Poetry, the Geometry of the Living Substance

Poetry, the Geometry of the Living Substance: Four Essays on Ágnes Nemes Nagy

By

Ágnes Lehóczky

Foreword by George Szirtes

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS

PUBLISHING

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This book first published 2011

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-2631-6, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2631-0

To the memory of my father

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Denise Riley, Dr George Szirtes and Dr Jeremy Noel-Tod, first of all, for guiding my research for four years at the University of East Anglia. Their sophisticated and constructive assistance has brought the work to completion.

A very special thank you goes to Veronika Kerek and Dr Győző Ferencz, whose generous correspondence from Budapest helped and enriched the final stages of the monographic work. Veronika is the executor of the Nemes Nagy legacy and Győző has been in full charge of the editorial work of Nemes Nagy's unpublished posthumous documents. I am very grateful to Veronika for meeting me in London and in Budapest in person and imparting the extraordinary depth of her knowledge of Nemes Nagy's life and oeuvre. I am grateful for the kind willingness of Győző Ferencz for providing me with the rare posthumous documents I have been relying on.

Many thanks to the editorial team of Cambridge Scholars Publishing, particularly to Carol Koulikourdi, Soucin Yip-Sou and Amanda Millar for their time they generously invested in taking care of the publishing process of the book.

Further thanks for professional support from Budapest to Dr Emil Hargittay, Éva Szentes and Attila Buda, the editor of the most recent Nemes Nagy bibliography, who generously provided me with ample information regarding the research. I am also grateful to Szabolcs Várady, the editor of *Holmi*, who supplied me with the electronic versions of all recently published Nemes Nagy posthumous documents edited by Győző Ferencz. I am equally thankful to Zsófia Zachár, one of the editors of *The Hungarian Quarterly*, and to Zoltán Ágoston, the editor of *Jelenkor*, who made crucial articles available for me.

I owe a massive thank you to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for their financial support throughout my research.

I would like to thank my loving mother, my sister and my grandparents for their endless emotional support from Budapest during these four years. Special thanks to Szabolcs Szigeti, whose support through the Hungarian Faludi Academy was indispensible in the first year of my research.

Special thanks are due to Isabel A. Hill, Dr Veronika Schandl, Emilie Vince, Maria Kardel and Dr Richard De Ritter who gave their time generously to give these essays further editorial support.

I owe a warm thank you to my dear friend Sokratis Kioussis, who gave me energy and endless encouragement in the final stages of my research and to fellow poets, researchers and friends from UEA, Sheffield and Budapest, whose uncompromising faith in my work during these four years have been vital: among many others, to Tessa Sowerby, Nathan Hamilton, Grainne McGeough, Dr Emma Bell, Dr Charles Kennedy, Andrew Spragg, Jo Budd, Peter Holm-Jensen, Dr Vahni Capildeo, Alice Wright, Melody Wright, Dr Lynda Thompson, Anna Selby, Kate Kilalea, Hayley Buckland, Liz Adams, Noémi Kovács, Márton Beke, Anna Biro-Kocsis, Gabriella Bazsó, Janet Macpherson, Deb Muldowney, Kim Knight, Stefan Tobler, Amaan Hyder, Marketa Mikulova, Dr Vikram Kapur, Dr Madeleine Callaghan, Gergely Hargittay, Dr A.C. Fernandez, Lelia Salles, Marian Del Moral, Fiona Roxburgh, Jenny Hodgson, Beth Titchiner, Gary J. Hughes, Dr Sarah Whitely, András Donászi-Ivanov, Meghan Purvis, Jack Underwood and Sam Riviere.

I would like to say thank you to the English Department at the University of Sheffield, too, particularly to Professor Adam Piette, Dr Joanna Gavins and Dr Duco van Oostrum. Their friendly support, humour and professional advice meant a lot to me in the very final stage of the editorial work.

Many thanks to Professor Jon Cook and Professor David Herd for their generous comments on the work.

And finally in memory of my father I would like to express my gratitude for all that he taught me; how to persevere relentlessly and obstinately with what may seem to be a sisyphean task.

PREFACE

GEORGE SZIRTES

Ágnes Nemes Nagy (1922-1991) is one of the genuinely important European poets of the twentieth century. But how is that to be proved to an anglophone reader? Anyone can make claims, and people do so all the time.

One can try to do it by providing the evidence of good translations and hope there are enough of them available to prove the case. That is assuming one knows the original language–Hungarian in this instance–well enough to venture a judgment.

In my own, admittedly curious, position, that is to say of someone reabsorbing the lost Hungarian of his childhood as an adult, in fact as a poet of his second language, I came to Nemes Nagy's poetry in three ways. Firstly, through reading translations of her work by the Irish poet, Hugh Maxton; secondly, by reading her in Hungarian; and thirdly, by meeting her and talking over aspects of her work, as well as of poetry in general.

Critical texts on Nemes Nagy in English were pretty well non-existent until the 1998 publication of the hard-to-find *On Poetry, a Hungarian Perspective*, edited by Győző Ferencz and John Hobbs in 1998: other than that there were only the introductions to the available translations: those by Bruce Berlind, and those by Hugh Maxton. There was a growing list of material in Hungarian, chiefly in the form of magazine articles, especially since the mid-eighties re-launch of *Újhold* (New Moon), the magazine with which she was most closely associated after the war, this time in an annual anthology form.

Újhold had been closed down in by the Stalinist regime in 1949 for 'bourgeois individualism'. It was a magazine where progressive, liberal writers could meet, explore and experiment, while retaining connections with a broadly intelligent public, but its ideology was out of key with what

the regime required so it had to be suppressed. Nemes Nagy was one of a group of major figures suffering this fate. Having published her first book in 1946, she was silenced for thirteen years, allowed to work in schools and write verses for children, but no more. This experience stayed with her for the rest of her life. The resentment burned on in her. As she wrote:

> He who cannot take revenge
> nor forgive must find redress
> in burning forever the low flame
> of his unquenchable bitterness.
> (*from* Journal)

Hungarian grammar is genderless - for *he* read *she* if you prefer, since it is a *she* who is writing, albeit at an avowedly impersonal distance, something she insisted on. Nemes Nagy made sure the low flame was kept burning. She was not the forgiving type. Her husband and fellow *Újhold* writer, the critic Balázs Lengyel, was imprisoned after 1949, but when she found out he had been unfaithful to her, she threw him out on his release. For all that he remained constant to both her and her work, constant, that is, to the poet, rather than to the woman.

The low flame was intense. Her feelings were strong and people felt strongly about her: either deeply devoted to her as a figure, as a poet and a thinker, or fearing and rejecting her. She was not a compromiser of any sort. She felt contemptuous of compromisers and would not forgive them.

But the fury in her poems was not personally directed, nor personally sourced. No names are named and one looks in vain for expressions of personal regret at betrayal (as she saw it) by this or that person, or for the bemoaning of lost opportunities. Very few people appear in her poems. Some of her last unpublished poems do refer to her personal condition or state of mind, but only as a kind of aside.

> Strange afternoon, I doubt now whether
> I'd felt so dull before or ever
> known a distress so dislocated.
> I was a child, uncomplicated
> by adult terrors. Now I fear
> that happy child might reappear.
> Have I improved? I might have done.
> But its another scent I'm on,
> I'm different. Of that not-me sense
> this poem is the evidence.
> (Strange Afternoon)

It is primarily, and potently, the ‘not-me’ sense we encounter in her work. There is nothing overtly or directly political in *not-me*. *Not-me* comments on both the personal and political realm by way of philosophical scorn for whatever is passing and is more locatable in terms of geology and sidereal time than in terms of human society. It is as if Nemes Nagy had undertaken the role of Walter Pater’s ‘Mona Lisa’, turning herself into a figure older than the rocks among which she sits, the rocks that are her true home on the great rock that is the Earth. The Earth, for her, is mountains, geysers, woods, lakes and the wind, with the odd spectral figure, more statue than human, moving among them. But it is the powers and objects of nature rather than nature herself that she wants to inhabit. It is phenomenon that fascinates her rather than schema.

Only in the person of the Egyptian Pharaoh, Akhenaton, does she find a human correlative. The religious autocratic rebel who tried in vain to overthrow polytheism in favour of monotheism and set to building a new city, a new culture, a new art, beginning everything anew, is a model large enough and distant enough to embody her sense of distance and power. Whether Akhenaton is friend or enemy is unclear: it is the realm Akhenaton inhabits that matters. The realm of Akhenaton overlaps with Nemes Nagy’s own time and place. So scenes from the Uprising of 1956 are the setting for ‘The Night of Akhenaton’ and a narrow gauge railway runs through ‘Akhenaton in Heaven’. Even so, the Akhenaton poems do not offer themselves as political allegory. Nemes Nagy is after something beyond politics or realism: it is existential reality she is after, and the two short key poems, ‘The Objects’ and ‘Above the Objects’ that point to the true area she’d wish to occupy.

THE OBJECTS

Look, look up to the massed blocks. In noon-light they stand, apart.
The objects are at peace within my heart.

ABOVE THE OBJECT

Because the head of every object glows,
trees glisten like arctic circles. In long rows
all 92 elements stand, frozen in endless white,
each wearing its own curious cap of light,
on each one's brow its likeness and reflection –
so body, I trust, shall rise in resurrection.

The consideration of things-in-themselves demands a capacity for intellectual discipline. The discipline in Nemes Nagy's earlier poems was chiefly formal in terms of prosody, but extended to a kind of tight-lipped mysticism (the body rising in resurrection), in which objects were surmised to be living entities of sorts. Hungarian poetry had not paid much attention to objects before: it had been inclined to declaration and display, whether in the form of personal and political passion or of melancholy and withdrawal, objects being secondary to identity. Nemes Nagy's verse rejected both identity and display. Her poetry is composed of significant understatement, its power latent rather than displayed, power held at tension.

The fascination with objecthood took a dramatic turn with the production of a series of prose poems that appeared in 1981 under the title *Egy pályaudvar átalakítása* (Transformation of a Railway Station). Here it is vanishings that dominate the world of objects. Life is fragmentary, in disjointed conversation with itself. The poet moves through the building site of a railway station, down a street, in and out of a museum, and over an extraordinary terraced landscape. These places are not sites for human narrative: they are phenomena composed of impersonal precisions that are nevertheless bursting with human passion. It is just that the passion is in the things, transferred by an enormous, all but passive, act of the will.

It is these paradoxes that Ágnes Lehóczky seeks to explore in this important study. In what way does Nemes Nagy's work fit into the world as described by Beckett and Rilke? into a sacred space abandoned by the sacred? a poetic space, as Lehóczky puts it ,'deprived of "presence"' and populated by 'negative statues'?

It is a realm of feeling we understand instinctively but can rarely construct as a world. Nemes Nagy's achievement is to produce such a world, complete with geology and force field, in which identity is continued as language in the spaces between statements about the world. Lehóczky seeks not only to understand that world–as a poet she herself inhabits it–but also to establish a place in English consciousness for Nemes Nagy's construction of that world.

Nemes Nagy was not a productive poet. Of the twenty-six books listed under her name, eight were critical works belonging to the latter part of her life, nine were books for children, three were Selected or Collected Poems with a few new poems included. Only five books were collections

of new poems. The posthumous Hungarian edition of the *Collected Poems* has 132 pages of poems published in book form in her life time, the rest of the 300 odd pages being unpublished, posthumously collected work composed of sketches, commemorative verses and some reflections. They throw light on her as a person and confirm her status as a prosodist of remarkable talent, but do not substantially change the balance of her oeuvre.

Reading her, even in translation, one cannot help but be struck by the fierce intellect, the high seriousness, and absolute concentration manifest in her poetry. It is an intellect that, however, does not work upon us in terms of ideas, but of sensibility. Had she written in English, German or French her work would now be perceived as central to mid- and late-twentieth century consciousness and beyond. It would have lodged in our consciousness as a marker in the way we feel the world. As it is we hear her through other voices. Lehóczky goes to the core, negotiating her interpreters, but probing the elements of the work in the original Hungarian. The result is the uncovering of a major figure, as relevant to us now as she was in her own, partly silenced, lifetime.

INTRODUCTION

I. AN OPEN ENQUIRY: A *MISE EN ABYME*

This is an open enquiry about poetry, a *mise en abyme*. It is a *mise en abyme* in the polysemic sense of the phrase, given that any attempts to come to final conclusions about specific traits, predominantly *sui generis* traits of poetry, may be simultaneously infinite and abyssal. Nevertheless, I make this paradoxical attempt to capture this dual nature of poetry, that of the infinite and the abyssal, through careful reading of the poetry and prose of Ágnes Nemes Nagy.[1] Nemes Nagy's work has galvanised and channelled my own writing since I first encountered her oeuvre in the 1990s and in my view Nemes Nagy is unquestionably one of the most exceptional Hungarian poets of the post-war period. George Szirtes, one of her current translators suggests, "no doubt she is far more than this: […] she is one of the great indispensable European poets of the twentieth century."[2] She is also an essayist in the grand European tradition, who although deprived of the (post)modern writing of her era, leaves her marks on the century's philosophical and poetic theories, and arrives at a similar destination to her contemporary Western authors. I suggest that in this sense, Nemes Nagy shares the notion of Rilke's ideological self-exile. Although Rilke, in contrast with Nemes Nagy, consciously avoids the works influencing his contemporaries, he arrives within a self-dictated pace, at his own most veracious and authentic guide to life, both in his poems and his prose work, which he feels could not be reduced to another's teaching, image, or text. In this way, Nemes Nagy too, although following her own solitary routes within a "closed-in world,"[3] handles the epistemological and poetic inquiries, contents and contexts on which her contemporaries discourse.[4] Throughout the course of these essays I draw analogies between Nemes Nagy's devoted pursuit of a new poetic language, a "language of (non)survival," and the languages of Rilke, Heidegger, Celan, Beckett, and Blanchot, whose works Nemes Nagy directly or indirectly encountered.[5] I discuss these poetic languages in the context of post-Nietzschean philosophy, and attempt to illustrate how Nemes Nagy's works contribute to the vast discipline of literary theory from reception-theory to aesthetics, literary history to modern hermeneutics, and, *inter alia*, from translation-studies to modern linguistics.[6]

Artlessly I start from objects. I start from objects which, I argue, are the poet's existential guidance. Nemes Nagy trusts that objects carry "news" within themselves. Nevertheless, not only do objects supply an existential map, but they are more than what they *are* in the simple mereness of their own being, purely because the objective world, which according to Nemes Nagy, is sufficient unto itself, may concentrate itself in them.[7] This created animate world rooted in the poet's rigorous reading of the objective environment is, I find, "housed" in the use of trope in the form of "embodied abstractions."[8] As the initial focus of my inquiries I introduce and explore the poet's profound attentiveness to objects and to the exclusive relationship of objects to the poetic image. The spiral theme of these four essays is that tropes manifest themselves in spatial terms, and that in their spatial aspect poetic images carry similar attributes to those of objects of the external world. In this way, I suggest they act as power centres, or simply as an almost palpable home for objectivised life embodied and temporarily demanding attention in the poem. Throughout the arguments of the four essays I reference Heidegger and Blanchot's philosophical works, and Rilke, Celan and Beckett's aesthetic and theoretical markers, drawing indirect parallels between the fields of poetics and epistemology. These are parellels that Nemes Nagy pursued ardently throughout her poetry and critical work. In addition, I make an attempt to describe objects as synecdochal and I suggest that things create a quasi-perfect synthesis with language and the psyche: that is to say, a Rilkean "inexpressible unity,"[9] which Nemes Nagy refers to as an "inseparable unity."[10] I concentrate on the hidden, semi-deceptive and aleatoric aspect of the synecdoche, and the way it stands manifest in the poetry of Nemes Nagy. These investigations lead to an understanding that the poem's space, as Nemes Nagy claims, is "in-between" and that this in-betweenness is "inseparable."[11] Not only does Derrida play a role in my argument on account of his link with both Heidegger and Celan, but I also rely on the Kantian concept of the "parergonal," which I argue is a possible way to define the poetic space of Nemes Nagy's poems: a space, I learn, that exists between paradoxes.

Although Nemes Nagy was supposedly familiar with Kant's work,[12] in this dimension of the argument Derrida's interpretation of Kant's term illuminates the in-between trait of the poetic space Nemes Nagy frequently refers to as border-line, a periphery, a thin dimension between external and internal, a scattered frame, or an involuntary unity. Nemes Nagy's boundary interposes itself between subject and object, the trope and the world, the nameable and the unnameable, and the psyche and the trope.

Eventually, as I come to the end of my inquiries, I argue that it permeates that dimension which stretches between the notion of the survival of the self and its extinction. In my understanding, this poetic dimension, that of the "in-between," may also seem infinite and abyssal, similarly to the way Heidegger claims that the "balance" of the poetic space is always a state of "risk."[13] Like this, Nemes Nagy argues, the task of the poem is to leave "the greatest distance between words; the greater the distance the deeper the abyss the poem creates."[14]

In *The Architecture of Seeing: a Tour of Blue Ball Street*, I introduce early poems of Nemes Nagy which continue to hold onto the modernist Hungarian poetic tradition, by which not only is the world comprehensible but nameable. They exist in relation to the platonic heritage which maintains that it is possible to grasp the objective world through language. I go on to note how Nemes Nagy surpasses this metaphysical "comforting force-field,"[15] discovering that through careful surveillance of the objective world, the realm of consciousness may broaden, and thus poetry may be capable of bringing about a new, rejuvenated language of the unknown. This idea draws further parallels between Nemes Nagy and Rilke in this first essay, namely that objects "built into" tropes appear to function as incarnation of nameless contents of the self. It is an "epistemological campaign," Nemes Nagy writes, a campaign we must conduct "in the domain of our own unnamed emotions in order to enlarge our awareness."[16] Her intense interest in the objective world lies in the even more laborious search for solidity and security in the often scientifically based knowledge of the world. I notice that Nemes Nagy's traditionally platonic views, originating in a gnostic pathos which perceives the objective world as a gateway to some supreme knowledge of it, fall apart from her first collection onwards. As opposed to confidence in the phenomenological activity of observing and seeing through the tropes' stretching exercise to conquer unnamed terrains, Nemes Nagy experiences a paradigm shift in her Akhenaton-series and late prose poems in which any kind of conscious rhetoricity begins to malfunction in its conventional role as a medium by which one can capture the objective phenomena of the world.

In the second essay, *Negative Statues: The Synechdocal Object–The Torso*, which circuitously pursues Heidegger's philosophical and Rilke's aesthetic markers, I focus on poems written during the 1950s and beyond. Silenced by the regime of 1950s' Hungary, Nemes Nagy worked in intellectual isolation, writing under pseudonyms and limited to irregular publications until the end of her life. She worked both from her own

experience and from solitarily exploring a limited range of Western literature under a fundamentally anti-Western political administration, "like an embryo rushing through evolution."[17] Nemes Nagy realised that the language the poem speaks had become unmanageable and somewhat impracticable: that it is some sovereign Babelic material, which is perhaps more difficult than ever to craft "well." Thus she recognises that objects, operating as "negative statues" of epistemology, have a dual nature too, that of solidity providing a sense of security, and that of limitation, as the incarnation of some unidentifiable contents carrying unknown news.[18] This is "venturing," as Heidegger claims, into the realm beyond the rational,[19] and "balancing out," between the nameable and the unnameable, between the world and the self, between memory and the psyche.[20] Confronting this paradox, Nemes Nagy notices that the language of the poem makes these objects only partially manifest and the world no more than partially comprehensible, thus forcing the trope into a "torso-existence." It simultaneously explores the "torso"-status of "new facts of the psyche"[21] along with "past escapees"[22] of twentieth-century identity which Nemes Nagy's oeuvre attempts to reconstitute. In this section I seek the relation between the poem and its external and internal realities, the unspoken emotional dynamism of the mind as well as the external object it is drawn to, and conclude that the so called unity between language and the objective world, between the self and external reality, may exist only in inconsistency, in "parergonality." Hence, the poet's secure devices gradually fade into a pseudo-metaphysical vision. The precise deployment of the rational, syntax, trope, chronology, descriptive observations, myths, imagery, symbols: namely, that of rhetoricity itself, is diluted into poetic dimensions beyond semantic borders. However, this shift is extraordinary and perplexing from a poet who has great confidence in the Hungarian poetic tradition that thrives in rich poetic apparatus.

During the course of this essay I suggest that words, as Nemes Nagy increasingly experiences, do not map reality as easily as she supposes in her earlier poems: "Look at the table, the door, the carburettor, crowd hysterics, the mountain goat, look at them carefully," Nemes Nagy stresses. "And then try to transform the carpet fringe into words."[23] Despite all her early epistemological conviction based on a would-be unification of language and the world Nemes Nagy notices that the correlation between language and reality is as incongruent as it is discordant.

However, what happens when the poet makes an attempt to re-define the long-trusted alliance with her own poetic devices? In the third essay,

The Self-Exit of the Trope, I predominantly examine Nemes Nagy's 'Akhenaton' series. Partly due to political constraints,[24] partly due to Nemes Nagy's intense interest in ontological inquiries (if these two may be separated at all), her security and confidence in the objective world become deranged. This is followed by her increasing lack of trust in the sufficiency of poetic/figurative language itself; the frames disappear from her work, and the trope appears inept. In this sense, not only do metaphors manoeuvre in a 'torso-like' state, but they eventually fall into absolute silence in attempting to confront the innermost fact of the psyche, the *individuum ineffable*. This is to say that language, gaining pseudo-control, makes its way solitarily beyond borders, disabling the mind from providing a homecoming to the unnameable self and the unspeakable memory. In this essay, amongst Heidegger, Rilke and Derrida's texts,[25] I reference Celan's prose piece "The Meridian," to elucidate my own inquiries and the creative process of Nemes Nagy's poetry. In this chapter I suggest that language breaks free of control and carries out its monologue in search of the 'other.' This is a monologue that either "hurries ahead of us"[26] in a Celanian sense or "returns to itself"[27] and into quietude. These poems thus become unique events describing their own process of simultaneously coming to being and withdrawing. Therefore, I suggest that the rift between language and silence is rather ambiguous. In these poems, indeed, "language speaks,"[28] driving the subject to become solely the "function of language."[29] However, language, unanchored, may speak of nothing, circumscribing nothing. As a result, despite her initial reliance on seeing in the Husserlian sense, Nemes Nagy realises that the long-practised observations of the objective world are deceptively rooted in the personal, that is, in subjectivity, in the observer's angle. As a consequence of being embedded in personal memory, these phenomenological observations, therefore, are unlikely to capture truth, or that of any metaphysical *aletheia*, the "truth" of the psyche's emotional dynamisms, as Nemes Nagy writes, whose validity she "examined a thousand times."[30] Thus Nemes Nagy discovers that, due to being produced by consciousness, the trope or *tertium comparationis* as she often refers to it, cannot unfold the immanent essence for which she is searching. At this stage I explore the border of the psyche, the parergonal identity as an open possibility of an attraction towards nothingness, towards the notion of self-erasure and towards beyond the border of wordlessness, towards a semi-conscious amnesia. Nonetheless, the building material of these poems constructs, paradoxically, just as much of a wordless architecture of the realm of unnameables as an arbitrary materiality of the words of the immanent.

In the last essay, *Conclusion: The Poetry of The Absent*, however, I find that seeing itself, existential seeing (the way it operates in Nemes Nagy's early work) creates an epistemological dilemma in Nemes Nagy's late prose poems. Nemes Nagy queries the security she felt in the accuracy of seeing that formerly provided a diaphanous structure to scaffold the immanent processes of comprehending existence, since she realises that "a likeness is not a likeness but a different aspect of the same law;"[31] that is to say, the realm of the trope is solely housed by the mind and self-consciousness interjects between the poetic word and the thing it targets. In this final essay I attempt to explore the auto-deconstructive aspects of Nemes Nagy's last prose-poems in which the speaker, the "I" of the poems becomes disintegrated, scattered, and eventually discharged. I believe that at this stage Nemes Nagy arrives at one of the cornerstones of post-modern hermeneutics: namely, that instead of conscious rhetoricity by which we construct and comprehend the world, it is the dialogue with the other which is the essence of the work of art. It is, as Samuel Beckett says, to exist "in words," to be "made of words, others' words,"[32] which allows discourse to go on, since language is not only the foundation but also the condition of existence: "Dark, thing-in-itself," Nemes Nagy stresses: "if it ceases to exist: I will cease to exist. Or perhaps I will fade into it. I am dependent on it. Everything else: vanity."[33] Here the condition of existence is rooted in its inexhaustible and repetitive linguistic qualities. In its inexhaustibility, time plays an important role, where past, present and future are entangled, leaving these dialogic prose poems in perpetual process, a *mise en abyme.* From this perspective the world is seen from a peripheral angle, from the angle of the solitary and yet polyphonic voice of the non-knower, which observes the world from the marginal perspective of what Blanchot calls a "distanced seeing."[34] Thus instead of attempting to pull unnameables into language these late poems by Nemes Nagy discuss the contingent nature of things, the problematic and complex disposition of the most fundamental oppositions: language and the world, the signifier and the signified, the teller and the told, being and non-being. As a result of this, the referential nature of language is once again queried. This marginal position cuts short the earlier metaphysical perspective of the poems, and hence dialogicity, which rather appears to operate as a form of monologicity of the speaking subject, replaces the epistemological function of tropes. Dialogism,[35] operating in the Bakhtinian sense, interrogates existence itself attempting to exhaust the infinite; in these late prose poems the dictation of existence corresponds to the dictation of language. Dialogism, in its endlessly repeated linguistic whirlwind like language's autonomous "talking ball,"[36] is a new way to raise ontological

questions. However, this ontology, Nemes Nagy claims, becomes "metaphysics without the metaphysical,"[37] echoing Valery's "mysticism without God," and Hofmannsthal's "mystic without the mystic."[38] This deploys the vocabulary of science even more extensively, which, according to Nemes Nagy, may be "capable of conjuring the most explosive emotions,"[39] and so replaces the function of the trope. In this sense dialogism reappropriates the central poetic role of the trope offering a new hermeneutic disposition towards the external world. Anachronistic and anaphoric elements play a fundamental role in these late poems. Time pulls existence and non-existence into one dimension, into a newly discovered "retrofuturistic"[40] space of poetry in which the rock-solid semantic ground of the word evaporates into a perpetual deferral of its decipherability. This Derridean "lack,"[41] this Blanchotean "absence" between the word and the object, this so called "silenced object,"[42] now operates as the essence of the work of art and, in my understanding, as the essence of these poems. In contrast with the early poems, a lot of the contradictory syntax, ambivalences, paradoxes, negations of previous pronouncements, and tautologies prepare these late prose texts for their own deconstruction, for the aleatoricism of their semantic presence.

It is simultaneously extraordinary and ironic that Nemes Nagy is searching for the unnameable all through her early work, and that it is only when she actually gives up the search linguistically that she finds it in the prose poems. As amalgams constituted through the voices of others, these texts speak from the edges of being, echoing a peripheral polyphonic tone of language. Thus her speech conforms to a system of linguistic prescriptions taken as a system of differences: that is, to the marginal, the scene of her final destinations. As a result, the phenomenological function of "looking" at the external or internal phenomena of "being here" becomes "superfluous"[43] and "ill seen,"[44] thus providing the metaphysical role of eidetic looking[45] with the absurd gesture of observing what "is not," and dismissing what "is." Perhaps all poetry, therefore, eventually turns to lack, or to the poetry of absence. In this sense, I suggest that the poetry of Ágnes Nemes Nagy evolves into an ongoing process of *apprendre à vivre enfin*:[46] a life-long practice of living her own life (death) in her writing.

II. ÁGNES NEMES NAGY (1922-1991): "THE HOLLOW OEUVRE"[47]

> There are enormous caverns, abysses opening between the lines. All that I have not written down, all that I have not talked about. Like astronomical black holes: as if there was nothing there, only horrific, unknown peril. No, not really unknown: the words' thin shaft of light leads through the dark spaces of well-known life-threats and prohibitions. My oeuvre (I must chuckle bitterly at this word) is like a field bombed into pieces, full of cracks and craters, here and there the ruins of houses. Good Lord, how much is missing.[48]

Along with many other Eastern and Central European writers, the work of Nemes Nagy could have been more complete if she had lived in a more convivial post-war era, and yet her volumes of poems and prose reveal an integrated and cohesive oeuvre despite her long struggle to prevent her voice from being silenced. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that "silence" and "word" are not only vital but quasi-equivalent terms in her poetry. It was a silence that, as Győző Ferencz, the editor of Nemes Nagy's posthumous works comments, "threatened her from two different directions–from political oppression by a totalitarian regime, and from her own philosophical speculations."[49]

"I was born at a peculiar historic moment,"[50] Nemes Nagy comments in one of the interviews with Lóránt Kabdebó towards the end of her life. As a daughter of middle-class Protestant parents, she was born in 1922 into a family of "Ernestines, honourable Susannes, farms, carts and vicarages,"[51] barely in Budapest since her father, a lawyer, fled Transylvania in 1920 when it was annexed to Romania after the First World War. Despite the family's continuing financial difficulties, Nemes Nagy received an outstanding education at Baár Madas, in Buda, which, as she writes, gave her a life-time stimulus in a "moral and professional measure."[52] "This was far too good a world," she says, "which, unfortunately, led me and many others to believe that this was, in effect, a miniature version of the entire world. However, it wasn't. It wasn't. Never again have I had Baár-Madas in my life. It was unique, but deceptive. Nonetheless, I do not mind this deception."[53] Nemes Nagy then continued her studies in Hungarian Language and Literature, Latin and Art at Péter Pázmány University in Budapest, which, as she writes, was an "intellectual desolation,"[54] compared with the creative and familial atmosphere her grammar school had provided. Although she was welcomed in literary circles, her debut as a young poet to the literary life of the time was

overshadowed by the Second World War. In 1944, when Nazi-Germany occupied Hungary, Nemes Nagy took part in the resistance, and in her "kitchen laboratory"[55] she collaborated with friends to fabricate passports and new birth certificates for Jewish-born writers and friends, such as the humanist essayist-novelist Antal Szerb and Gábor Halász, who were finally deported in 1945.[56] Through these intellectual friendships with Szerb and Halász did Nemes Nagy learn of "the sovereignty of the intellect, of normal life, and the value of literature."[57] Furthermore, in some of the recently published posthumous letters and documents Ferencz highlights evidence[58] for Nemes Nagy and Balázs Lengyel's desperate attempts to forge identity certificates for Miklós Radnóti as well, which Radnóti refused.[59] She rarely mentioned this hazardous role in later years when it might have provided her some political advantage, when in the late 1940s and early 1950s she was accused of membership of the bourgeoisie and, ironically, fascism, despite the fact that she considered herself to be a writer with a "left-wing intellectual background" for all of her life.[60] Her first volume of poems, *Kettős világban* (In a Dual World), was published immediately after the war in 1946 as a collection of a young intellectual's experiences of coexisting with war and death.[61]

Soon after the war Nemes Nagy became a member of a group of young writers, poets and artists who ran a short-lived yet historically significant periodical called *Újhold* (*New Moon*), rolling "from the life of a protected classy young girl" into "extreme history," "from a hidden interest in underground literature into the flesh and blood literary scene."[62] The editor of *Újhold* was Balázs Lengyel, a critic and later the husband of Nemes Nagy.[63] This group of two bound together a whole new generation including other writers such as, amongst many others, János Pilinszky, Iván Mándy, Miklós Mészöly, Géza Ottlik, Zoltán Jékely, György Rába, Magda Szabó, Mátyás Domokos and Sándor Weöres. "All of us, including myself," Nemes Nagy writes, "who had started by writing poetry following the poetic tradition of the 1930s and the poetic heritage of the different generations of *Nyugat*,[64] needed to let go of this, to surpass it to a degree."[65] She continues:

> To write about the extreme: about the assault on existence in a spiritual and physical sense. About physical misery and madness. We let these experiences crawl into our poems. The presence of these two anxieties quasi tamed by a pinch of *intellectualism* [italics original] was a very good lesson for us [...] Yet it was not enough after a while [...] since we had our own say in the matter.[66]

In 1948 the post-war liberal coalition that constituted the government was removed from power in a *coup d'état* by Communists directed from Moscow, and the country came under Stalinist control. At the end of 1948, *Újhold* was banned for spreading bourgeois ideology. This was the year when Nemes Nagy returned to Hungary after an eight month study-tour in Italy and France that, as she recalls, "meant a gigantic jump into the world" in terms of cultural experience. Indeed, it was a "grand tour around it." She comments in the 1980s:

> *New Moon* had not been intended to be what it became. We had no idea it would turn out to have such a special role in Hungarian literary history. […] We wanted to follow the intellectual elegance that took place between the two wars. […] We didn't know that it would provide a pretext to ban us from Hungarian culture for ten or fifteen years. Nor did we know that twenty or twenty-five years later it would be excavated, slowly, step by step, like a crumbling relic. All we wanted was a periodical for young authors. […] War, danger, and the experience of seeing all human ideals debased and trampled on had come to us when we were still very young and inexperienced. […] We were not silenced because, as they claimed, we were fascists. Nor was it the case that they did not want any of our writing. Quite the contrary. Latterly, in '47 and even in late '48-49, they were constantly trying to win us over. […] Naturally, at first we believed that we were a part of the literature of this country. But, as the expectations became ever more absurd in our eyes, we became increasingly withdrawn. […] We did not want to comply with the cultural and literary standards that were being imposed on us, since we considered them totally wrong. Therefore, we became excluded and written off. […] It wasn't difficult to have a career, to become one of the most prominent writers of the era; that wasn't a problem. What was difficult was not to make a career, to suppress our natural ambitions and throw away our literary vocation that had just begun.[67]

The poetry of Nemes Nagy was not aesthetically legitimate in the new regime's hegemony, therefore the 1950s became "a tunnel era" for writers like her. "We lived with no hope," she writes almost thirty years later.[68] In later interviews she often refers to Georg Lukács as the "executor" of *Újhold*,[69] whose report prompted the ban[70] on the literary periodical and as a consequence, put the literary movement out of favour.[71] As a result, to exist as a writer under this regime was to translate and/or to write children's literature. Nemes Nagy comments on this: "in the 1950s I was allowed to write children's poems, mainly 'reminding children to brush their teeth before going to bed.' Then, as I advanced in it step by step, I realised that it was a literary genre."[72] To earn a living, she also worked as a teacher between 1953 and 1957. From 1957 she was a freelance writer

making a living from her translations.[73] "The era of the personality cult was the era of translations," she writes, "not only in my life, but in the life of the whole of Hungarian literature, especially in the life of those writers who were banned from publication."[74] Nonetheless, these translations, as she recalls, gave her the opportunity to "luxuriate in one's particular poetic proneness to poetic form. I got hooked on my own amusement with form, and I utterly enjoyed it."[75] Ironically, the pressure of the 50s that forced writers to turn to translations "significantly revived the four-hundred year old Hungarian tradition of literary translations; it was born not only from coercion, but also out of ambition."[76]

After the revolution in 1956 against the totalitarian Soviet regime, Nemes Nagy's position partially changed. Although the revolution did provide some intellectual liberalization for writers and for the arts, the cultural sphere was still conducted under the state's ideological control. Thus, after the defeat of the 1956 revolution, a great number of writers suffered prison sentences of varying lengths. However, as a result of the moderation of cultural policy in 1957, Nemes Nagy's second collection of poems *Szárazvillám* (Dry Lightning) was published,[77] reflecting an "in-between" state of mind, lost in the intersection of questions of moral and existential threats. In the 1960s of the Kádár-regime,[78] under the direction of György Aczél, cultural policy became more refined and tactically oriented. As a result, these authors were offered a somewhat more "liveable" climate, allowing Nemes Nagy and her fellow writers to make a limited number of cultural trips abroad.[79] This new cultural policy went hand in hand with the consolidation of internal politics which conciliated the entire country. This meant that, bit by bit, *Újhold* authors were allowed to publish their work with a limited regularity,[80] without being forced to take on political roles. Gradually they made their arrival in contemporary literature and many of them came to be surrounded by something of a cult: Pilinszky, Mészöly, Nemes Nagy, Ottlik, and Mándy continued to gain in popularity. Nonetheless, Nemes Nagy "obstinately" maintained her literary position, which meant that she was still limited to having only one poetry collection published in a decade, not receiving commendatory reviews, and still being stigmatised as obscure and hermetic. However, following the publication of her next collections, *Napforduló* (Solstice) in 1967, and *Lovak és Angyalok* (The Horses and the Angels) in 1969,[81] her reputation finally rocketed, which she found hard to believe. Ferencz recalls: "Once, towards the end of her life when I informed her that her poetry had been taught at university during the seventies, she refused to believe me. *No*, she replied, *you only say that to comfort me. In those*

years we were severely oppressed."[82] Nevertheless it is true that during the years when Nemes Nagy was not permitted to publish her poems, in the view of many, to a degree "adamantly," she continued to make her presence felt by silence. It was in the 1970s that she started writing essays. Her essays, discussing issues of language and poetry, linguistics and philosophy, art and aesthetics, are marked by a certain sagacity, vigour and intuitiveness that correspond with her eloquent idiosyncrasies.[83] Besides the poems I rely on these essays as pivotal and primary resources for my premises on Nemes Nagy's poetics. These essays, Nemes Nagy writes in one of her last fragments to her "desk drawer" in 1990, were written with a "concealed political-topical tone" as "secretly ticking bombs against the regime's corrupting literary politics."[84] "Critics," Nemes Nagy continues, "do not seem to realise what *isn't* in this book."[85]

> They do not seem to understand, that these essays were born in the 60s and 70s in an environment drowned in a sea of lies; and while these essays were making an attempt to tell what they *could* tell, they were at the same time, in a very subtle way, trying to confront that consolidating dictatorial administration, in which we lived […] there is not one review which would recognise this concealed political-topical dimension of these essays, or which would talk about that false and dishonest ideology which surrounded us in those years, not about those semi-truths, or occasional truths: since it is true, by then, books by some of the previously silenced writers could irregularly be published, however, they critical reception was either followed by berserk or belittling reviews or by none at all. […] It is a miracle that these essays were allowed to be printed. Their most hazardous trick is that I am *discussing literature* [italics original] in them, while, at the same time, every single one of them is underground-literature in disguise.[86]

The last two principal collections of Nemes Nagy's poems to be published during her lifetime were *Között* (Between)[87] in 1981 and *A Föld emlékei* ("Earth's Souvenirs")[88] in 1986. By the late 1980s Nemes Nagy and her fellow poets of *Újhold* were recognised as writers of the official literary scene, partly due to the fact that *Újhold* was "resurrected" in 1986 and published as an almanac, and partly as a result of being recognised by a nascent Hungarian literature of the time, marked by names such as Esterházy, Nádas, Lengyel and Hajnóczy, who stretched out a hand to them. Continuity with this generation was emphasized by young authors who, at the same time had the freedom and courage to experiment with the rejuvenation of literary language. When Esterházy discovered Ottlik's novel *Iskola a határon* (*School at the Frontier*), a novel that came to be a cult book in Hungarian literature, he pointed out that "Ottlik's jacket […]

that tweed jacket[89] [would] not be worn with the same combination of elegance and nonchalance any more," thus paying tribute to the entire generation of *Újhold* writers.

Nonetheless the "damage," the "cracks and craters" caused by a political epoch could never be entirely repaired and perhaps Nemes Nagy could never fully reconcile[90] with that "abyss, for a missed, banned, great cultural chance, for an eradicated era," and for those "three mopped-up years, 1945-1948."[91] "I am not a political writer, which is odd," she said in an interview in 1984 when asked about politics and literature of the 1950s. "Yet I lived in an age," Nemes Nagy continues,

> when I faced questions, and hence it was a must to state one's position on those questions. In my view, the writer should only be present when politics crosses a critical line and becomes a moral issue. If it becomes a moral issue, then one must make a decision. For example, in my life there were two eras like this: fascism with the addition of war, and the 1950s, when one had to be present, one had to make a decision. As for me, mine was a silent disposition. I've forgiven those who flirted with political power at that time, but they'll never forgive me that I remained clean. […] I would like to quote from Ottlik: Perhaps there are luckier, greater nations, that can afford to have immoral writers–but a small nation like this cannot get away with it.[92]

It is a shame, yet perhaps a necessary path, to have "holes" and "chasms" in a poet's oeuvre; however, my aim is to attempt to build a few invisible arches over "known" and "unknown abysses," over never *quite fully* rectified "cracks and craters," nor ever remedied "life-threats" and "peril(s)" of Nemes Nagy's life and work.