

«Auschwitz, I said to my wife, manifests itself to me
in the image of a father»: Queer Approaches to Interpreting
Kaddish for an Unborn Child by Imre Kertész¹

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Abstract

In line with literary critical interpretations of Imre Kertész's works as a series of interconnected texts, this study aims to enter into dialogue with Kertész's novel *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* and analyze it as a continuation of his novel *Fatelessness*, where the decision of the protagonist «to continue my uncontinuable life» is elaborated on, and an alternative life path is conceived. Particular attention is paid to textual references to gender roles and identities by drawing on gender research and queer theory, in particular the concepts of queer negativity and queer time. Finally, the study makes a contribution to discussions on the intertextuality of *Kaddish* by drawing parallels between the novel and the play *The Tragedy of Man* by Imre Madách with regard to the question of fatherhood.

Keywords

Holocaust; Hungarian literature; Imre Kertész; Narrative Theory; Queer Studies

1. Introduction

In literary criticism, the works of Imre Kertész are often viewed as a series of interconnected texts in which the questions raised by earlier works are brought up and elaborated on in later works, thereby forming a cohesive

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whole; in line with this argument, in this study I shall analyze Kertész's novel *Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért* (1990; *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*, 2004a) as a continuation of the novel *Sorstalanság* (1975; *Fatelessness*, 2004b) in which the decision of the protagonist «to continue my uncontinuable life»² is elaborated and an alternative life path is conceived. As a literary work, *Kaddish* poses a challenge to any objective critical approach: with its constant self-corrections, frequent changes of subject, and use of tropes that hinder the reader's forward progress, the text seems to resist our attempts at assimilation, and instead invites the reader to engage in mutual contemplation. As the public reception of Kertész's works shows, there have been studies that have tried to engage in mutual contemplation with the author, and in doing so created new critical genres that merge literary texts and biographical information with the personal experiences of the critic³. These studies have likely realized that the key to connecting with Kertész's texts is entering into dialogue with them, rather than following the strict rules of literary critical analysis. Keeping the unique characteristics of Kertész's works in mind, in this study I eschewed attempts at assimilating the text

² Orig. «folytatni fogom folytathatatlan életemet» (Kertész [1975] 1993, e-book). Where not otherwise indicated, translations are by the author of the article.

³ In honor of Imre Kertész's eightieth birthday, Ágnes Heller (2009) published a volume of subjective essays in which she interpreted the works of Kertész through the lens of her own personal history and their common historical experiences. In lieu of writing studies and essays, F. László Földényi (2007) compiled a dictionary of commonly recurring concepts in the works of Kertész, acting as a sort of co-creator by writing entries and descriptions of key concepts that, like exocentric compounds, condense a lot of information and thereby carry several layers of meaning. In the dictionary, each entry includes references to other entries, creating a weblike system of references that frees us from the constraints of strictly structured scientific articles and allows us to jump back and forth in Kertész's works. The contributors of the first English volume on the works of Imre Kertész edited by Louise O. Vasvári and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek (2005) approach the author and his experience in the Holocaust in the context of Jewish identity in Hungary and in Central and Eastern Europe. Last but not least, Clara Royer (2017) wrote a special biography of Kertész in which she traced the major events of the author's life through his literary references to contemporary places and events. She draws a parallel between, on the one hand, biographical events and the acquaintances and friends of the author, and on the other, Kertész's writing and the works he quotes in his novels. Similarly to Heller, Royer also included her own subjective feelings and impressions in her volume.

of *Kaddish* in favor of presenting my analytical perspective as my own dialogue with the text.

In this study, I aim to contribute to interpretations of *Kaddish* by analyzing its textual references to gender roles and drawing on gender theories that criticize any rigid distinction of gender roles. Queer theory is a particularly promising avenue for my analysis, as the novel is about the rejection of the fundamentally masculine role of fatherhood, and by extension the rejection of the internalized heteronormative masculine roles and behaviors passed down from father to son. New approaches to queer theory that focus on the representation of culturally marginalized gender identities and positions (Jagose 1997, 1) and refuse normativity and the foundational solidity of identity categories (Hall, Jagose 2013, xvii) may also offer insight into the novel's way of questioning the validity of a multi-generational teleological worldview; in this regard, I shall focus on the issues of queer time and queer negativity.

In the first part of this study, I shall examine the fundamental tropes of textual organization in *Kaddish* and the theme of having children, with special attention paid to the connection between framing and the figura etymologica. In the second part, I shall analyze through the lens of queer theory the narrative poetical figures that destabilize authoritarian and patriarchal worldview; and in the final part, I aim to contribute to discussions on the intertextual context of *Kaddish* by examining the parallels between the novel and the play *Az ember tragédiája* (1861; *The Tragedy of Man*, 1933) by Imre Madách with regard to the question of fatherhood. My approach focuses on the formal-rhetorical aspects of the novel looking for the signs of rigid and poisoning masculinity as were presented and challenged by the novel. Sándor Radnóti's contextual reading is a good example for a different approach. He elaborates on the ethical issues raised by the novel, especially on the ethical problem of refusing the existence of the future generation (2009, 130).

Before we begin, it is worth highlighting a few studies that are similar to mine in terms of approach and perspective, that is, studies that see the novels *Fatelessness*, *A kudarc* (1988; *Fiasco*, 2011) and *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* as a set of closely connected texts. Zsuzsa Selyem (2003, 72) agrees with the German reception of Kertész's works and refers to the

three novels as a trilogy about people suffering under fascism and communism; in her work, she explores the three novels together to see what they convey in terms of anthropological knowledge, human possibilities, and human constraints. On the other hand, according to Márton Kopány, each of the three novels is a variation and elaboration of the same core theme, not unlike the way fugues are structured in music, meaning that he considers the memory of Auschwitz not as the novels' theme but rather their material. The novels' complex sentences are composed with great artistic care and aim for the utmost precision, and yet they contain relatively little information and a relatively great amount of deliberation, references, and interjections: «The innermost tendency and most striking ability of Kertész is to describe not what we call reality, but the reality manifesting within his own thoughts»⁴.

On the last page of *Fatelessness*, having returned to Budapest from the concentration camp, the protagonist decides to visit his mother, and as the image of the mother surfaces in his mind, he hears, as a calling to continue his life, that maternal voice living on and within the subject as same and other, which rouses in him the 'wish to live':

Yes, as I looked around this placid, twilight 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. (Kertész 2004a, 262)⁵

I agree with the idea that Kertész's works can be viewed as a series of interconnected texts, which is why I shall analyze *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* as the elaboration of the idea of «[continuing] my uncontinuable life», given

⁴ Orig. «Kertésznek legbensőbb hajlama és legszembetűnőbb képessége, hogy ne az úgynevezett valóságot, hanem a gondolataiban testet öltő valóságot írja le» (Kopány 2003, 31).

⁵ Orig. «Igen, ahogy körülnéztem ezen a szelíd, alkonyati téren, ezen a viharvert s mégis ezer ígérettel teli utcán, máris éreztem, mint növekszik, mint gyülemlik bennem a készség: folytatni fogom folytathatatlan életemet. Anyám vár, s bizonyára igen megörvendő majd nekem, szegény» (Kertész [1975] 1993, e-book).

that the novel itself is a paradoxical play at presenting a potential life path while pointing out its contradictions (Eaglestone 2005, 47). My approach was also inspired by the work of Péter Szirák, whose monograph hails the tension created by the paradox of a soliloquizing, logorrheic narrative self constrained by an orderly textual composition as the greatest literary achievement of the novel (2003, 127). This study also emphasizes the integral role of the paradoxical in interpreting the novel, because it is only the paradox that can truly capture the trauma of surviving Auschwitz and the unprocessable nature of it; the possibility as well as the impossibility of survival and moving on, and the desire to process childhood traumas and its infeasibility, all of which ultimately lead to the radical rejection of patriarchal society.

2. The Issue of Gender and Conception Caught in a Web of Repetitions

Several researchers have pointed out that the text of *Kaddish* is interwoven with various forms of repetitions, and many analyses have focused on the repeated forms of address, the constantly emerging and reemerging memories, and the repetitive patterns of the protagonist's thoughts and arguments. As Nelli Koltai (2002) points out, the novel's constant repetition of explanations and interpretations reflects the tradition of rabbinic literature; in other words, Kertész's work is tied to Jewish literary tradition both in terms of genre and textual composition. According to Pál Kelemen (2003, 420), repetition is an important trope of the act of narration. The basic narrative pattern of *Kaddish* consists of various figures of repetition such as copying, the insertion of original texts and borrowed quotes into the narrative followed by the constant repetition of both, and repeatedly restarting the monologue. Selyem summarizes the various forms of repetition in the novel as follows:

In *Kaddish*, the accumulated knowledge of the twentieth century and of humanity cyclically repeats itself in unique forms, such as the repetitions of «No!» or «a bald-headed woman seated in front of the mirror in a red negligee», writing as a burial pit one digs in the air, and the repetition of words calling out to the

unborn child, or the greenish-blue carpet which the woman traversed towards [the protagonist] as if she were making her way on the sea.⁶

According to Szirák, the repeating structures of *Kaddish* can be considered as an attempt to translate musicality into written language: «the repetitive structure and rhythm of thought use the mechanism of action of the return of that which is *same but different*»⁷. The novel can be divided into eight larger sections or chunks, each of which begins with the singular reply of «No!»⁸. The text is structured around the various figures of repetition in such a way that the story essentially progresses by sending us back into the past over and over, first when the text recounts the period spent in the concentration camp, and later when it explores the even earlier years of childhood. Through these recounted memories, we see the gradual emergence of a connection to the narrative present; in other words, by reading on, we begin to realize why the protagonist's questions about having children resurface over and over, and why we keep receiving the same rejective reply. It is only when we arrive at the last conversation taking place in the narrative present that light is shed on the earliest events of the past, thus forming a complete picture of what drove the homodiegetic narrator to reject a shared future with his beloved wife.

2.1 Figura Etymologica

When we examine the syntax of *Kaddish*, we are immediately struck by the frequency of repetitive tropes following the logic of the figura etymologica: the use of words that share the same base or stem, but appear in an inflectional or derivational form. Among some women writers, a

⁶ Orig. «A *Kaddisban* a 20. századról és az emberről fölhalmozott tudás ismétlődik ciklikusan egy-egy sajátos formában, mint például a »Nem!«-ek, vagy a »kopasz nő a tükör előtt piros pongyolában«, az írás mint sírásás a levegőbe, és ismétlődnek a meg nem született gyermeket megszólító szavak, a zöldeskék szőnyeg, melyen a nő, mintha tengeren kelne át, úgy lépked feléje» (Selyem 2003, 95).

⁷ Orig. «[...] az ismétléses szerkesztés, a gondolatrítmus az *ugyanaz másként* való visszatérésének hatásmechanizmusával él» (Szirák 2003, 131, emphasis in the original).

⁸ Orig. »Nem!« (ivi, 132).

multi-generational view of the subject is not uncommon; for instance, in Anna Lesznai's work (1908), this phenomenon is specifically tied to the trope of the *figura etymologica*, as seen in her poem «Dédanyám» (My great-grandmother). The rhetorical device of inflecting the same stem is itself a demonstration of the theme of the poem, which is about how, across generations, multiple life paths can emerge from the same familial roots. According to the logic of the plant metaphor, the root, stem, leaf, and flower grow from the same source as a continuation of each other, similarly to how a family progresses from great-grandmothers to great-grandchildren.

In the novel, the trope of the *figura etymologica* negates the idea of a multi-generational subject, because the narrator's argument rejects the idea of a life continued and culminating in descendants. If we look to the trope of the *figura etymologica* as a means of interpreting the possibility of having children, we shall find that the progress of the stream of consciousness is constantly hindered by interruptions: the subject of the stream of consciousness keeps changing in the process of elaboration, and it is also continuously modified by variations of the same word stem.

I don't know why it is that every time everything is different in every respect with me, or perhaps if I do know, it's simpler that I know without knowing it. That would spare me a lot of explanations. But, it would seem, there is no getting around *explanations*, *we are constantly explaining and excusing ourselves*; life itself, that *inexplicable* complex of being and feeling, demands *explanations* of us, those around us demand *explanations*, and in the end we ourselves demand *explanations* of ourselves, until in the end we succeed in annihilating everything around us, ourselves included, or in other words *explain ourselves to death*, — *I explain to the philosopher* with that compulsion to speak, to me so abhorrent and yet irrepressible, that always grips me when I have nothing to say for myself... (Kertész 2004b, 3, emphasis mine)⁹

⁹ Orig. «Nem tudom, miért van nálam minden, mindig, mindennel másképpen, illetve ha tudom is tán, egyszerűbb, ha úgy tudom, hogy nem tudom. Mert ez sok magyarázattól megkímélne. De, úgy látszik, a *magyarázatok* elől nem lehet kitérni, állandóan magyarázunk és magyarázkodunk, *magyarázatot* követel tőlünk maga az élet is, ez a *megmagyarázhatatlan* jelenség- és érzetkomplexum, *magyarázatot* követel a környezetünk, és végül magunk is ma-

In the excerpt above, which is an explanation of explanations, we see several denotations and connotations of the word *explanation*, which itself renders the explanation ridiculous as the various meanings diverge from each other: the explanation of what is already known, the need for conquering the unknown, overexplanation, and logorrhea altogether create a scattered web of meanings, a trope that mirrors and exposes the entire work as an attempt at explaining the unexplainable.

If we were to draw a connection between the trope of the *figura etymologica* and our innate self-preservation instinct or the genetic code for the desire to conceive descendants, we would find that the text of *Kaddish* is rife with modified concepts functioning according to the logic of the *figura etymologica* and replete with codes related to conception; in other words, any argument about rejecting the idea of having children can only be voiced by way of a continuous rhetorical counter-motion. The protagonist's story about the memory of Auschwitz and his childhood traumas is conveyed by a language that is saturated with tropes revolving around the subject of having children, from which we may conclude that the possibility of processing one's trauma and the chance of survival is closely connected to the question of whether the concept of the next generation is conceivable by that person or not.

2.2 Frame Narratives

The basic communication situation of *Kaddish* is itself contradictory inasmuch as the text and the narrator's contemplations are addressed to the unborn child, who is also the subject of the text. In other words, the subject and the audience addressed by the narrator in the text are one and the same. The slight difference that arises from the change of subject pronouns from 'it' [*róla* in Hungarian] to 'you' [*rólad* in Hungarian] highlights the fundamental problem of the novel, namely that the subject discussed and

gyarázatot követelünk önmagunktól, míg végül sikerül magunk körül mindent, és önmagunkat is megsemmisítenünk, vagyis agyonmagyaráznunk – magyarázom a bölcselőnek, azzal a számomra oly undorító, de leküzdhetetlen beszédkényszerrel, amely mindig elfog, amikor nincsen semmi mondanivalóm» (Kertész [1990] 1995, e-book, emphasis mine).

addressed by the text is one and the same. More precisely, the problem is that there is no objectivity involved in the question, because one cannot talk about having children without the preconception of a child, the child who evokes the question in the first place. In this communication situation, the audience is the child to whom the homodiegetic narrator relates his reasons for refusing to be a father, and why said child would never be born, and the 'you' addressed by him is no other than the subject of the speech to follow.

«No!» something had bellowed and howled inside me, instantly and at once, when my wife (though as it happens long since not my wife) first made mention of *it* – of *you* – and my whimpering abated only gradually, yes, actually only after the passage of many long years, into a gloomy weltschmerz... (Kertész 2004b, 9, emphasis mine)¹⁰

As mentioned earlier, the novel can be divided into eight larger sections, each of which starts the argumentation by opening with the singular reply of «No!». In terms of structure, when we examine the narrative layers, we shall find that the novel is composed of stories embedded within multiple intertwined frameworks that cannot be clearly separated from one another because they are all connected by the same reply of «No!». In the first frame narrative and the opening scene of the novel, the first «No!» is uttered in response to the simple question of Dr. Obláth, who, at the sight of stunted, diseased trees, is reminded of Buchenwald (Takács 1990, 153). The narrator gives a lengthy reply to what seems like a simple question of whether he has any children, then relates to Dr. Obláth how he said no to his wife when she wished to have a child by him, which is the second frame narrative; and finally, there is a third frame narrative in which the narrator talks to and about the imagined unborn child. These frame narratives are repeated like musical parts, their melodies constantly resurging and intertwining with one another. At the resort, on a stormy night, a narrative is formed in the light of lightning as the narrator

¹⁰ Orig. «"Nem!" – üvöltötte, vonította bennem valami, rögtön és azonnal, amikor a feleségem (egyébként már rég nem a feleségem) először kerített szót róla – rólad, és szűkölésem csak lassan, tulajdonképpen, igen hosszú-hosszú évek múltán csitult bennem valami mélabús világfájdalommal» (Kertész [1990] 1995, e-book, emphasis mine).

of the story reminisces about a previous self. In this embedded narrative the evoked self and his wife appear as characters of a story. At the same time, the wife becomes recipient of the narrative as a listener and interpreter within that fiction, the audience to whom the narrator tells his childhood. To his wife the narrator recounts all that had culminated in him refusing to be a father, and why he was incapable of participating in the reproduction of an authoritarian and patriarchal society based on paternal austerity.

The first framework is doubled by the narrator repeatedly addressing the unborn child; however, this repetition is not an exact replica of the original, but a repeated and amended version thereof. In this narrative framing and reframing, we see the reemergence of the trope following the logic of the *figura etymologica*: the figure of repetition based on the same base or stem is itself exploring the theme of having children. The two versions read as follows:

«No!» something had bellowed and howled inside me, instantly and at once, when my wife (though as it happens long since not my wife) first made mention of it – of you – and my whimpering abated only gradually, yes, actually only after the passage of many long years, into a gloomy *weltschmerz*, like Wotan's raging fury during the renowned farewell scene, until a question assumed ever more definite form within me, emerging as it were from the mist-shrouded figurations of stifled string voices, slowly and malignantly, like an insidious illness, and you are that question; or to be more precise, I am, but am I rendered questionable by you; or to be even more precise (and Dr. Obláth, too, broadly agrees with this): *my existence viewed as the potentiality of your being*, or in other words, me as a murderer, if one wishes to take precision to the extreme, to the point of absurdity, and albeit at the cost of a certain amount of self-torment, since, thank God, it's too late now, now it'll always be too late that is permissible too, you are not, whereas I can be assured of being in complete safety, having ruined everything, smashed everything to bits, with that «no»... (Kertész 2004b, 4, emphasis in the original)¹¹

¹¹ Orig. «"Nem!" – üvöltötte, vonította bennem valami, rögtön és azonnal, amikor a feleségem (egyébként már rég nem a feleségem) először kerített szót róla – rólad, és szűkülésem csak lassan, tulajdonképpen, igen hosszú-hosszú évek múltán csitult bennem valami mélabús világfájdalommmá, akár Wotan tomboló haragja a nevezetes búcsú során, mígnem mintegy az elfúló vonósszólamok

«No!» something within me bellowed, howled, instantly and at once, and my whimpering abated only gradually, after the passage of many long years, into a sort of quiet but obsessive pain until, slowly and malignantly, like an insidious illness, a question assumed ever more definite form within me: 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? – *yes, contemplating my life as the potentiality of your existence*. And that day, the whole night through, I contemplated nothing but this question, now by the blinding flashes of lightning, now in the darkness with dazzled eyes which, in the capricious intervals between the ragings in the atmosphere, seemed to be seeing this question flicker across the walls, so I must regard the sentences that I am writing down now, on this sheet of paper, as if I had written them down that night... (Ivi, 13-14, emphasis mine)¹²

The two excerpts quoted above can be considered repeated variations of one another; however, in linguistic terms, their core thesis is substantially modified upon its conclusion. In the first excerpt, the thesis is «my existence viewed as the potentiality of your being». In the original Hungarian text, the same base word is used to denote the father's *existence* and the child's *being*

ködképeiből, lassan és rosszindulatúan, akár valami lappangó betegség, mind határozottabb körvonalat öltött bennem egy kérdés, és ez a kérdés te vagy, pontosabban én vagyok, de általad kérdésessé téve, még pontosabban (és ezzel nagyjából doktor Obláth is egyetértett): *az én létezésem a te léted lehetőségeként szemlélve*, vagyis én mint gyilkos, ha a pontosságot a végletekig, a képtelenig akarjuk fokozni, és némi önkínzással ez meg is engedhető, hiszen hál' isten, késő, mindig is késő lesz már, te nem vagy, én pedig teljes biztonságban tudhatom magam, miután ezzel a »nemmel« mindent romba döntöttem, porrá zúztam» (ivi, e-book, emphasis in the original).

¹² «'Nem!' – üvöltötte, vonította bennem valami, rögtön és azonnal, és szűkülésem csak hosszú-hosszú évek múltán csitult valami halk, de rögeszmés fájdalommal, mígnem, lassan és rosszindulatúan, akár a lappangó betegség, mind határozottabb körvonalat öltött bennem egy kérdés – hogy sötét szemű kislány lennél-e? orrocskád környékén elszórt szeplők halvány pöttyeivel? vagy konok fiú? vidám és kemény szemed, akár szürkés-kék kavics? –, *igen, az én életem a te létezésed lehetőségeként szemlélve*. És aznap egész éjszaka csakis ezt a kérdést szemléltem, hol vakító villámfénynél, hol a sötétben káprázó szemekkel, melyek a légköri őrjöngés szeszélyes szüneteiben mintha a falakon látnák cikázni ezt a kérdést, úgyhogy ezeket a mondatokat, amelyeket most erre a papírosra írok, úgy kell tekintenem, mintha akkor éjszaka írtam volna» (ivi, e-book, emphasis mine).

(*létezés* vs. *lét*), which in a broader sense can be seen as the complete rejection of the idea of coming into being from the same root. Meanwhile, in the second excerpt, the stream of consciousness does not explore the complex subjects of existence or non-existence but digresses and goes on different tangents. For instance, the narrator wonders what the imagined and rejected child might have looked like, and the idea of a little girl with dark eyes seems to blend into the darkness of the night and the eyes of the narrator dazzled by the dark, while the bright and hard eyes of the imagined little boy appears to be a wordplay on the flashes of lightning (*vidám* and *villám* in the original Hungarian text, and *bright* and *lightning* in the official English translation). This interplay of light, the illuminating light of lightning, and the imagined children serve as the spatial and temporal basis of the next embedded narrative.

It is worth noting that in the core thesis of the second excerpt, the base words describing the existence of the unborn child and the narrator are different in both the Hungarian original and the official English translation: «yes, *contemplating* my life as the potentiality of your *existence*» (emphasis mine). In this version, the life of the narrator is contrasted to the existence of the unborn child, meaning that this question does not appear in the form of the *figura etymologica* that is based on the same root, a life begetting another life. The unborn child also appears not as an abstract idea, but in a detailed, tangible, affectionate description, which brings it closer while the language simultaneously pushes it away: the existence of a loveable child and the life of the potential father are thus separated from one another. The rest of the novel then becomes a detailed elaboration on the divergence between the existence of the child and the life of the narrator, as conceived on that stormy night illuminated by lightning:

... and it was only after many years had passed that the night stirred into life within me once more, and again years had to pass until I can attempt to write down now what I would have written down that night... (Ivi, 14)¹³

¹³ Orig. «[...] és csak sok év múltán kelt bennem ismét életre ez az éjszaka, és megint éveknek kellett elmúlniuk, míg most megpróbálkozhatom azzal, hogy leírom, amit akkor éjszaka írtam volna» (ivi, e-book).

In light of the above, if we were to consider the rest of the novel to be the elaboration of this idea conceived amid flashes of lightning, then it would make sense to consider an interpretation in which the perspective and 'right' of the child is considered, thus creating the possibility of a future generation. In other words, the narrator does not murder his rejected unborn child, but construes a birth in which his own fatherhood is removed from the process, and gives his wife the chance to have the children that he himself would have liked to have. In the core thesis quoted above, the *figura etymologica* is not realized, and thus cannot play out the theme of having children; the process is aborted, and this abortion, this transferred and aborted continuity is what frames the novel.

3. Queer Negativity and Queer Time

Kaddish builds on the concept of negativity in several ways: as mentioned previously, the key questions of the narrator's lines of reasoning emerge at the resort by the light of a dark night filled with lightning, which evokes the idea of night as negative when contrasted with the light of day. The novel is a detailed elaboration of these key questions, structured in a way that also builds on negativity, since the structural elements of the text, the different parts of that stream of consciousness all spring from the same declaration of «No!». Moreover, the *shadow* the narrating subject casts upon itself also becomes tangible through metaphors about the humiliation of a man reduced to the level of an animal and incapable of survival and moving on; in other words, the narrator's derogatory view of himself *shrouds* the subjectivity of the narrator. In the following, I also want to call attention to the fact that the rejection of the idea of having children and of authoritarian systems in general carries a unique aspect of negativity that is often described by a queer sense of time and queer negativity.

One characteristic intersection of queer theory and narratology is the study of narrative time and queer time; in this regard, research tends to focus on the dynamics of the narrative, on deep structures and conclusions, and by extension on a future time and future perspectives, and the worldviews they inspire. Studies focusing on time often emphasize the resistance of queer subjects to the heteronormative views of time and life; in other words,

questioning the paradigm of heterosexuality is linked to an alternative or queer sense of time. Alternative ways of thinking create alternative spatial and temporal dimensions (Halberstam 2011, 70; Dinshaw 2007, 177-195).

As Elizabeth Freeman notes in the introduction to her monograph, queer identities are about the need to create new possibilities within temporality, to create visions of the future and constructs of the past that are not in compliance with generally accepted and official narratives of belonging somewhere and becoming something (2010, xv). In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman approaches this question from a deconstructive perspective and interprets the essence of queer identity as a kind of negativity, a position or rhetorical figure that does not «constitute an authentic or substantive identity» (2004, 24). From this radical perspective, Edelman argues that queer identities cannot be articulated along the lines of political advocacy, because every ideology inherently and fundamentally accepts the idea that its activity is future-bound; to put it differently, every ideology is based on «reproductive futurism» (*ibidem*), the social fantasy of a bright future which takes reproductivity for granted. Therefore, any political program projecting a vision of a positive future implicitly or explicitly includes and takes for granted the generally accepted heterocentric paradigm based on conception, reproduction, and the ability to create future generations. Based on Edelman's reasoning, queer theory can never be defined along political or ideological lines, because queer thinking is a negativity that can only disturb or queer politics (*ivi*, 17).

3.1 Negativity

The story of *Kaddish* takes place in the space of denying the validity of a future based on reproduction: its entire composition is built on ideas elaborating on the rejective reply of «No!» that are joined by further codes of negativity in a variety of forms. The novel explores the ever-expanding circles of negativity, drawing on one past dimension after another in order to undermine the validity of patriarchal systems that carry within them the possibility of dictatorships and of dictatorships leading to genocide. In the last argumentation opened by the final rejection, the humiliations suffered

in childhood, the memory of Auschwitz, and the rejection of the idea of having children are brought together and connected into a single causal link:

Auschwitz, I said to my wife, seemed to me to be just an exaggeration of the very same virtues to which I had been educated since early childhood. Yes, childhood and education were the start of that inexcusable process of breaking me, the survival that I never survived, I said to my wife. Even if my progress was not always with top marks, I was a modestly diligent party to the silent conspiracy that was woven against my life, I said to my wife. Auschwitz, I said to my wife, manifests itself to me in the image of a father; yes, the words father and Auschwitz elicit the same echo within me, I said to my wife. And if the assertion that God is a glorified father figure holds any truth, then *God manifested himself to me in the image of Auschwitz*, I said to my wife. (Kertész 2004b, 112, emphasis mine)¹⁴

By rejecting fatherhood, the novel rejects the reinforcement of the patriarchal system by providing it with a new generation, thereby rejecting assimilation into a multi-generational worldview. It is important to note that this revolt takes place in the private sphere, in the same way totalitarianism invades the most intimate and private parts of human life. The phrase *breaking me* (worded as *my breaking* in the original Hungarian) suggests that the traumas suffered by the child had not only taken place but have been indelibly internalized by the protagonist physically, mentally, and spiritually, and it is impossible to erase them now. The chain of repetition has to be broken, otherwise the internalized principles will be reproduced. One must leave the chain by rejecting the civilizational order that keeps mechanically repeating and reproducing the ingrained notions of patriarchy

¹⁴ Orig. «Auschwitz, mondtam a feleségemnek, később csupán azon erények túlhajtásának tűnt nekem, melyekre már kora gyerekkorom óta neveltek. Igen, akkor, a gyerekkorral, a neveltetéssel kezdődött megbocsáthatatlan megtöretésem, soha túl nem élt túlélésem, mondtam a feleségemnek. Egy szerényen igyekvő, nem mindig kifogástalan előmenetelű tagja voltam az életem ellen szőtt hallgatag összeesküvésnek, mondtam a feleségemnek. Auschwitz, mondtam a feleségemnek, nekem az apa képében jelenik meg, igen az apa és Auschwitz szavak bennem egyforma visszhangot vernek, mondtam a feleségemnek. És ha igaz az az állítás, hogy isten felmagasztalt apa, akkor *isten nekem Auschwitz képében nyilatkozott meg*, mondtam a feleségemnek» (ivi, e-book, emphasis mine).

and fatherhood. In his streams of thoughts based on rejection, the narrator goes around in concentric circles to create a unique negative space and time which is the space and time of the broken and fateless, people who are incapable of assimilation; the time and space of people who are seemingly present in mainstream society, but cannot identify with its fundamental views, such as the expectation of fatherhood that is automatically ascribed to masculinity.

Interpreting *Kaddish* as a narrative existing in negativity is supported by the fact that it is exceedingly difficult to find hints in the text that offer an alternative to the behaviors and principles rejected by the protagonist. I only found two such instances in the long discussions based on rejection: two short clauses, each but a fragment compared to the whole. The alternative life path suggested by them is also rooted in negativity inasmuch as the suggested alternative paths are untreaded, with only a fleeting glance stolen at each as the narrator passes them by.

After all, my father likewise only equipped me for the same thing, the same *culture*, as the school, and he probably gave as little thought to his goals as I to my reluctance, my disobediences, my failures: we may not have understood one another, but our cooperation worked perfectly, I said to my wife. And even if I have no idea whether I loved him or not, the fact is there were many times when I honestly pitied him, with all my heart: but if, by sometimes making him ridiculous, and pitying him because of that, if by doing that – in secret, always in the greatest secrecy – I thereby overthrew paternal power, respect, God, it was not just that he – my father – lost his authority over me, but I myself became achingly lonely, I said to my wife. I had need of a tyrant for my world order to be restored, I said to my wife, but my father never tried to replace my usurpatory world order with another, *one based on our common state of powerlessness, for example, in other words, one based on truth*, I said to my wife. (Ivi, 111-112 first emphasis in the original, second emphasis mine)¹⁵

¹⁵ Orig. «Végeredményben apám is csak ugyanarra készített fel, ugyanarra a *kultúrára*, mint az intézet, és a céljain valószínűleg éppolyan keveset töprengett, mint én a vonakodáson, az engedetlenkedéseimen, a csődjeimen: érteni ugyan nem értettük egymást, együttműködésünk azonban tökéletes volt, mondtam a feleségemnek. És ha mit sem tudok

The narrator constantly interrupts his own arguments with interjections and amplification in an attempt to continuously correct himself, creating an overly complicated textual composition that reveals the contradictory relationship between father and son: any differences between neutral narrative parts and heartbreaking statements are virtually lost in a sea of self-correcting monologues and myriads of clauses. The feelings of the evoked little boy are unclear, because the evoked self of the narrator cannot give an answer to the important question raised by the reminiscing self and the wife listening to his narration, of whether he had loved his father at all. Nor does the narrator dwell on even such a serious question as this, because the text quickly proceeds. One of the interjections highlights the phrase *my father* by placing it between dashes, thus reducing the father to a rigid figure of text, a framed statue that the argumentation aims to topple, thereby destroying its authority.

When the son destroys the statue of the father and the godlike authority it signifies, he finds himself alone, and it is at this point that we envisage a potential alternative in the relationship of father and son, which would be to acknowledge their common state of powerlessness. However, this alternative life path is not explored beyond the first step, which is facing the idea that the father and son were mutually dependant on one another. Their relationship is not about love in the semantic sense, and yet the phrase «our common state of powerlessness» does indicate a sense of belonging between them.

In the last conversation between the narrator and his wife, we can glimpse another alternative, the faint possibility of acceptance:

It is superfluous for me to reflect on that period here; for instance, on how much longer we lived, were able to live, like that, mutely alongside one another. I was

arról, hogy szerettem-e, tény viszont, hogy sokszor őszintén, szívemből sajnáltam: de ha ezzel, hogy olykor nevetségessé tettem, és ezért megsajnáltam, ha tehát ezzel – titokban, mindig csak a legnagyobb titokban – megdöntöttem az apai uralmat, a tekintélyt, az istent, akkor nemcsak ő – apám – veszítette el a hatalmát fölöttem, de én is vacogatóan magányossá váltam, mondtam a feleségemnek. Zsarnokra volt szükségem, hogy világrendem ismét helyreálljon, mondtam a feleségemnek, apám pedig sosem próbált uzurpatori világrendem helyébe másikat állítani, közös *kiszolgáltatottságunkat például, vagyis az igazságét*, mondtam a feleségemnek» (ivi, e-book, first emphasis in the original, second emphasis mine).

deeply depressed, inert and lonely, this time to a degree that it proved impossible to compensate for; in other words, it did not bring *my work* any further forward, on the contrary, it totally paralyzed it. I am not absolutely sure if, while I was inwardly – naturally – in the very process of fabricating accusations, a whole web of accusations, against her, *I was not secretly waiting for help from my wife*; but even if this was the case, I gave no visible sign of it, in my opinion. (Ivi, 113-114, first emphasis in the original, second emphasis mine)¹⁶

In the previous examples discussed above, the long monologue of the husband is followed by his wife's attempt at approaching him, which the husband repeatedly rejects because he believes that accepting her would be to acknowledge and «sanction» (*szenesítését*) his own powerlessness (ivi, 113). Nevertheless, after a detailed account of their broken relationship, from which every possible solution had been thoroughly excluded, an alternative is suggested to struggling in self-isolation: «[if] I was not secretly waiting for help from my wife». It is a very faint possibility, appearing only after several clauses and negations, of the husband accepting the help of his wife; however, instead of acknowledging his own powerlessness, the husband repeats the behavioral patterns inherited from his father by turning away from his wife, which leads to the liquidation of their marriage.

3.2 Gender, Conception, and Queer Conceptions of Life

According to Koltai's analysis (2002), having survived Auschwitz, the protagonist creates for himself a Jewish identity that insists on a singular life and thus excludes survival or the perpetuation of his own existence «in descendants» (*utódokban meghosszabbított*). In spite of this, Koltai points out

¹⁶ Orig. «Fölösleges, hogy itt az időn elmélkedjem, azon például, hogy meddig éltünk, meddig élhettünk még így, némán egymás mellett. Mélyen lehangolt, tehetetlen és elhagyott voltam, ezúttal olyan mértékig, hogy az kompenzálhatatlannak bizonyult, vagyis már nem mozdította elő a *munkámat*, ellenkezőleg, tökéletesen megbénította azt. Nem egészen vagyok bizonyos abban, hogy miközben – természetesen – magamban vádakat, vádak egész szövedékét kovácsoltam ellene, *titokban mégis nem a feleségemtől vártam-e segítséget*; ha így volt is, látható tanújelét ennek, szerintem, nem adtam» (ivi, e-book, first emphasis in the original, second emphasis mine).

that the novel is rife with references to conception. Consider the following examples:

[...] my male member throbbing, like one of those male swine... (Kertész 2004b, 19)¹⁷

[...] that too was a brilliant night, like my present night, glistening velvety-black... (Ivi, 65)¹⁸

[...] this consciousness may be the ultimate kernel of my being, which created and evolved this whole thing (my being, that is to say). (Ivi, 66)¹⁹

[...] everything stood ripe and ready within me for a *change of state*... (Ivi, 68; emphasis in the original)²⁰

According to Koltai's interpretation (2002), through articulation and artistic achievement, the text manages to extend itself; in other words, the novel is nothing less than the survival of the author, because the creation of the work itself becomes an act of conception. The novel thus creates a sense of identity that transcends the negative identity of the «branded Jew» (*megbélyegzett zsidó*).

Based on the above, we can argue that in terms of theme, by layering multiple frameworks, restarting over and over, and bursting at the seams with repetitions, the text also rejects the idea of linear development, just as it rejects the principle of development passed down from father to son by observing continuity and reproducing the authority of the father. The illogical actions of the narrator's father, the ingrained, incomprehensible, and irrational principles he had internalized through his upbringing (such as insisting on a certain inconvenient tram stop) may arouse the suspicion that the narrator himself cannot part from the model he had internalized from his father. He feels that

¹⁷ Orig. «[...] szervembe nyilallóan, mint egy afféle hímgazember» (Kertész [1990] 1995, e-book).

¹⁸ Orig. «Fényes éjszaka volt az is, mint fényes e mostani éjszakám is, bársonyfeketén fénylő» (ivi, e-book).

¹⁹ Orig. «[...] ez a tudat a legvégső magja [...] a létemnek, amely a létemet létrehozta és kifejezte» (ivi, e-book).

²⁰ Orig. «[...] mindaz, amit itt leírtam, és ami, mint mondtam, már készen állt bennem és megérlelt az *állapotváltozásra*...» (ivi, e-book, emphasis in the original).

meaningless repetition awaits him, and therefore all he can do is break the chain of his progress, break the formation of progress as defined by patriarchal society, and thereby the tradition of teleological thinking or the principle of development, which can be considered one of the great metanarratives of Western culture. By doing so, the narrator creates a negative space opposite of the heteronormative paradigm of reproduction: the entire novel takes place in this rejection, in the strange, queer space of negativity. It takes place in the space of a lifelong love that does not bring any descendants into being, and yet, sensing the call of the unborn child, the novel is conceived in response.

In *Fatelessness*, the hidden maternal alter ego preserved within the self calls to the protagonist in the death camp, and this same maternal voice dictates a worldview completely different from the existing model of survival (Zsadányi 2010, 385). In *Kaddish*, the novel brings to the surface a similarly encoded voice, which is the voice of the potential child calling out within the narrator. He hears the call of this potential future child because he feels a love for his wife that activates within him the desire to become a father. It is important to note, however, that in this call, the idea of linear progress and continuity are questioned: the issue is not whether the husband will have a child or not, and the focus is not on the path leading from father to son; it is not the survival of the father and the perpetuation of his own life that is emphasized, but the fact that the child is looking for the chance to be born. The narrator can feel the call of the next generation, and the entire novel plays out and gravitates towards this call:

[...] yes, contemplating my life as the potentiality of your existence. And that day, the whole night through, I contemplated nothing but this question, now by the blinding flashes of lightning, now in the darkness with dazzled eyes... (Kertész 2004b, 22)²¹

The call for fatherhood comes from the direction of the future, making tangible the possibility encoded within the self. Yet, to the narrator's mind,

²¹ Orig. «[...] igen, az én életem a te létezésed lehetőségeként szemlélve. És aznap egész éjszaka csakis ezt a kérdést szemléltem, hol vakító villámfénynél, hol a sötétben káprázó szemekkel» (ivi, e-book).

there is no path leading from the past into the future, which means that the chain must be broken by him. He can do no more, because to him it is impossible to step onto the path of continuity after surviving Auschwitz, nether in collective history nor in his individual life. The narrator thus scraps the script of survival, moving on, and the principle of «wish[ing] to live». However, he does get to experience something very important: the imagined child appears to address him from the direction of the future.

And this question – contemplating my life as the potentiality of your existence – proves a good guide, yes, as if clutching me with your tiny, fragile hand, you were leading me, dragging me behind you along this path, which in the end can lead nowhere, or at most only to a totally futile and totally irrevocable self-recognition... (Ivi, 15)²²

In light of the above, we see the emergence of a possible alternative interpretation, where the love between husband and wife leads to the creation of a future dimension within them. The husband follows his wife towards the future and awakens in her the desire for a child of their own, and from that point on, it is the wife who concludes the story: the continuity of the father gives way to the continuity of the mother. It is no coincidence that the phrase «I said to my wife» (*mondtam a feleségemnek*) is repeated countless times throughout the novel, and the narrator's long streams of contemplation end in signaling the communication situation by concluding with the clause of «I said to my wife»: this is the end of his communication, in which the final word belongs to his wife.

At the end of the novel, the narrator meets his ex-wife's children, who look exactly as he had imagined them: the progress of history has been broken by the birth of children who are no longer burdened by the heavy Jewish historical legacy with all its soul-crushing consequences. The husband has broken the chain of reproduction and created a new opportunity: by not

²² Orig. «És ez a kérdés – az én életem a te létezésed lehetőségeként szemlélve – jó vezetőnek bizonyul, igen, mintha kis, törekeny kezeddél kézen fogva vinnél, vonszolnál magad után ezen az úton, amely végső soron sehova, legföljebb a teljesen hiábavaló és teljesen megmásíthatatlan önfelismerésig vezethet» (ivi, e-book).

placing the burden of his own life upon the children, history and his story can no longer repeat itself.

As several studies have pointed out, in a certain sense the husband and his wife do conceive a child of their own in the form of the finished novel (Koltai 2002; Summers-Bremner 2005, 30). On the one hand, the act of creation is thematized in fiction as the husband and wife look to the work in progress as their own child; on the other hand, we can also consider the final product as the fruit of their labor of love, the child that leaves its parents to experience a new path in the process of its reception. There is essentially a narrative shift where the relationship between the frame narrative and the embedded story changes: the embedded story about the writing of the novel ascends to a new level that falls outside of the frame narrative about the narrator's contemplations and enters the communication space between the novel and the reader.

At the end of the novel, in his final speech, the narrator concludes that in terms of power mechanisms, there was no great difference between Auschwitz and the authoritarian institutions leading up to it (including the boarding school where the children were starving while daily feasts were being delivered to Fat Nat, and a couple of young lovers were kicked out with the blame automatically placed on the girl). The figure of the father, the child, and the autocratic relationship between them also falls into the same category, as does the figure of God who is all-seeing and all-hearing, who monitors our thoughts in every single moment and constantly compels us to feel guilty and repent. The only way to revolt against them all is in the narrator's possible choice not to reproduce the system, thus breaking the chain by rejecting fatherhood.

Upon closer examination of the poetics of the text, we find that the narration and the theme of the argument develop in a contradictory manner that potentially carries the possibility of alternative interpretations. The theme of the embedded story is the sum of the narrator's childhood traumas, while the frame narrative is the narration itself, or the husband relating his own story to his wife. However, this situation, this frame is only referenced by the repeating clauses of «I said to my wife» or «I related to my wife» (*meséltem a feleségemnek*). These clauses appear with increasing frequency as the husband repeats them again and again, which seems to suggest that the atmosphere between him and his wife has become increasingly heated. In other words,

the quickening tempo of «I said to my wife» can be interpreted as an expression of passionate and painful sexuality. The husband's narration repeatedly ends with «I said to my wife», and as the repetition of this clause carries no new information in terms of the narrator's narration, it draws our attention to the clause itself and to the increasing rhythm of its repetition.

The husband's narration of his childhood begins on page 91, detailing his fears and the humiliating, gut-wrenching situations experienced at the boarding school; starting from page 102, there is an increased repetition of the clause «I said to my wife», and on page 112, in the final stream of consciousness, this repetition intensifies until the long monologue finally ends with the same clause. While in the semantic sense, the text is about the husband rejecting the most fundamental role ascribed to fathers by the patriarchal world order, that of conceiving descendants, the rhythmic and accelerating repetitions of the text can be interpreted as playing out a sexual act where the rhythmic repetitions are the husband's argument being bored into his wife and indelibly impressed upon her. This double and contradictory meaning, the interplay of the semantic and rhetorical meanings thus creates a unique and unhinged mode of future-bound reproduction, where the new generation and the new literary work is conceived in rejection and (queer) negativity.

3.3 Dehumanization and Queer Alternatives

The text of *Kaddish* is permeated by metaphors suggesting animalistic behavior, which are used by the narrative figure to interpret his own behavior and self. These metaphors are present from the beginning of the novel to the very end. Consider the following examples (all emphases mine):

... for all my soundless *lying low* in my room... (Kertész 2004b, 3)²³

... for all my *scurrying about* on tiptoe in the corridors... (*Ibidem*)²⁴

«No!» something had *bellowed and howled* inside me, instantly and at once, when my wife (though as it happens long since not my wife) first made mention of

²³ Orig. «Hiába *lapulok meg* zajtalanul a szobámban» (Kertész [1990] 1995, e-book, emphasis mine).

²⁴ Orig. «[...] hiába *surranok* lábujjhegyen a folyosón» (*ibidem*, emphasis mine).

it – of you – and my *whimpering* abated only gradually, yes, actually only after the passage of many long years, into a gloomy weltschmerz... (Ivi, 4)²⁵
 ... so the thought that I am again living here, as long as I still have to live, fourteen floors above my childhood, and therefore inevitably, and now purely for my annoyance, sometimes assails me in the form of totally superfluous memories of my childhood, for surely these memories long ago fulfilled the function that they had to fulfill, their stealthy *rat* work, eroding everything, *gnawing away* at everything, they could safely have left me in peace by now. (Ivi, 35)²⁶

The words «bellowed» and «howled» are repeated several times in the text, most often following the «No!» uttered in rejection of the idea of having children. While bellowing can be attributed to both humans and animals, howling is more closely associated with animal behavior; in this manner, the enumeration and use of synonyms leads from the state of being human into the realm of the non-human and transcends both to arrive at a post-human state. Similarly, at one point in the novel, the repetition of «No!» leads from protesting to reasoning as the narrator finally manages to explicitly state what had been long implied: that he wanted to avoid his own fate being repeated in the life of his future child. This is the point at which the narrator begins to relate his childhood to his wife and starts roaming in his hometown to revisit the most important scenes of his childhood, a roaming that is also described with metaphors about animals on the move:

I could never know upon which unspeakable location, pervaded with agonies and ignominies, I might unexpectedly stumble, or what summons I was yield-

²⁵ Orig. «“Nem!” – *üvöltötte, vonította* bennem valami, rögtön és azonnal, amikor a feleségem (egyébként már rég nem a feleségem) először kerített szót róla – rólad –, és *szűkülésem* csak lassan, tulajdonképpen, igen, hosszú-hosszú évek múltán csitult bennem valami mélabús világfájdalommal» (ivi, e-book, emphasis mine).

²⁶ Orig. «[...] az a gondolat tehát, hogy itt élek újra, míg élnem kell még, tizennégy emelettel a gyerekkorom fölött, s következésképpen elkerülhetetlenül, és most már kizárólag csak bosszantásomra, olykor meg-megrohannak gyerekkori és teljesen fölösleges emlékeim, hisz ezek az emlékek réges-rég elvégezték már, amit el kellett végezniük: alattomos és mindent kikezdő, mindent *szétrágó* *patkány*munkájukat, most már nyugodtan békén hagyhatnának tehát» (ivi, e-book, emphasis mine).

ing to, for instance, when I would *sneak into* a side street, dozing like some illustrious patient between the tiny, crippled, dream-wreck palaces, or *steal between* the shadows of turreted, weather-cocked, lace-curtained, steeply gabled, blind-windowed fairy-tale houses [...]. (Ivi, 91, emphases mine)²⁷

The narrator most often makes references to the animals that the Nazis associated with Jewish people, weasels and rats, which on a linguistic level already anticipates the inhumane treatment that reduces its victims to an animal-like state. The last sentences evoke a Christ-like figure and Christ-like thinking where the protagonist takes the suffered sins onto himself, breaks the tradition of the Jewish legacy, and opens the way to the continuation of the story. On the final pages of the novel, we thus see the simultaneous emergence of exaltation and dehumanization, and in these two dimensions, one metaphysical and one sub-human, the problems that the protagonist had been struggling with for the entire duration of the novel are ultimately dissolved.

On the last page of *Kaddish*, we finally meet those to whom the entire novel had been addressed: the children, who have come alive and look exactly as the protagonist had imagined them. The clause «I said to my wife» returns towards the end of the novel, but the wife is no longer addressing her ex-husband: she uses instead the children as an intermediary to inform us that the narrator has turned into a «gentleman»:

One was a dark-eyed little girl with pale spots of freckles scattered around her tiny nose, one a headstrong boy with eyes bright and hard as greyish-blue pebbles. *Say hello to the gentleman*, she told them. That sobered me up completely, once and for all. (Ivi, 120, emphasis in the original)²⁸

²⁷ Orig. «Úgyhogy nem tudhattam, váratlanul melyik kimondhatatlan, gyötrelmekkel és gyalázattal átitatott színterén találok magam, milyen hívásnak engedek például, amikor apró, rokkant álomroncs paloták közt előkelő betegként szunnyadó mellékutcába *osonok*, tornyos, szélkakasos, csipkés, csúcsos, vakablakos meseházak árnyai közt *lopakodom*» (ivi, e-book, emphasis mine).

²⁸ Orig. «Egy sötét szemű kislányt, orrocskája környékén elszórt szeplők halvány pöttyeivel, meg egy konok fiút, vidám és kemény szeme, akár szürkés-kék kavics. Köszönjétek a bácsinak, mondta nekik. Ez egyszer s mindenkorra, tökéletesen kijózanított. Néha, akár egy kopott, megmaradt menyét a nagy irtás után, még végigsurranok a városon» (ivi, e-book, emphasis in the original).

The excerpt quoted above makes it clear that the simple pleasures of life, such as spending time with one's children are not for the narrator to have; instead he comes to occupy a transcendent state, at once a Christ-like self-sacrificing position and a sub-human, animalistic role. The novel ends with the narrator achieving this state of duality, in which he is not a father but a mere «gentleman» to the children. That one word sobers him up; that one word confronts the verbal flood of the whole novel and its lengthy and cumbersome existential philosophical reflections. It is worth paying attention to the increasing and shocking frequency of the use of animal metaphors as the previously quoted part continues in the novel:

That sobered me up completely, once and for all. Sometimes I still *scurry through* the city like a bedraggled weasel that has managed to make it through a big extermination drive. I *start at* each sound or sight, as if *the scent* of faltering memories were assailing my calloused, sluggish senses from the other world. Here and there, by a house or street corner, I stop in terror, I search around with alarmed looks, *nostrils flaring*, I want to flee but something holds me back. Beneath my feet the sewers bubble, as if the polluted flood of my memories were seeking to burst out of its hidden channel and sweep me away. (*Ibidem*, emphases mine)²⁹

Excluded from the circle of life and stripped of the life-giving power of love, the narrator's Christ-like self-sacrifice goes hand in hand with the devaluation of his own human dignity: just as the dehumanization suffered at the death camps follows him throughout his life, it also *sneaks* and *lurks* like a ghost in the language of the text. The metaphors referencing animals cast the shadow of the inhumane conditions of the past onto the narrator's everyday life in the present, and at the same time shed light on the web of memories woven around that everyday life. At the end of the novel, an existence reduced to the

²⁹ Orig. «Néha, akár egy kopott, megmaradt *menyét* a nagy irtás után, még *végigsurrannok* a városon. Egy-egy hangra, képre *felneszelek*, mintha megkérgesedett, lomha érzékeimet akadozó emlékek *szimata* ostromolná a túlvilágról. Egy-egy ház mentén, egy-egy utcasarkon rémülten megállok, *táguló orrlyukakkal*, riadt tekintettel fürkészek körbe, menekülni akarok, de valami fogva tart. Lábam alatt csatorna zubog, mintha emlékeim szennyes árja akarna rejtett medréből kitörni, hogy elsodorjon» (ívi, e-book, emphasis mine).

state of an animal is united with the feelings of a man excluded from love, family, and the circle of life, which can be balanced only by the lesson of a Teacher, the Christ-like self-sacrifice, and the finished work of the novel. In the text of *Kaddish*, the dehumanization related to the narrator's self-image gradually gives rise to a unique narrative voice, that of a subjectivity standing on the threshold between being human and being sub-human.

The continuous dehumanization of the narrative self gives rise to an alternative interpretation, where the traces of an existence reduced to an animal-like state is indelibly impressed upon the human subject, to be carried within and by him for the rest of his life because he cannot rise above the damage that had been so deeply ingrained into his personality. These wounds have likewise become ingrained in the fabric of the novel, in the conceptual meaning as well as the image component of the metaphors. It is no coincidence that the wife feels like her husband got stuck in a «mire» (*mocsár*): he did not simply get lost in some dark place from which it might be possible to lead him into the light but is drowning in an all-pervasive and depressive muck in which he can only roam about, being not able to either leave or move on. We ultimately find that the healing power of narration and the illusion of working through his traumas lead nowhere because the past does not only influence one's personal histories and life paths but becomes ingrained and permeates the language of the novel, thereby determining its linguistic subjectivity. In this situation, the only possible path is to rescue the other person from the powers that drag him down and create a new generation free from the mire. *Kaddish* is a novel about this path in particular.

4. Teacher and *The Tragedy of Man* by Imre Madách

Several studies have explored the intertextual web of *Kaddish*, such as the narrator's references to Thomas Bernhard (Marno 1990, 880-881), Franz Kafka (Schein 2002, 114), or Paul Celan (Erdődy 1990, 888), and with regard to certain parts of the novel, others have also suggested as literary sources *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* Robert Musil ([1930, 1933, 1943] 1978); *The Man Without Qualities* ([1953, 1955, 1961] 1995), *À la recherche du temps perdu* by Marcel Proust ([1913-1927] 2019); *In Search of Lost Time* ([1981] 2021). In this final section, I shall add to this line of works the *magnum opus* of

Imre Madách, *Az ember tragédiája* ([1861] 2005; *The Tragedy of Man*, 1933) in particular the parts of Adam and Eve in the Fifteenth Scene.

Upon closer inspection of *Kaddish*, the remembrance of *The Tragedy of Man* can be traced throughout the novel: similarly to Adam, the protagonist struggles to process or interpret the determining events of human history and raises fundamental existential questions. As if Adam's dream had proven prophetic, human history does lead to the world burning, to dictatorships, to the genocide of millions, and to death camps. The final thoughts of *Kaddish* are also in line with the closing scene in Madách's play: in the Fifteenth Scene, Eve's motherhood unexpectedly causes a shift where the conclusions drawn from historical scenes are transferred to different dimensions. With her motherhood, history begins, when according to Adam's logic, the events of history should be aborted. According to Pál S. Varga,

Eve's effect on Adam could only be so impactful because her words about the future were inspired by the same elementary – but opposite – existential experience that annihilation had been to Adam; and that is the incomprehensible experience of the rebirth of life. In this manner, the child appears to Adam as the symbol of a monumental meaning which, at the same time, only has meaning within a language motivated by the memory of Eden – of that intimate connection with The Lord – and to which belongs a future that fundamentally differs from his own in terms of its meaning. (2007, 474)³⁰

In the context of the parallels between *The Tragedy of Man* and *Kaddish*, on the last pages of the novel, one might expect to see a similar conclusion to that of the Fifteenth Scene (to the effect that there is no rational support

³⁰ Orig. «Éva hatása Ádámmra azért lehet ilyen erőteljes, mert az ő jövőre vonatkozó szavai ugyanolyan elementáris – csak éppen ellentétes – egzisztenciális tapasztalatból erednek, mint amilyen Ádámmnak a megsemmisülés volt – s ez az élet újjászületésének értelemmel megfoghatatlan élménye. A gyermek tehát egy monumentális értelem szimbólumaként jelenik meg Ádám előtt, amelynek azonban csak az éden – az Úrhoz fűződő bensőséges kapcsolat – emléktől motivált nyelvből van jelentése, s amelyhez az övétől eredendően különböző jelentésű jövő tartozik».

for surviving or moving on from Auschwitz); however, in a different dimension, the dimension of faith and trust, these conflicts dissolve:

THE LORD: Your arm is strong – your heart sublime;
The field which summons you to work is endless,
And if you take good heed, you will hear a voice
Unceasingly recalling and uplifting you.
Only follow that. And if amidst the din
Of active life, Heaven's voice is silenced
This weak woman with a purer soul
Less near to the contamination of the world
Will hear it, through her heart
It will be turned to poetry and song.
(Madách 1933, 154)³¹

In *Kaddish*, by rejecting his wife, the protagonist essentially rejects Madách's version of Eve and the path she suggests. The wife hoped that after her husband had related to her the story of his childhood and elaborated on his reasons for not wanting to assimilate into a patriarchal society – in other words, having cast off the burden of the past in this manner –, her husband, like Adam, would finally glimpse a different path leading towards descendants. Her husband does in fact glimpse that path, since the entire novel had been dedicated to the imagined children; however, despite this fact, he does not choose that path. Similarly to Eve, the wife hears the heavenly call and chooses life; in spite of every horror she had been through, she urges her husband to move on with her. However, her husband does not follow because he does not want to be conquered by God in the form of having a child with his wife; nor does he try to derail creation or consider suicide like Adam did in the Fifteenth Scene. He chooses a different solution where only he steps out of the chain of reproduction, thereby enabling his wife to bring a different man into the chain of con-

³¹ Orig. «AZ ÚR. Karod erős – szíved emelkedett: / Végetlen a tér, mely munkára hív, / S ha jól ügyelsz, egy szózat zeng feléd / Szünetlenül, mely visszaint s emel, / Csak azt kövesd. S ha tetteid életed / Zajában elnémúl ez égi szó, / E gyöngye nő tisztább lelkülete, / Az érdekek mocskától távolabb, / Meghallja azt, és szívéren keresztül / Költészetté fog és dallá szűrődni» (Madách [1861] 2005, 594).

tinuing to live. In this manner, the desire he had aroused in his wife, that of having children, does become fulfilled by another man, a non-Jewish man who does not carry and therefore cannot transmit a Jewish identity of suffering, which is how a new life can be born, liberated from the crushing and binding legacy of the past.

After surviving Auschwitz, the protagonist does break the chain, but he by no means aborts the coming of newer generations; in this manner, he does not follow the word of The Lord, but the example of the Teacher: just as the Teacher had risked his life to pass the life-saving ration to the weakened child, the narrator of *Kaddish* passes the possibility of life onto another man, and by extension to another man's child. He passes the baton to the man his wife chooses over him, the husband she had loved as deeply as if «seeking to tap a source deep inside» him (*mintha forrást akarna fakasztani*). In this context, the novel becomes a fruit of this passing of the baton and the life philosophy of the Teacher, as it allows the unborn child to be born in another way.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, my study of the prose poetic functions related to gender roles and conception in *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* supports an interpretation in which the novel emphasizes the elementary rejection of an order based on the authority of the father as well as the questioning of a teleological worldview. I argue that the language of a text interwoven with figures of repetition, the emergence of multiple interwoven narrative frameworks, and the dehumanizing metaphors of the narrating subject make possible an interpretation according to which the novel questions the ingrained views of the rigid heteronormative order on fatherhood and the conception of descendants.

Based on the poetic functions analyzed in the novel, we arrive at an alternative worldview that disturbs the patriarchal and authoritarian system, a view that is able to understand and take into account the desire of the next generation as well as the desire of the wife to have children. I approached this alternative worldview from the perspective of queer negativity and queer time, arguing that by queering traditional

masculine roles based on reproduction, the novel brings into the open a long suppressed and serious problem, that of a toxic masculinity being passed down from father to son. In other words, it opens onto paths that are not treaded but merely indicated by the text, and thus allows these questions to be discussed, allows the loneliness and suffering of men to be dissolved, and allows them to acknowledge their «common state of powerlessness» (*közös kiszolgáltatottság*).

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