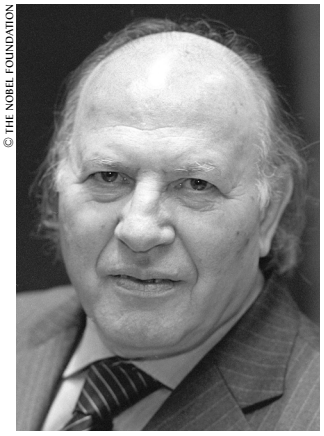
nobel lecture 2002

Heureka!

IMRE KERTÉSZ



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IMRE KERTÉSZ, the first Hungarian to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, was born in 1929 into a Jewish family in Budapest. During 1944–45 he was interned in Auschwitz and Buchenwald. He then worked as a journalist in Hungary until 1951, when he was dismissed after his newspaper became a Communist Party organ. Subsequently he has lived as a translator and writer. His first novel, *Sorstalanság* (1975; *Fateless*), is based on his experiences in the Nazi camps. Its protagonist returns as a middle-aged writer in two later novels, *A kudarc* (1988; "Failure") and *Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért* (1990; *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*). His other writings include diaries in fictional form of events from 1961 to 1995.

This translation of Kertész's Nobel Lecture was provided by the Nobel Foundation.

I MUST BEGIN WITH A CONFESSION, A STRANGE CONFESSION PERHAPS, BUT A CANDID ONE. FROM THE MOMENT I STEPPED on the airplane to make the journey here and accept this year's Nobel Prize in Literature, I have been feeling the steady, searching gaze of a dispassionate observer on my back. Even at this special moment, when I find myself being the center of attention, I feel I am closer to this cool and detached observer than to the writer whose work, of a sudden, is read around the world. I can only hope that the speech I have the honor to deliver on this occasion will help me dissolve the duality and fuse the two selves within me.

For now, though, I still have trouble understanding the gap that I sense between the high honor and my life and work. Perhaps I lived too long under dictatorships, in a hostile, relentlessly alien intellectual environment, to have developed a distinct literary consciousness; even to contemplate such a thing would have been useless. Besides, all I heard from all sides was that what I gave so much thought to, the "topic" that forever preoccupied me, was neither timely nor very attractive. For this reason, and also because I happen to believe it, I have always considered writing a highly personal, private matter.

Not that such a matter necessarily precludes seriousness—even if this seriousness did seem somewhat ludicrous in a world where only lies were taken seriously. Here the notion that the world is an objective reality existing independently of us was an axiomatic philosophical truth. Whereas I, on a lovely spring day in 1955, suddenly came to the realization that there exists only one reality, and that is me, my own life, this fragile gift bestowed for an uncertain time, which had been seized, expropriated by alien forces, and circumscribed, marked up, branded—and which I had to take back from "History," this dreadful Moloch, because it was mine and mine alone, and I had to manage it accordingly.

Needless to say, all this turned me sharply against everything in that world, which, though not objective, was undeniably a reality. I am speaking of Communist Hungary, of "thriving and flourishing" Socialism. If the world is an objective reality that exists independently of us, then humans themselves, even in their own eyes, are nothing more than

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objects, and their life stories merely a series of disconnected historical accidents, which they may wonder at, but which they themselves have nothing to do with. It would make no sense to arrange the fragments in a coherent whole, because some of it may be far too objective for the subjective Self to be held responsible for it.

A year later, in 1956, the Hungarian Revolution broke out. For a single moment the country turned subjective. Soviet tanks, however, restored objectivity before long.

I do not mean to be facetious. Consider what happened to language in the twentieth century, what became of words. I daresay that the first and most shocking discovery made by writers in our time was that language, in the form it came down to us, a legacy of some primordial culture, had simply become unsuitable to convey concepts and processes that had once been unambiguous and real. Think of Kafka, think of Orwell, in whose hands the old language simply disintegrated. It was as if they were turning it round and round in an open fire, only to display its ashes afterward, in which new and previously unknown patterns emerged.

But I should like to return to what for me is strictly private—writing. There are a few questions, which someone in my situation will not even ask. Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, devoted an entire little book to the question: For whom do we write? It is an interesting question, but it can also be dangerous, and I thank my lucky stars that I never had to deal with it. Let us see what the danger consists of. If a writer were to pick a social class or group that he would like, not only to delight but also influence, he would first have to examine his style to see whether it is a suitable means by which to exert influence. He will soon be assailed by doubts, and spend his time watching himself. How can he know for sure what his readers want, what they really like? He cannot very well ask each and every one. And even if he did, it wouldn't do any good. He would have to rely on *his* image of his would-be readers, the expectations *he* ascribed to them, and imagine what would have the effect on *him* that *he* would like to achieve. For whom does a writer write, then? The answer is obvious: he writes for himself.

At least I can say that I have arrived at this answer fairly straightforwardly. Granted, I had it easier—I had no readers and no desire to influence anyone. I did not begin writing for a specific reason, and what I wrote was not addressed to anyone. If I had an aim at all, it was to be faithful, in language and form, to the subject at hand, and nothing more. It was important to make this clear during the ridiculous and sad period when literature was state-controlled and "engagé."

It would be more difficult to answer another, perfectly legitimate though still rather more dubious question: *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

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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 things I have already mentioned—the need to step out of the mesmerizing crowd, out of History, which renders you faceless and fateless. 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.

It is clear that such visionary moments have a long prehistory. Sigmund Freud would trace them back to a repressed traumatic experience. And he may well be right. I, too, am inclined toward the rational approach; mysticism and unreasoning rapture of all kinds are alien to me. So when I speak of a vision, I must mean something real that assumes a supernatural guise—the sudden, almost violent eruption of a slowly ripening thought within me. Something conveyed in the ancient cry, "Eureka!"—"I've got it!" But what?

I once said that so-called Socialism for me was the petite madeleine cake that, dipped into Proust's tea, evoked in him the flavor of bygone years. For reasons having to do with the language I spoke, I decided, after the suppression of the 1956 revolt, to remain in Hungary. Thus I was able to observe, not as a child this time but as an adult, how a dictatorship functions. 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.

Can one imagine greater freedom than that enjoyed by a writer in a relatively limited, rather tired, even decadent dictatorship? By the nineteen-sixties, the dictatorship in Hungary had reached a state of consolidation that could almost be called a societal consensus. The West later dubbed it, with good-humored forbearance, "goulash Communism." It seemed that after the initial foreign disapproval, Hungary's own version quickly turned into the West's favorite brand of Communism. In the miry depths of this consensus, one either gave up the struggle or found the winding paths to inner freedom. A writer's overhead, after all, is very low; to practice his profession, all he needs are paper and pencil. The nausea and depression to which I awoke each morning led me at once into the world I intended to describe. I had to discover that I had placed a man groaning under the logic of one type of totalitarianism in another totalitarian system, and this turned the language of my novel into a highly allusive medium. If I look back now and size up honestly the situation I was in at the time, I have to conclude that in the West, in a free society, I probably would not have been able to write the novel known by readers today as *Fateless*, the novel singled out by the Swedish Academy for the highest honor.

No, I probably would have aimed at something different. Which is not to say that I would not have tried to get at the truth, but perhaps at a different kind of truth. In the free marketplace of books and ideas, I, too, might have wanted to produce a showier fiction. For example, I might have tried to break up time in my novel, and narrate only the most powerful scenes. But the hero of my novel does not live his own time in the concentration camps, for neither his time nor his language, not even his own person, is really his. He doesn't remember; he exists. So he has to languish, poor boy, in the dreary trap of linearity, and cannot shake off the painful details. Instead of a spectacular series of great and tragic moments, he has to live through everything, which is oppressive and offers little variety, like life itself.

But the method led to remarkable insights. Linearity demanded that each situation that arose be completely filled out. It did not allow

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me, say, to skip cavalierly over twenty minutes of time, if only because those twenty minutes were there before me, like a gaping, terrifying black hole, like a mass grave. I am speaking 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. 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 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 remembered these twenty minutes differently. Turning to authentic sources, I first read Tadeusz Borowski's stark, unsparing and self-tormenting narratives, among them the story entitled "This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen." Later, 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.

So I proceeded, step by step, on the linear path of discovery; this was my heuristic method, if you will. I realized soon enough that I was not the least bit interested in whom I was writing for and why. One question interested me: What have I still got to do with literature? For it was clear to me that an uncrossable line separated me from literature and the ideals, the spirit associated with the concept of literature. The name of this demarcation line, as of many other things, is Auschwitz. When we write about Auschwitz, we must know that Auschwitz, in a certain sense at least, suspended literature. One can only write a black novel about Auschwitz, or—you should excuse the expression—a cheap serial, which begins in Auschwitz and is still not over. By which I mean that nothing has happened since Auschwitz that could reverse or refute Auschwitz. In my writings the Holocaust could never be present in the past tense.

It is often said of me—some intend it as a compliment, others as a complaint—that I write about a single subject: the Holocaust. I have no quarrel with that. Why shouldn't I accept, with certain qualifications, the place assigned to me on the shelves of libraries? Which writer today is not a writer of the Holocaust? One does not have to choose the Holocaust as one's subject to detect the broken voice that has dominated modern European art for decades. I will go so far as to say that I know of no genuine work of art that does not reflect this break. It is as if, after a night of terrible dreams, one looked around the world, defeated, helpless. I have never tried to see the complex of problems referred to as the Holocaust merely as the insolvable conflict between Germans and Jews. I never believed that it was the latest chapter in the history of Jewish suffering, which followed logically from their earlier trials and tribulations. I never saw it as a one-time aberration, a large-scale pogrom, a precondition for the creation of Israel. What I discovered in Auschwitz is the human condition, the end point of a great adventure, where the European traveler arrived after his two-thousand-year-old moral and cultural history.

Now the only thing to reflect on is where we go from here. The problem of Auschwitz is

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not whether to draw a line under it, as it were; whether to preserve its memory or slip it into the appropriate pigeonhole of history; whether to erect a monument to the murdered millions, and if so, what kind. The real problem with Auschwitz is that it happened, and this cannot be altered—not with the best, or worst, will in the world. This gravest of situations was characterized most accurately by the Hungarian Catholic poet János Pilinszky when he called it a "scandal." What he meant by it, clearly, is that Auschwitz occurred in a Christian cultural environment, so for those with a metaphysical turn of mind it can never be overcome.

Old prophecies speak of the death of God. Since Auschwitz we are more alone, that much is certain. We must create our values ourselves, day by day, with that persistent though invisible ethical work that will give them life, and perhaps turn them into the foundation of a new European culture. I consider the prize with which the Swedish Academy has seen fit to honor my work as an indication that Europe again needs the experience that witnesses to Auschwitz, to the Holocaust were forced to acquire. The decision—permit me to say this—bespeaks courage, firm resolve even—for those who made it wished me to come here, though they could have easily guessed what they would hear from me. What was revealed in the Final Solution, in *l'univers concentrationnaire*, cannot be misunderstood, and the only way survival is possible, and the preservation of creative power, is if we recognize the zero point that is Auschwitz. Why couldn't this clarity of vision be fruitful? At the bottom of all great realizations, even if they are born of unsurpassed tragedies, there lies the greatest European value of all, the longing for liberty, which suffuses our lives with something more, a richness, making us aware of the positive fact of our existence, and the responsibility we all bear for it.

It makes me especially happy to be expressing these thoughts in my native language: Hungarian. I was born in Budapest, in a Jewish family, whose maternal branch hailed from the Transylvanian city of Kolozsvár (Cluj) and the paternal side from the southwestern corner of the Lake Balaton region. My grandparents still lit the Sabbath candles every Friday night, but they changed their name to a Hungarian one, and it was natural for them to consider Judaism their religion and Hungary their homeland. My maternal grandparents perished in the Holocaust; my paternal grandparents' lives were destroyed by Mátyás Rákosi's Communist rule, when Budapest's Jewish old age home was relocated to the northern border region of the country. I think this brief family history encapsulates and symbolizes this country's modern-day travails. What it teaches me, though, is that there is not only bitterness in grief, but also extraordinary moral potential. Being a Jew to me is once again, first and foremost, a moral challenge. If the Holocaust has by now created a culture, as it undeniably has, its aim must be that an irredeemable reality give rise by way of the spirit to restoration—a catharsis. This desire has inspired me in all my creative endeavors.

Though I am nearing the end of my speech, I must confess I still have not found the reassuring balance between my life, my works and the Nobel Prize. For now I feel profound gratitude—gratitude for the love that saved me and sustains me still. But let us consider that in this difficult-to-follow life journey, in this "career" of mine, if I could so put it, there is something stirring, something absurd, something which cannot be pondered without one being touched by a belief in an otherworldly order, in providence, in metaphysical justice—in other words, without falling into the trap of self-deception, and thus running aground, going under, severing the deep and tortuous ties with the millions who perished and who never knew mercy. It is not so easy to be an exception. But if we were destined to be exceptions, we must make our peace with the absurd order of chance, which reigns over our lives with the whim of a death squad, exposing us to inhuman powers, monstrous tyrannies.

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And yet something very special happened while I was preparing this lecture, which in a way reassured me. One day I received a large brown envelope in the mail. It was sent to me by Doctor Volkhard Knigge, the director of the Buchenwald Memorial Center. He enclosed a small envelope with his congratulatory note, and described what was in the envelope, so, in case I didn't have the strength to look, I wouldn't have to. The envelope contained a copy of the original daily report on the camp's prisoners for February 18, 1945. In the "Abgänge," that is, the "Decrement" column, I learned about the death of Prisoner #64,921—Imre Kertész, factory worker, born in 1927. The two false data: the year of my birth and my occupation were entered in the official registry when I was brought to Buchenwald. I had made myself two years older so I wouldn't be classified as a child, and had said worker rather than student to appear more useful to them.

In short, 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. But, since we are talking about literature, after all, the kind of literature that, in the view of your Academy, is also a testimony, my work may yet serve a useful purpose in the future, and—this is my heart's desire—may even speak to the future. Whenever I think of the traumatic impact of Auschwitz, I end up dwelling on the vitality and creativity of those living today. Thus, in thinking about Auschwitz, I reflect, paradoxically, not on the past but the future.

Translated by Ivan Sanders

Heuréka!

MINDENEK ELŐTT EGY VALLOMÁSSAL tartozom, egy, talán különös, de őszinte vallomással. Amióta repülőgépre szálltam, hogy itt, Stockholmban átvegyem az ez évi irodalmi Nobel díjat, szakadatlanul egy szenvtelen megfigyelő szúrós tekintetét érzem a hátamon; s ebben az ünnepi pillanatban, amely hirtelen a közfigyelem fókuszába állít, inkább e hűvös megfigyelővel, semmint az egyszeriben világszerte olvasott íróval érzem magam azonosnak. S csak remélni tudom, hogy a beszéd, amelyet e kitüntető alkalommal elmondhatok, a segítségemre lesz, hogy e kettősséget, ezt a bennem élő két személyt végül majd egyesítsem.

Egyelőre magam sem értem eléggé világosan, hogy miféle apóriát érzek e magas kitüntetés és a művem, illetve az életem közt. Talán túl sokáig éltem diktatúrákban, ellenséges és reménytelenül idegen szellemi környezetben ahhoz, hogy szert tehettem volna némi irodalmi öntudatra: ezen egyszerűen nem volt érdemes töprengenem. Emellett mindenfelől az értésemre adták, hogy az, amin gondolkodom, az úgynevezett „téma", amely foglalkoztat, időszerűtlen és nem attraktív. Így hát ezért is, és mert a saját meggyőződésemmel is egybevágott, az írást mindig is a legszigorúbb magánügyemnek tekintettem.

Magánügy: ez természetesen még nem zárja ki a komolyságot, ha az ilyen komolyság egy kissé nevetségesnek tűnt is abban a világban, ahol egyedül a hazugságot vették komolyan. A filozófiai axióma úgy hangzott itt, hogy a világ a tőlünk függetlenül létező objektív valóság. Én viszont 1955 egy szép tavaszi napján váratlanul arra a gondolatra jutottam, hogy egyetlen valóság létezik csupán, ez a valóság pedig én magam vagyok, az én életem, ez a törékeny és bizonytalan időre szóló ajándék, amelyet idegen, ismeretlen erők kisajátítottak, államosítottak, meghatároz-

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