necessarily involve memory and commemoration: he goes to Forget-me-not Road, where the family of Bandi Citrom, his friend from the camps, lives. At the family’s apartment, Bandi’s mother and sister tell Gyorgy that Bandi has not returned from the camps. Only Bandi’s mother believes that Bandi has survived; his sister does not. Through the conversation it becomes clear that Gyorgy does not want to alienate or wound his interlocutors. Before speaking, Gyorgy first evaluates what he imagines Bandi’s family members to be feeling and what he imagines they want to hear from him. For example, when he notices the sister struggling to contain her fears about Bandi’s death, he is about to tell her that in his view her mother “had the clearer head, she knew Bandi Citrom better,” but he “h[olds his] tongue” (245).

Riding a streetcar to his apartment building, Gyorgy next meets a journalist who engages him in extended conversation. The journalist, “his face brightening,” tells Gyorgy, in reference to his persecution, “‘[T]he main thing is that it’s over, in the past’” (247). For Gyorgy it is not over. When asked what he feels about being back in his hometown, he responds, “‘Hatred . . . Everyone’” (247). Gyorgy’s willingness to converse and his mindfulness about the impact of his words on others indicate his desire to return to his community. At the same time, on the threshold of his return, the hatred he feels marks a new iteration of his shame. Hatred signifies the self’s connection to something outside of itself, and for this reason, it is more bearable than the destabilizing, intra-subjective conflict that characterizes shame. According to Melvin Lansky, feelings of aggression such as hatred can be the outcome of a process of projective identification and can enable shame to be avoided:

Projective identification is instigated by the awareness, conscious or unconscious, of imminent or actual shame. An important function of projective identification, though by no means the only one, is that it is a mechanism that can in fantasy relocate one’s shame and pain to the other, in the conscious or unconscious conviction that this will rid one of the problem. This aspect of projective identification consists, then, of a reversal, a turning of the tables, a reversal instigated by an incipient or actual experience of shame. Putting shame into the shamer is a common defensive maneuver and a significant component of vengefulness.21

21. Melvin Lansky, “The Impossibility of Forgiveness: Shame Fantasies as Instigators of
Lansky’s elaboration of the mechanism of projective identification as a response to shame is useful in understanding the surfacing of hatred in Gyorgy. Projective identification comprises the second of the three stages of the externalization of Gyorgy’s shame, and it informs his discussion with the journalist. In an effort to unburden himself of his shame, Gyorgy projects it outward, now displacing his inner conflict into the relation between the journalist and himself. Though the journalist tries to establish solidarity with Gyorgy by expressing his appreciation of the fact that Gyorgy had endured the “‘hell of the camps,’” Gyorgy rejects such a characterization of his experience (248). In his view what happened to him was “natural” (247), meaning a piece of experience he could not disclaim by describing it in heightened metaphors. The journalist persists in seeing the camps as an aberration: “‘a concentration camp in itself is unnatural,’” he maintains (247, italics in original). This prompts Gyorgy to recognize that “there are some things you just can’t argue about with strangers, the ignorant, with those who, in a certain sense, are mere children so to say” (248). In spite of this observation, Gyorgy continues to “argue” with this stranger:

I tried to explain how different it was, for example, to arrive in a not exactly opulent but still, on the whole, agreeable, neat, and clean station where everything becomes clear only gradually, sequentially over time, step-by-step. By the time one has passed a given step, put it behind one, the next one is already there. By the time one knows everything, one has already understood it all. And while one is coming to understand everything, a person does not remain idle: he is already attending to his new business, living, acting, moving, carrying out each new demand at each new stage. Were it not for that sequencing in time, and were the entire knowledge to crash in upon a person on the spot, at one fell swoop, it might well be that neither one’s brain nor one’s heart would cope with it. (249)

While listening to Gyorgy, the journalist fishes in his pocket for his cigarettes and offers one to Gyorgy, who refuses it; then, “having taken two deep drags, he set both elbows on his knees and leaned his upper body forward, not so much as looking at me, as he said in a somehow lackluster, flat tone, ‘I see’” (249). The journalist’s smoking, his physical doubling—
over, and the draining of affect from his voice express the defensiveness that Gyorgy’s words have triggered. Gyorgy notices the journalist’s distress but still persists. He next describes what survival entailed for those prisoners who had been in the camps for many years:

I had seen prisoners who had already been—or to be more accurate were still—in concentration camps for four, six, even twelve years. Now, those people somehow had to fill each one of those four, six, or twelve years, which in the latter case means twelve times three hundred and sixty-five days, which is to say twelve times three hundred and sixty-five times twenty-four hours, and twelve times three hundred and sixty-five times twenty-four times . . . and so on back, every second, every minute, every hour, every day of it, in its entirety. From yet another angle, though, I added, this is exactly what can also help them, because if the whole twelve times three hundred and sixty-five times twenty-four times sixty times sixtysfold chunk of time had been dumped around their necks instantaneously, at a stroke, most likely they too would have been unable to stand it, either physically or mentally, in the way they actually did manage to stand it. (250)

The journalist remains stricken. “At this, still in the same position as earlier, only now instead of holding the cigarette, which he had meanwhile discarded, with his head between his hands and in an even duller, even more choking voice, he said: ‘No, it’s impossible to imagine it’” (250). Of the time he spent observing the journalist’s reaction, Gyorgy writes, “For my part, I could see that [it was impossible to imagine the situation], and I even thought to myself: so, that must be why they prefer to talk about hell instead” (250). In an effort to compose himself reminiscent of Gyorgy’s own reliance on parsing time, the journalist “straightened up, looked at his watch, and his expression changed” (250). He also tells Gyorgy that that he works for a “‘democratic paper,’” as if to assert his absence of involvement in Gyorgy’s victimization (250).

Although Gyorgy recognizes the journalist as one of the naïve and ignorant who are incapable of understanding the experiences of the victims, the fact that Gyorgy persists in arguing with him may signify that he is in the throes of projecting his “shame into the shamer.”22 Gyorgy does not intentionally set out to do this, but his overwhelming of the journalist’s imagination suggests that unconsciously this is what is occur-
ring. And while he does not derive perceptible gratification from the exchange, he also does not shy away from the opportunity it presents.

An earlier scene in the novel anticipates this means of displacing shame onto the shamer. Of the moments spent passing through a bombed-out city along the Elbe River where the inhabitants are existing among the ruins, Gyorgy writes, “I tried to take pleasure at that sight, naturally, only I could not help being made to feel—by the selfsame people—somewhat uneasy at doing so” (240). Though he attributes the check on his gratification to the inhabitants themselves, given that they are passive objects of his gaze, his uneasiness must be an expression of an inner inhibition against acting on his vengeful impulse. As such, this scene reveals the internal conflict that now hampers Gyorgy’s return to his community: on the one hand, he seeks to unburden himself of his shame through projective identification; on the other hand, he is unable to sustain his objectifying displacement onto others, because it alienates him from the very community he needs.

After leaving the journalist, Gyorgy returns to his former apartment building, where he meets two neighbors. The men tell him about his father’s death in Mauthausen and his stepmother’s recent marriage. In a manner reminiscent of the journalist’s, they urge him to “put the horrors behind [him]” so that he can move on with his life (256). As in his conversation with the journalist, Gyorgy does not accept their characterization of his experience or their advice to him. He remarks that in the camps he “didn’t notice any atrocities,” a comment that emphasizes the disparity between the immediacy of his lived reality and the abstractness of their characterization of that reality as filled with “atrocities” (256).

When the neighbors express their incomprehension at Gyorgy’s reaction, Gyorgy responds by asking about what they did during those “‘hard times.’” They answer that they “‘tried to survive,’” which prompts Gyorgy to point out that “[t]hey too had taken one step at a time” (257). He illustrates his point about their survival by referring to the physical stepping of the prisoners during the selection process at Auschwitz:

For each train—and I am not saying it was always necessarily this number, since I have no way of knowing—but at any rate in our case you have to reckon on around three thousand people. Take the men among them—a thousand, let’s say. For the sake of the example, you can reckon on one or two seconds per case, more often one than two. Ignore the very first and very last, because they don’t count; but in the middle, where I too was standing, you would therefore have to allow ten to
twenty minutes before you reach the point where it is decided whether it will be gas immediately or a reprieve for the time being. Now, all this time the queue is constantly moving, progressing, and everyone is taking steps, bigger or smaller ones, depending on what the speed of the operation demands. (257)

As in his conversation with the journalist, Gyorgy narrates these events from a perspective that enables him to assert his agency: the past consists of a series of steps he had taken in a larger “operation” in which he participated. But what distinguishes this dialogue from the first one is that Gyorgy converses with people who had been a part of his life before his deportation. Whereas in conversation with the journalist he acknowledged his hatred in general terms, his accusations are now focused and personal. He tells his former neighbors,

> [E]very one of those minutes might in fact have brought something new. In reality it didn’t, naturally, but still, one must acknowledge that it might have; when it comes down to it, each and every minute something else might have happened other than what actually did happen, at Auschwitz just as much as, let’s suppose, here at home, when we took leave of my father. (258)

Gyorgy first introduces the question of blame in a hypothetical formulation—“let’s suppose”—and also includes himself among those who had facilitated his father’s capture. As he continues, his conclusions become at once more universal and more targeted:

> I could no longer be satisfied with the notion that it had all been a mistake, blind fortune, some kind of blunder, let alone that it had not even happened . . . I made it clear to them that we can never start a new life, only ever carry on the old one. I took the steps, no one else, and I declared that I had been true to my given fate throughout. The sole blot, or one might say fly in the ointment, the sole accident with which they might reproach me was the fact that we should be sitting there talking now—but then I couldn’t help that. Did they want this whole honesty and all the previous steps I had taken to lose all meaning? Why this sudden about-face, this refusal to accept? Why did they not wish to acknowledge that if there is such a thing as fate, then freedom is not possible? If, on the other hand . . . there is such a thing as freedom, then there is no fate . . . that is to say, then we ourselves are fate. . . . It was
impossible, they must try and understand, impossible to take everything 
away from me, impossible for me to be neither winner nor loser, for me 
not to be right and for me not to be mistaken that I was neither the 
cause nor the effect of anything; they should try to see, I almost pleaded, 
that I could not swallow that idiotic bitterness, that I should merely be 
innocent. (259–61)

Gyorgy’s hatred has given way to “bitterness” that he now wants to 
avoid, indicating a shift in his attitude.23 Regarding himself as having 
been “innocent” in the past would mean holding his mother, his neigh-
bors, and his entire community responsible for not having protected him 
from victimization, a view Gyorgy does not want to entertain. Hence the 
modulation of hatred into “bitterness,” an indication of Gyorgy’s refusal 
to engage in a dynamics of blame and of his desire to achieve a stance 
of openness toward the very social body he needs to rejoin. Given this 
emotional shift, we can understand Gyorgy’s comment about his one 
reproachable act—having had this conversation in the first place—as a 
reflection of his desire to move into a position of even greater open-
ness so as to shield others from accusation and himself from isolating 
bitterness.

Initially one of the men understands that Gyorgy’s accusations origi-
nate out of his need to unburden himself. He restrains the other neigh-
bor (called Uncle Steiner as a term of familiarity though he is not 
Gyorgy’s blood relation) from taking Gyorgy’s words as an affront. Of this 
moment, Gyorgy writes: “I saw that every now and then Uncle Steiner 
was about to interrupt or elsewhere about to jump to his feet, but I 
saw the other old man restraining him, heard him saying, ‘Leave him 
be! Can’t you see he only wants to talk? Let him talk! Just leave him 
be!’” (259). Notwithstanding his desire to control his vengeful feelings, 
the ensuing conversation demonstrates how they still dominate him: the 
inclusive and equivocal “we” of the passage above gives way to an overtly 
accusatory “they” in the passage below. Once Gyorgy intimates that the 
neighbors were accessories to his and his father’s deportation, their for-
bearance ends. He tells them:

They too had taken their own steps. They too had known, foreseen, 
everything beforehand, they too had said farewell to my father as if

23. The bitterness also echoes the feeling that remains when his wound was infested with 
ermin. In that scene he was also struggling to dissociate his shame and anger.
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we had already buried him, and even later on all they [the neighbors] had squabbled about was whether I should take the suburban train or the bus to Auschwitz. . . . At this point not only Uncle Steiner but old Fleischmann as well jumped to his feet. Even now he was still striving to restrain himself, but was no longer capable of doing so: “What!” he bawled, his face was red as a beetroot and beating his chest with his fist: “So it’s us who’re the guilty ones, is it? Us, the victims!” (260)

Fleishmann, initially the most understanding of the two neighbors, now also loses control; his face reddens and he begins pounding his chest, an equivocal gesture that could signify a self-flagellation or a displaced impulse to accost Gyorgy. Seeing that “they did not wish to understand anything” Gyorgy leaves, “in the midst of a few disjointed words and motions, one more unfinished gesture and incomplete utterance from each,” all of which are signs of a traumatization reminiscent of the journalist’s reaction to Gyorgy’s description of survival (261).

Recognizing the influence of shame on Gyorgy’s interactions adds an intrasubjective dimension to the “contemporary moment” of trauma that Prager identifies with the community’s failure to provide support. Shame attests to the presence of the other within Gyorgy, in the form of his conscience, which belatedly judges—and condemns—his past actions according to standards that derive from the present. This second stage of the metabolization of shame, characterized by its conversion through projective identification into hatred, thus pits Gyorgy against the very community he wants to rejoin, and therefore, against himself.

If Fatelessness had concluded with Gyorgy’s conversations with the members of the community, the foregoing discussion of shame and its transformation into hatred would affirm the pessimism that critics identify with the authorial perspective as regards Gyorgy’s future. But the novel continues for a few paragraphs, and in so doing inaugurates a third stage in the metamorphosis of Gyorgy’s shame, one that intimates the possibility of a more hopeful future. Leaving his former apartment building, Gyorgy observes,

Down below I was greeted by the street. I needed to take a streetcar to my mother’s place, but now it dawned on me that I had no money of course, so I decided to walk. In order to gather my strength, I paused for a minute. . . . Over ahead, in the direction that I would need to take, where the street appeared to lengthen, expand, and fade away into infinity, the fleecy clouds over the indigo hills were already turning purple
and the sky, a shade of claret. Around me it was as if something had changed: the traffic had dwindled, people’s steps had slowed, their voices become quieter, their features grown softer, and it was as if their faces were turning toward one another. (261)

As Gyorgy beholds the view, he endows it with extension and dynamism: the street appears to continue forever, the colors of the clouds and the sky are in transition, and there is a general appearance of change. The movement in this spectacle reflects Gyorgy’s dawning sense of time as slowing and of the future as opening. The thinning of the traffic and the slowing pace of the pedestrians could also be seen as figuring a psychological expansion.

D. W. Winnicott characterizes such visions as instances of “creative apperception” which “more than anything else . . . makes the individual feel that life is worth living.”24 According to Winnicott, this approach to external reality is not confined to the aesthetic realm; it is a universal practice of relating to the external world. It “is present when anyone—baby, child, adolescent, adult, old man or woman—looks in a healthy way at anything or does anything deliberately.”25 Projecting himself into the spectacle before him enables Gyorgy to “gather [his] strength”; it also creates the impression that the world is receptive to him: the street “greet[es]” him. Most crucially, Gyorgy’s vision of people who look “as if their faces were turning toward one another” can be understood as a projection onto the people he observes of his own desire for recognition. Appearing as Gyorgy is about to find his mother, the turning of faces toward one another brings to mind Winnicott’s exploration of the significance of the mother’s face as the first thing the baby sees when it begins to look. According to Winnicott, in looking at her face, the baby sees not her face, per se, but itself. Functioning as a mirror for the baby, the face of the mother who has adapted well enough to her infant’s needs “reflects what is there to be seen” because, when “the mother is looking at the baby what she looks like is related to what she sees there.”26 This means that for the infants, who, in this early period of life, do not differentiate between themselves and their mother, the experience of looking is a means of “getting back what they are giving.”27 Though Gyorgy’s conversations with the journalist and the neighbor reveal how the community cannot

25. Ibid., 92.
26. Ibid., 151–58 (italics in original).
27. Ibid., 151.
function as his mirror, his capacity to become enlivened by viewing the street may be what saves him from himself, insofar as viewing reflects back to him, in a containing form, what he is giving. The scene suggests how, through creative apperception, Gyorgy externalizes potentially destabilizing emotions in a nonthreatening perceptual exchange; it is Gyorgy’s (as yet) unmet desire for recognition that colors his perception of the faces turning toward one another. Given this, we could say that creative apperception affords psychic relief by expressing, at a distance, Gyorgy’s unfulfilled desire. Before setting out to find his mother, he makes one final observation:

Yes, as I looked around this placid, twilit square, this street, weather-beaten yet full of a thousand promises, I was already feeling a growing and accumulating readiness to continue my uncontinuable life. My mother was waiting, and would no doubt greatly rejoice over me. I recollect that she had once conceived a plan that I should be an engineer, a doctor, or something like that. No doubt that is how it will be, just as she wished; there is nothing impossible that we do not live through naturally, and keeping a watch on me on my journey, like some inescapable trap, I already know there will be happiness. For even there, next to the chimneys, in the intervals between the torments, there was something that resembled happiness. Everyone asks only about the hardships and the “atrocities,” whereas for me perhaps it is that experience which will remain the most memorable. Yes, the next time I am asked, I ought to speak about that, the happiness of the concentration camps.

If indeed I am asked. And provided I myself don’t forget. (262)

This concluding paragraph of the novel indicates that the future may well hold happiness. Gyorgy’s “growing readiness” to move forward results from his ability to apperceive creatively. In the pause before he takes his next step, he sees a square “full of a thousand promises.” Considered together, the above two reflective interludes of looking, which themselves are like the pauses between Gyorgy’s steps of accommodation, raise the possibility that in the aftermath of survival, Gyorgy may be able to “[retain] something personal, perhaps secret, that is unmistakably” himself, while complying with the demands of external reality.28 That Gyorgy recognizes the compatibility of accommodating to his mother’s

wishes and to “that inescapable trap” of happiness lends support to the notion that creative apperception can create a secret, containing space for dissociated emotions.

The following passage reveals how the creation of this space of difference within Gyorgy now enables him to play host to nonthreatening others. Gyorgy muses,

It was that peculiar hour, I recognized even now, even here—my favorite hour in the camp, and I was seized by a sharp, painful, futile longing for it: nostalgia, homesickness. Suddenly, it sprang to life, it was all here and bubbling inside me, all its strange moods surprised me, its fragmentary memories set me trembling. Yes, in a certain sense, life there had been clearer and simpler. Everything came back to mind, and I considered everyone in turn, both those who were of no interest as well as those whose only recognition would come in this reckoning, the fact that I was here. (261)

Gyorgy’s very existence—“the fact that I was here”—comprises the “only recognition” of the dead: the woman on the train, the two boys in the infirmary, and even, perhaps, his father. In this regard it could be said that creative apperception makes it possible for Gyorgy to preserve the memory of others’ deaths within himself. By the same token, his recognition of the dead is a “reckoning” that is not synonymous with mourning. Because Gyorgy’s very survival was an untenable reckoning—the loss of another’s life was his gain—mourning is foreclosed, insofar as it would require that Gyorgy retrospectively confront his shame about his collusion, under duress, in those deaths. The alternative to mourning is thus to keep the dead alive inside of himself: “Suddenly, it sprang to life, it was all here and bubbling inside me.” This makes Gyorgy a living site of death with an internal custodial bond to the dead.

The opening of a memorial site of death within Gyorgy, enabled through creative apperception, reveals something about the relationship between Kertész’s shame and his writing. An elaborated form of creative apperception, writing is not an antidote, but a strengthening supplement, to shame. The creation of a fictional other in Gyorgy enables Kertész to distance himself from his shame so that he can recognize the deceased, who would otherwise vanish.

In his Nobel Banquet speech Kertész draws upon a figure from Greek mythology to characterize his relation to his past in terms that indicate an image of himself as a living site of death. He states, “I have seen the
true visage of this dreadful century, I have gazed into the eye of the Gorgon, and have been able to keep on living. Yet, I knew I would never be able to free myself from the sight; I knew this visage would always hold me captive.” It can be no accident that Kertész invokes, to characterize his condition, the very image that Primo Levi uses to describe the prisoners who died in spirit before their bodies died. Levi writes that the Muselmänner “saw the Gorgon.” But whereas Levi insists that either they “have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute,” Kertész’s self-portrait indicates that, even after gazing into the eye of the Gorgon, he was “able to keep on living.” His words suggest not that he avoids the metamorphosis into stone, but rather that his awareness of the deadly transformation he undergoes paradoxically enables him to outlive it. His survival is thus a question of knowledge: “Yet, I knew I would never be able to free myself from the sight; I knew this visage would always hold me captive” (my italics).

Whereas Levi invokes the myth of the Gorgon to signify the furthest reaches of the victim’s desubjectification, emphasizing the gap that separates him as a survivor from the “true witnesses”—the Muselmänner—Kertész’s reappropriation of the Gorgon myth simultaneously inflects it with an alternate self–other relation. Levi bears witness “in their stead,” that is, instead of the Muselmänner; Kertész, by contrast, conceives of himself as a living Muselmann. Kertész relates an occurrence that affirms the aptness of the image of himself as a living Muselmann. While Kertész was preparing his Nobel Prize Lecture, the director of the Buchenwald Memorial center sent him a copy of a daily report mistakenly listing “the death of Prisoner #64,921,” which was the number Kertész was assigned in the camps; about this erroneous announcement of his own death Kertész comments, “I died once, so I could live. Perhaps that is my real story. If it is, I dedicate this work, born of a child’s death, to the millions who died and to those who still remember them.”

In the scene in which Gyorgy conceals the corpse in his bed, he executes to the letter what Levi describes in *Survival in Auschwitz* as the emblematic state of the Muselmann. Levi writes:

> It is man who kills, man who creates or suffers injustice; it is no longer man who, having lost all restraint, shares his bed with a corpse. Whoever waits for his neighbour to die in order to take his piece of bread is, albeit

30. Ibid., 83–84.
guiltless, further from the model of thinking man than the most primitive pigmy or the most vicious sadist.

Part of our existence lies in the feelings of those near to us. That is why the experience of someone who has lived for days during which man was merely a thing in the eyes of man is non-human.32

Levi’s “non-human” is Gyorgy, Kertész’s fictional other, whose very disassociation from feelings of shame reflects his most human need to resume the place he lost in his community and to do so by becoming a living site of the dead.

As a survivor of his encounter with the Gorgon, Kertész is a modern Perseus. Whereas Perseus could avoid the gaze of the Gorgon, Kertész could not, but he outlived his transformation nevertheless, existing as a man of stone. It could be said that the elegiac capacity of Kertész’s text, dedicated as it is to those who died, including Kertész himself, makes such an existence possible. In this regard, Italo Calvino’s commentary on Perseus is apt:

The relationship between Perseus and the Gorgon is a complex one and does not end with the beheading of the monster. Medusa’s blood gives birth to a winged horse, Pegasus—the heaviness of stone is transformed into its opposite. With one blow of his hoof on Mount Helicon, Pegasus makes a spring gush forth, where the Muses drink. In certain versions of the myth, it is Perseus who rides the miraculous Pegasus, so dear to the Muses, born from the accursed blood of Medusa. (Even the winged sandals, incidentally, come from the world of monsters, for Perseus obtained them from Medusa’s sisters, the Graiae, who had one tooth and one eye among them.) As for the severed head, Perseus does not abandon it but carries it concealed in a bag. . . . Here, certainly, the myth is telling us something, something implicit in the images that can’t be explained in any other way. Perseus succeeds in mastering that horrendous face by keeping it hidden, just as in the first place he vanquished it by viewing it in a mirror. Perseus’s strength always lies in a refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live; he carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden.33

Like the concealing bag that Perseus keeps with him, Fatelessness per-

forms a holding function, containing within its pages a story steeped in the Medusan blood of dissociated shame. Calvino calls attention to the power that comes to Perseus precisely because he keeps the Medusa head with him: “When his enemies are about to overcome him, he has only to display it, holding it by its snaky locks, and this bloodstained booty becomes an invincible weapon in the hero’s hand.”

A passage in *Fatelessness*, about György’s detention before his deportation, reads as an allegory of the novel’s analogous apotropaic power. In the customs post where he is being held shortly after his arrest on the streets of Budapest, György notices a few interesting faces. “One of them . . . did not join in the conversation, for instance, but instead merely read a book that, it seems, he just happened to have with him. He was a very tall, gaunt guy in a yellow windbreaker, with a sharp slit of a mouth stretching between two deep, ill-tempered-looking furrows in his bristly face” (47). The perpendicular lines of the man’s face in relation to the straight line of his mouth form the letter “U,” the signifier that Hungarian concentration camp prisoners wore on their chests. The symbolic letter, along with the man’s gauntness and his yellow jacket, reminiscent of the yellow badge Jews were made to wear, makes it likely that he is a figure or double of Kertész. When the prisoners are eventually marched out of the building, the man makes “a single long leap . . . he was off to the side, lost somewhere in the seething eddy of machines and humanity” (55). The allegorical author escapes to freedom, thanks to the Medusan book he possesses, which endows him with the ability to fend off his enemies. Read as a self-reflexive commentary on Kertész’s relation to his writing, the scene represents the expressive possibilities of fiction as enabling Kertész to carry the reality of his shame with him, to accept it as his particular burden. This, in turn, makes the future—and future love—possible, “somewhere in the seething eddy of machines and humanity.”

34. Ibid.

35. This signifier later becomes an explicit topic of conversation, when an adult prisoner asks György, “‘Do you know what this here,’ pointing to his chest, ‘this letter, [U] signifies?’ Sure I did, I told him: ‘Ungar, Hungarian.’ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘Unschuldig’ meaning ‘innocent,’ then gave a snort of laughter followed by prolonged nodding of the head with a brooding expression, as if the notion were somehow highly gratifying, though I have no idea why” (142–43).