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Remaining Still
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> *A political minimalism? That would obviously go against the grain of our current political ideology → in fact, we are in an era of political maximalisation* (Roland Barthes 200, arrow in original).

Barthes' comment is found in the 'Annex' to his 1978 lecture course *The Neutral*. Despite the three decade difference I don't things have changed that much, certainly not insofar as academic debate about the cultural and social is concerned. At conferences I regularly hear the demand that the speaker or speakers account for the 'political intent', 'worth' or 'utility' of their work, or observe how speakers attempt to pre-empt and disarm such calls through judicious phrasing and citing. Following his diagnosis Barthes (201-206) proceeds to write under the title 'To Give Leave'. Here he notes the incessant demand placed upon us, as citizens, as consumers, as representative cultural subjects and as biopolitical entities and, in this context, as academics to have and to communicate our allegiances, views and opinions. Echoing the acts, (or rather the 'non-acts'), of Melville's Bartleby, Barthes describes the scandalous nature of suspending the obligation of holding views; the apparent immorality of suspending the obligation of being interested, engaged, opinionated, committed – even if one only ever suspends provisionally, momentarily even. For the length of a five thousand word essay perhaps.

In this short, unfortunately telegraphic and quite speculative essay I want pause to consider a few gestures or figures of 'suspension', 'decline' and 'remaining aside'. What follows is in three parts. First a comment on the nature of the 'demand to communicate' identified by Barthes and its links to longer running moral and practical imperatives within Western understandings of the subject, the social and the political. Second, the most substantial section but still an all too brief account of the apparent 'passivity' of the narrator of Imre Kertész's novel *Fatelessness* and the ways in which the novel may be read as a reflection on the nature of agency and determination. Third, a very brief conclusion, the question directly; what politics or what apprehension of politics, could a reflection on stillness and its 'political minimalism' offer?

1.

For Barthes, (in 1978), one of the factors defining the contemporary intellectual scene was the way in which "politics invades all phenomena, economic, cultural, ethical" coupled with the "radicalization" of "political behaviors" (200), perhaps most notably in the arrogance of political discourse as it assumes the place of a master discourse. Writing in 1991 Bill Readings identified a similar phenomenon. For Readings the category of the political and politically inspired critique were operating by encircling their objects within a presupposed "universal language of political significance into which one might translate everything according to its effectivity", an approach which has the effect of always making "the political [...] the bottom line, the last instance where meaning can be definitively asserted" (quoted in Clark 3) or, we may add, realized. There is, of course, much that could be said here, not least concerning the significant differences in context, (between, for example, the various forms of revolutionary Marxism, Communism and Maoism which seem to preoccupy Barthes and the emancipatory identity and cultural politics which swept through literature departments in the US and beyond in the last two decades of the twentieth century). However it is also possible to suggest that a general grammar and, moreover, a

general acceptance of a telos of the political persists.

Barthes' (204-206) account of 'political maximalisation' is accompanied by a diagnosis of its productivist virility, (be it, in 1978, on the part of the increasingly reduced revolutionary left *or* the burgeoning neo-liberal right). The antithesis, or, rather, the outside of such an arrangement or frame would not be another political *program* but rather a certain stammering, a lassitude or dilatoriness. A flaccidness even; "a devirilized image" wherein from the point of view of the (political) actor or critic, "you are demoted to the contemptible mass of the undecided of those who don't know who to vote for: old, lost ladies whom they brutalize: vote however you want, but vote" (Barthes 204). Hence Barthes is not suggesting a counter-move, a radical refusal, a 'No' shouted back to the information saturated market society. What is truly scandalous he suggests, is not opposition or refusal but the 'non-reply'. What is truly scandalous, roughish even, is the decline or deferral and so the provisional suspension of the choice (and the blackmail) of the 'yes' or 'no', the 'this' or the 'that', the 'with us' or 'against us'.

In *Literature and Evil* Georges Bataille concludes his essay on Kafka with a comment on such a decline. According to Bataille, the reason why Kafka remains an ambivalent writer for critics, (and especially for those who would seek to enrol his work to political ends), lays precisely in his constant withdrawal; "There was nothing he [Kafka] could have asserted, or in the name of which he could have spoken. What he was, which was nothing, only existed to the extent in which effective activity condemned him" (167). 'Effective activity' refers, contextually, to a certain form of Communism but more broadly to the rationalization or systematization intrinsic to *any* political program, political programs (or ideologies) *as such*, be they communist, liberal or libertarian. At least insofar as, as implied above, the political is taken to coincide with a certain metaphysics and morality of action and the consequent linking of freedom to work, (a factor common to communist, fascist and liberal political programs), and so to the labour of the progressive self-realization and achievement of the self, the *autos* or *ipse* (see Derrida 6-18). Be it via, for example, Marx's account of human's intrinsic 'capacity for work' (*Arbeitskraft*), Heidegger's account of necessary existential (and ultimately communal) struggle (*Kampf*), or Weber's diagnoses of the (Protestant/bourgeois) liberal project to realize human potentiality (see also Agamben *Man without Content;* François 1-64). Hence what is 'evil' in Kafka is not any particular deed but the deferral of deeds; his ambivalence or immorality in the eyes of certain critics being due to the question his writing poses to "the ultimate authority of action" (Bataille 153) and so to the space *beyond* action onto which it opens.

What could this space of 'worklessness' or 'unwork' look like? This non-virile, anti-heroic space? This would not be a space of 'inaction', (a term still too dependent, albeit negatively, on action), but of 'non-action'; of 'non-productive' or non-disclosive action. That is to say, and as a first attempt at definition, 'action' or 'praxis', if we can still call it that, which does not generate or bring to light any specific positive content. As a way to highlight the difficulties and pitfalls, (at least with certain traditions), which stand in the way of thinking such a space, we may highlight Giorgio Agamben's comments on the widespread coincidence of a metaphysics of action with the determination of both the subject, its teleology and its orientation in the world:

> According to current opinion, all of man's [sic] doing – that of the artist and the craftsman as well as that of the workman and the politician – is praxis – manifestation of a will that produces a concrete effect. When we say that man has a productive status on earth, we mean, that the status of his dwelling on the earth is a practical one [...] This productive doing now everywhere determines

> the status of man on earth – man understood as the living being (animal) that works (laborans), and, in work, produces himself (*Man without Content* 68; 70-71 original emphasis).

Beyond or before practical being then, that is to say before and beyond the determination of the subject as essentially or intrinsically active and engaged, another space, another dwelling. Maybe nocturnal, certainly one with a different light to that of the day; one not gathered in and by the telos of the *ipse* or the turning of the *autos*, an interruption of labour, an unravelling. Remaining still, unravelling together (see Harrison *In the absence*).

2.

Kertész's novel *Sorstalanság* was first published in his native Hungary in 1975. It has been translated into English twice, in 1992 as *Fateless* and in 2004 as *Fatelessness*. *Fatelessness* opens in Budapest on the day before György Köves' – the novel's fourteen year old narrator – father has to report for 'labour service'. It goes on to recount Köves' own detention and deportation and the year spent in the camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Buchenwald and Zeitz. During this period Köves' health declines, gradually at first and then rapidly to a moment of near death. He survives and the novel closes with his return to his home town. Köves is, as Kertész has put it in various interviews and as is made clear in the novel, a 'non-Jewish Jew'; a non-practicing and non-believing Hungarian Jew from a largely assimilated family who neither reads nor speaks Hebrew or Yiddish. While Kertész has insisted that the novel is precisely that, a novel, a work of literature and not an autobiography, we should note that Kertész was himself imprisoned in Buchenwald and Zeitz when fourteen.

Not without reservations but for the sake of brevity I shall focus on only one theme in the novel; determination and agency, or what Kertész calls 'determinacy'. Writing in his journal *Galley Boat-Log* (*Gályanapló*) in May 1965 Kertész suggests 'Novel of Fatelessness' as a possible title for his work and then reflects on what he means by 'fate', the entry is worth quoting at length.

> The external determinacy, the stigma which constrains our life in a situation, an absurdity, in the given totalitarianism, thwarts us; thus, when we live out the determinacy which is doled out to us as a reality, instead of the necessity which stems from our own (relative) freedom – that is what I call fatelessness.
>
> What is essential is that our determinacy should always be in conflict with our natural views and inclinations; that is how fatelessness manifests itself in a chemically pure state.
>
> The two possible modes of protection: we transform into our determinacy (Kafka's centipede), voluntarily so to say, and I that way attempt to assimilate our determinacy to our fate; or else we rebel against it, and so fall victim to our determinacy. Neither of these is a true solution, for in both cases we are obliged to perceive our determinacy […] as *reality*, whilst the determining force, that absurd power, in a way triumphs over us: it gives us a name and turns us into an object, even though we were born for other things.
>
> The dilemma of my '*Muslim*' [Köves]: How can he construct a fate out of his own determinacy? (*Galley Boat-Log* 98 original emphasis).

The dilemma of determinacy then; how can Köves, who is both determined by and superfluous to the Nazi regime, to wider Hungarian society, to his neighbours and to his family, gain some kind of control over his existence?

Throughout *Fatelessness* people prove repeatedly unable to control their destinies, be it Köves himself, his father, his stepmother, his uncles, his friends from the oil refinery, or even Bandi Citrom, Köves' mentor in the camps. The case of the 'Expert' provides a telescoped example. First appearing when Köves and his friends are arrested the 'Expert' is an imposing figure, well dressed, fluent in German and the director of a factory involved in the war effort (*Fatelessness* 50). Later at the brickworks, where the Jews who have been rounded up are being held prior to deportation, he appears more dishevelled and slightly less confident. Still, he takes the 'audacious' step of addressing a German officer directly (and receives some placatory 'advice' as his reward) (68-69). By the time the group arrives at the camp Köves has difficulty recognising him and without a word of protest, the 'Expert' does not pass the initial selection (88).

Köves displays no such initiative with regard to his situation. He is reactive or passive, never active. For Köves events unfold as a series of situations and circumstances which are, he tells himself, essentially reasonable and to which he has to adapt and conform so that he may get on. Nothing more than "given situations with the new givens inherent in them" (259), as he explains near the end of the novel. As Köves' identity papers testify, his life and its continuation are the effect of arbitrary sets of circumstances which he is compelled to live through; "I am not alive on my own account but benefiting the war effort in the manufacturing industry" (29). In his Nobel lecture Kertész described Köves' situation:

> 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 (*Heureka!* no pagination).

Without any wilful or effective action on the part of the narrator and with only 'the dreary trap of linearity' where one would expect drama, plot, rationalization or stylization, *Fatelessness* can read as an arbitrarily punctuated series of waitings. Köves waiting for his father to leave, waiting in the customs shed, waiting at the brick works, waiting in train carriages, waiting on the ramp, waiting at roll call, waiting in the infirmary. Here is the first period of waiting described in the book, it is the day before his father's departure and he is waiting for his father and stepmother as they go through the accounts at the family shop:

> I tried to be patient for a bit. Striving to think of Father, and more specifically the fact that he would be going tomorrow and, quite probably, I would not see him for a long time after that; but after a while I grew weary with that notion and then seeing as there was nothing else I could do for my father, I began to be bored. Even having to sit around became a drag, so simply for the sake of a change I stood up to take a drink of water from the tap. They said nothing. Later on, I also made my way to the back, between the planks, in order to pee. On returning I washed my hands at the rusty, tiled sink, then unpacked my morning snack from my school satchel, ate that, and finally took another drink from the tap. They

> still said nothing. I sat back in my place. After that, I got terribly bored for another absolute age (*Fatelessness* 9).

It is interesting to consider exactly how this passage presages those that will come. Certainly this scene is an effect of the political context, his father and stepmother have to go through the books because of the summons to labour service and because of the racial laws on who may own and profit from a business. However, the specifically familial setting should not be overlooked, particularly when read alongside Kertész's other novels where, as Madeleine Gustafsson writes, Communist dictatorship is "portrayed almost as an uninterrupted continuation of life in the camp – which in turn [...] is depicted as a continuation of the patriarchal dictatorship of a joyless childhood" (no pagination, see, for example, Kertész *Kaddish*).

Time to turn back to our question; does *Fatelessness* provide an answer to the 'dilemma of determinacy'? *We* should think carefully before answering. As Julia Karolle suggests, the composition of the novel and our search for a logic within it

> reveal the abuses that reason must endure in order to create *any* story or history about the Holocaust [...]. Ultimately Kertész challenges the reader not to make up for the lack of logic in *Fatelessness*, but rather to consider the nature of its absence (92 original emphasis).

Still, with this point in mind, (and despite what has been said above), the novel *does* contain a scene in which Köves appears to affirm his existence.

In many respects the scene is the culmination of the novel. The camps have been liberated and Köves has returned to Budapest. Finding his father and step-mother's apartment occupied by strangers he calls on his Aunt and Uncle Fleischmann and Uncle Steiner. The discussion which follows would repay a slower reading, however again for the sake of brevity I shall focus on only a few short excerpts. Köves suggests that everyone took their 'steps' towards the events which have unfolded and that prediction and retrospection are false perspectives which give the illusion of order and inevitability whereas, in reality, "everything becomes clear only gradually, sequentially over time, step-by-step" (*Fatelessness* 249): "They [his Uncles] too had taken their own steps. They too [...] had said farewell to my father as if we had already buried him, and even later has squabbled about whether I should take the train or the suburban bus to Auschwitz" (260). Fleischmann and Steiner react angrily, claiming that such an understanding makes the 'victims' the 'guilty ones'. Köves responds by saying that they do not understand him and asks they see that:

> It was impossible, they must try to understand, impossible to take everything away from me, impossible for me to be neither winner nor loser, for me not to be right and not to be mistaken that I was neither the cause nor effect of anything; they should try to see, I almost pleaded, that I could not swallow that idiotic bitterness, that I should merely be innocent (260-261).

Karolle (93-94) suggests that Köves' discussion with his uncles marks the moment where he accepts and affirms his existence and, from this point on begins to take control of and responsibility. Hence for Karolle the end of the novel depicts an 'authentic' moment of self-affirmation as Köves steps forward and refuses to participate in "the factual historical narrative of Auschwitz, to forget what he knows, and to be unequivocally categorized as a victim of history" (95). In distinction to Karolle, Adrienne Kertzer argues that Köves' moment of self-affirmation is, in fact, one of self-

deception. Rather than acknowledging that it was "inexplicable luck" and a "series of random acts" (Kertzer 122) which saved his life or that his near death was due to an accident of birth, Köves asserts his personal freedom. Hence – and following István Deák – Kertzer suggests that we should read *Fatelessness* as a satire, 'a modern *Candide*'. A satire on the hope of finding meaning, be it personal or metaphysical, in such experiences and events, the closing scenes of the novel being an ironic reflection on the "desperate desire to see […] life as meaningful" (Kertzer 122). So, while Köves convinces himself of his logic his uncles say to each other "'Leave him be! Can't you see he only wants to talk? Let him talk! Leave him be!' And talk I did, albeit possibly to no avail and even a little incoherently" (*Fatelessness* 259). Which are we to choose then? The affirmation of agency (with Karolle) or the diagnosis of determination (with Kertzer)?

Karolle and Kertzer give insightful analyses, (and ones which are certainly not limited to the passages quoted above), however it seems to me that they move too quickly to resolve the 'dilemma' presented by Köves, if not of *Fatelessness* as a whole. Still, we have a little time before having to name and decide Köves' fate.

Kertész's use of the word 'hero' to describe Köves above – 'the hero of my novel…' – is, perhaps, more than a little ironic. As Kertész asks (in 1966), how can there be a hero, how can one be heroic, when one *is* one's 'determinacies'? What sense does it make to speak of heroic actions if "man [*sic*] is no more than his situation"? (*Galley Boat-Log* 99). Köves' time, his language, his identity, none are his. There is no place, no hidden reservoir of freedom, from which way he set in motion any efficacious action. All resources have already been corrupted. From Kertész's journal (in 1975): "The masters of thought and ideologies have ruined my thought processes" (*Galley Boat-Log* 104). As Lawrence Langer has argued, the grammar of heroics, along with the linked terms 'virtue', 'dignity', 'resistance' 'survival' and 'liberation', (and the wider narrative and moral economies which these terms indicate and activate), do not survive the events being described. Here the 'dilemma of determinacy' becomes the dilemma of how to think and value the human outside or after such a grammar. How to think and value the human beyond a grammar of action and so beyond, as Lars Iyer puts it, "the equation of work and freedom that characterizes the great discourses of political modernity" (155). If this is possible. If such a grammar and equation isn't too all pervasive, if something of the human still remains outside their economy. It may well be that our ability to read *Fatelessness* depends in large part on what we are prepared to forsake (see Langar 195).

How to think the subject and a politics in *contretemps*, beyond or after the choice between determination or autonomy, passive or active, inaction or action, immoral or virtuous – if only for a moment? Kertész wonders, (in 1966), "perhaps there is something to be savaged all the same, a tiny foolishness, something ultimately comic and frail that may be a sign of the will to live and still awakens sympathy" (*Galley Boat-Log* 99). Something, perhaps, which remains to be salvaged from the grammar of humanism, something that would not be reducible to context, to 'determinacies', and that, at the same time, does not add up to a (resurrected) agent.

'A tiny foolishness, something ultimately comic and frail'. The press release announcing that Kertész had been awarded the Nobel prize for literature states that "For Kertész the spiritual dimension of man lies in his inability to adapt to life" (*The Swedish Academy* no pagination). Despite the difficulties presented by the somewhat over-determined term 'spiritual', this line strikes me as remarkably perspicuous. Like Melville's Bartleby and Bataille's Kafka before him, Kertész's Köves' existence, insofar as he exists, is made up by his *non-action*. That is to say, his existence is defined not by his actions or his inaction, (both of which are purely reactive and functional), but

rather *by his irreducibility to either*. As commentators and critics have remarked, (and as the quotes given from the text above hopefully illustrate), Köves has an oddly formal and neutral 'voice'. Köves' blank, frequently equivocal tone may be read as a sign of his immaturity, his lack of understanding and his naivety. However I would suggest that before such factors, *what characterizes Köves' mode of address is its reticence to assert or disclose*. Köves speaks, he speaks endlessly, but he says nothing or almost nothing - 'to no avail and even a little incoherently'. Hence where Karolle seeks to recover an 'intoned self-consciousness' and Kertzer the repressed determining context, we may find Köves' *address.* Where Karolle's and Kertzer's approaches seek in some way to repair Köves words, to supplement them with either an agency to-come or an awareness of a context and, in doing so, pull his words fully into the light, Köves, it seems to me, remains elusive. His existence, insofar as we may speak of it, lies in his 'inability to adapt to life'. His reserves are not composed of hidden or recoverable sources of agency but in his equivocality, in the way he takes leave of and remains aside from the very terms of the dilemma. It is as if with no resources of his own, he has an echo existence. As if still remaining itself where a tiny foolishness, something ultimately comic and frail.

3.

Is this it? Is this what we are to be left with in a 'political minimalism'? It would seem more resignation or failure, turning away or quietism, the conceit of a beautiful soul, than any type of recognisable politics. On one level this is correct, however any such suspension or withdrawal, this moment of stillness where we are, is only ever a moment. However it is a moment which indicates a certain irreducibility and as such is, I believe, of great significance. Great significance, (or better 'signifyingness'), even though – and precisely because – it is in itself *without value*. Being outside efficacy, labour or production, being outside economisation as such, it resides only in its inability to be integrated. What purpose does it serve? None. Or, perhaps, none other than demonstrating the irreducibility of a life, of a singular existence, to any discourse, narrative, identity or ideology, insofar as such structures, in their attempt to comprehend (or apprehend) the existent and put it to use always and violently fall short. As Theodor Adorno wrote;

> *It is this passing-on and being unable to linger*, this tacit assent to the primacy of the general over the particular, which constitutes not only the deception of idealism in hypostasizing concepts, but also its inhumanity, that has no sooner grasped the particular than it reduces it to a thought-station, and finally comes all too quickly to terms with suffering and death (74 emphasis added).

This moment of stillness then, of declining and remaining aside, represents, for me, the anarchical and all but silent condition of possibility for all political strategy as such (see Harrison, *Corporeal Remains*). A condition of possibility which all political strategy carries within itself, more or less well, more or less consciously, as a memory of the finite and corporeal nature of existence. A memory which may always and eventually come to protest against the strategy itself. Strategy itself *as* strategy; as command, as a calculated and calculating order. And so, and we should be clear about this, such a remaining still *is* a demonstration.

A demonstration not unlike, for example, that of the general anonymous population in José Saramago's remarkable novel *Seeing*, who 'act' more forcefully through non-action than any through any ends-directed action.

A demonstration of the kind which Agamben writes about after those in Tiananmen

Square in 1989:

> *The novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be the struggle for control of the state, but a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity)* [...] [who] cannot form a *societas* because they do not poses any identity to vindicate or bond of belonging for which to seek recognition (*Coming Community* 85-67; original emphasis).

A demonstration like that which sounds through Köves when his health fails in the camps and he finds himself being wheeled on a handcart taken for dead;

> a snatch of speech that I was barely able to make out came to my attention, and in that hoarse whispering I recognized even less readily the voice that has once – I could not help recollecting – been so strident: 'I p ... pro ... test,' it muttered" (*Fatelessness* 187 ellipses in original).The inmate pushing the cart stops and pulls him up by the shoulders, asking with astonishment "*Was? Du willst noch leben?* [What? You still want to live?] [...] and right then I found it odd, since it could not have been warranted and, on the whole, was fairly irrational (187).

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