

# General Section

---



# The Mouth and the Tongue – or the Dictator and the Dentist

## The Head and its Parts as Figures in Andrea Tompa's Prose

*Csilla Bonifertné Bodroghi*<sup>1</sup>

---

### Abstract

In this paper I attempt to give a reading of Andrea Tompa's two novels by examining one chosen chapter from each work, hoping that the investigation will provide insights into the work as a whole. I will approach the text through close reading and examine the poetic and semantic role of the body parts that appear in the text. In *The Hangman's House*, the focus will be on the *mise en abyme* and we will have a better understanding of the metaphoric process. In *Home*, an essayistic travel novel, the interplay of literal and metaphorical meanings and the question of allegory will be raised. The contrast between medical themes and an artistic approach reveals the relationship between language and home, and the strangeness inherent in that which is one's "own".

### Keywords

Body parts, embodied experience, metaphor, language, home, mother tongue, dictatorship

*"The senses of proximity are the skin, the ears, the tongue and the nose - the gaze alone is capable of the act of objectification and idealisation: of distancing and organising the simultaneous order of things. The critic uses all his senses, so to speak, simultaneously: his judgments of true and false, beauty and ugliness, are based on the dynamics of proximity and distance."*

(Sarloita Deczki, *Praise of Sensuality*)

---

<sup>1</sup> Pázmány Péter Catholic University, [bonifertne.csilla@gmail.com](mailto:bonifertne.csilla@gmail.com)

In this paper,<sup>2</sup> I would like to show the prose-poetic role of parts of the head in Andrea Tompa's prose. I examined all five of her published novels from this point of view. It is interesting to note that in each of them there is a part of the body that is of central importance. (Of course, this emphasis on my part does not mean that only one sense organ appears in a work.) This narrow interpretative framework offers the possibility of seeing Andrea Tompa's oeuvre as a unified whole, insofar as a face is formed by mouth, head, ear, tongue, and eye; this may be a confluence of interpretative arbitrariness and chance, but it may lead to important insights. The validity and *raison d'être* of this viewpoint is due, first, to the recent prominence of various body poetics and corporeal narratology approaches in literary studies, and second, to the increasing prominence of embodied mind theory (Varela, F. J., Thompson, E., Rosch, E., 1991) in philosophical, psychological, and linguistic studies since the 1990s. Linguistic cognitive metaphor theory, understood on the basis of the embodied mind, is also relevant to this study (Kövecses 2005, 32). On the other hand, in the past few years, such hybrid fields of research as *medical humanities* have been continuously gaining ground within cultural studies.<sup>3</sup> Daniel Punday's theory laid the foundations for corporeal narratology, one of the novelties of which is that it incorporates referential readings of the body into the creation of meaning.<sup>4</sup>

Here I focus on two works, specifically her first and fourth novels, because these two works exist in an English translation. In *The Hangman's House* (*A bóbér háza*, first Hungarian edition 2010) I explore the mouth, and in *Home* (*Háza*, first Hungarian edition 2020) the tongue. I am also looking for answers to the question of the relationship between body parts and text, how they participate in meaning making, and whether we are dealing with metaphorization and allegory. We will see that the starting point is a concrete narrative unit, and from this we will derive multiple meanings throughout the text. An oscillation between literal and metaphorical meanings seems to be the author's trademark. This exploration appears to support the argument concerning Tompa's whole oeuvre that embodied experience, different modes of perception, and sensory language are prominent features in this prose.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is an extract from the extended and further developed version of my lecture for the conference on *Poetics and Semantics of Literary Representations of the Head and its Parts* held on 13 January 2024 at Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest. In this lecture I studied all five of Tompa's novels and in each the role of a part of the head: in *Top to Tail*, *Two Doctors in Transylvania* I examined the figure of the head, in *Omertà* the ear as a subtext in the Riffaterrian sense, and in her recent work *Often We Don't Die*, the figure of the eye. The role of the body is most prominent in *Top to tail*, where the body is a code that provides a way of approaching the whole emancipatory era represented. The study of the five novels (with the two others studied here) puts together a whole image of a face (mouth, head, ears, tongue, eyes) as, in a sense, a metaphor of Tompa's oeuvre.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. *Helikon's* special issue on *Medical Humanities*, Volume 68, no 1, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Györgyi Földes speaks about Punday's theory: "He argues that although the body always fits into a sign system, it also points beyond the text, preserves cultural and thematic influences, points to its sociological and anthropological frames, and is influenced to some extent by the personality of the author." (Földes 2018, 27)

## 1. The dictator's mouth

Andrea Tompa's first novel is *The Hangman's House*, published in 2010, the most analyzed chapter of which is entitled "The Mouth". This chapter is the third in a novel of 38 loosely linked chapters, in which schoolchildren assemble a living image of the dictator's face at the behest of a teacher. It is also a key chapter, since, according to Júlia Szilágyi, it contains the key sentence of the novel, which suggests that the hangman's house is only a fiction. Perhaps this is the most analysed chapter of the novel because it is easy to extract from the text and it offers an easily interpretable metaphor or at least it seems to be an easily interpretable one. According to one interpretation, the power of the metaphor is related to its comprehensibility, namely that it is easily understood by the recipient: "Andrea Tompa's novel has the great merit of making this reality comprehensible to everyone without any embellishment, with this powerful metaphor." (Szilágyi 2010, 83)

Most critics and academics interpret it as a metaphor of the communist regime, showing how dictatorship works through a cult of personality. Éva Bányai emphasizes that the totalitarian system is inscribed on the body,<sup>5</sup> Flóra Kovács assumes the creation of the tableau as one of the "incorporation techniques of the regime" (Kovács 2011, 15) and attributes its description to the author's intention to illustrate it. In my opinion, if this were the case, namely that the author only wanted to illustrate something with this scene, it would detract from its aesthetic value. Kovács calls this image "redundant, but at the same time inventive" (Kovács 2011, 15), where in the case of the first adjective it is not entirely clear what the critic means. Perhaps we might think that although it "does not carry new information", it "represents an additional element in communication that facilitates reception" (Kovács 2011, 15).

The characteristic and authorial decision that the protagonist of the novel, the girl, should represent the dictator's mouth, i.e. his speech organ and not any other part of his body, is read in different ways by critics and scholars. Kovács sees in this that the individual can only appear as the "mouthpiece" of the regime (Kovács 2011, 15), while Orsolya András understands her as the opposite, as a signifier of silencing, as the regime's "intention to silence" individuals. (András 2023, 224) As

<sup>5</sup> "The Formation into image, the embodiment: the dictatorship-figure that emerges from the unconscious, but still *participating* bodies that consequently take *part* in it, is also a regime metaphor: they all form the dictatorship, the bodies are "constructing" it, which also raises the (memory) creating power of fiction: the existence of (fictional) doubles and the space of fear constructed by the image(s), just as the hangman's house was built by the memory to have something to fear." Bányai, Éva. 2016. *Fordulat-próza. Átmenetnarratívák a kortárs magyar irodalomban*. [Prose of the Turn: Transitional narratives in contemporary Hungarian literature], Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület. 36-37.

Magdolna Balogh has pointed out: in the chapter “At the Tear Man”, the girl learns that it is necessary to speak, that trauma can be dealt with by telling one's own story, though only silently” (Balogh 2023, 89). In this sense, the novel itself can be considered as subversive counter-speech (András 2023, 233) to this silencing intention, given that it is the story of the girl narrated by a third-person narrator.

The dictator's name is not written down once in the text. He is referred to as “One-ear” (*Félfülű*), because the side profile on his pictorial representations does not allow the viewer to see more than one ear. We have seen that this image of a face made up of bodies functions as a metaphor, but Szilágyi goes even further and speaks of “an image with symbolic power”, that is, she understands the “tableau” as a symbol that is stronger than the metaphor, and one that affects the whole novel. Szilágyi, moreover, considers this chapter to be “one of the best resolved chapters of the novel.” (Szilágyi, 2011)

This chapter, understood as a *mise en abyme*, can be a “small mirror” (diminishing mirror) of the whole novel, in so far as it seeks to show the “face” of a dictatorship from the bottom, from the point of view of an adolescent girl, told in an “undisclosed order” in successive chapters. The face, made up of ignorant children who do not know their roles as parts, visible only from above, can be juxtaposed with the text: is there a position or point of view that unites the pieces and makes them whole? Does the reader get a picture of the period, of the Ceaușescu dictatorship?

The chapter, which consists of a single long sentence, opens with this sentence in medias res: “*What part of him are you?*” (Tompá 2021b, 22, original italics) This follow-up conversation with classmate Csabi, waiting at the trolley-bus station, embeds the ekphrasis in a narrative framework and creates readerly expectations, since it is not yet known to which person and to which part the question refers. A conversation with a classmate awakens the girl to what has happened earlier. The ekphrastic text thus describes not only the image, but also the situation in which the girl runs away from the scene of the conversation, while becoming aware of her role in a living image.

Drawing on the analysis of Mónika Dánél, who interprets this text as an ekphrasis, reading it from the point of view of the relationship which exists between image and language (2018, 115), we can say that language is not transparent, as the text calls attention to its own linguistic composition which constructs itself as a speech. In this way, instead of using language to create an image of the photograph in the reader, whether known or not to the reader, self-referentiality becomes the primary concern, the rhythm of the text pulling the reader along. Language draws

attention to itself primarily through repetition. In the following passage, the lexeme of “pictures” is used three times in succession and a little later a fourth time, which gives particular emphasis to the figure of the leader as a fiction created by visuality:

I am him, or more precisely we are all him, because we're all stood in nice, tidy order and we turn on the word of command and we're him: but he himself doesn't exist anywhere, nobody's ever seen him, never: Tátá's seen him and my uncle Pista as well, they've sat with him at meetings, but now *he's just pictures, pictures, pictures, not a person, just pictures* (Andrea Tompa, 2021, 28, my italics).

In the second quotation, the text employs enumeration and repetition as its main rhetorical tools:

and they've become a picture, *mouth, hair, skin, eyes, floppy bow-tie and ears*, but they can't see it, can't hear anything, aren't looking at anything, saying *nothing, nothing, nothing*, If you turn to the left you become him at once, and now “left turn!”, and they feel no pain in the January frost. (Andrea Tompa, 2021, 29, my italics)

Here the word *nothing* is repeated three times, as a signifier of silence (*saying nothing*). The image created in the dynamics of proximity and distance of subjects identified as parts is only assembled into a whole in the mind. We are witnessing the subject becoming an image through language, as here the gesture of silencing and later freezing becomes dominant in the final lines. The final phrase refers to this freezing, to the immobilized moment of becoming a picture: “in the January frost”, the narrative voice concludes the chapter-long sentence. The repetition makes the language lyrical, the rhythm of the text accelerates towards the end of the chapter, which at once reveals the monotony of the live image, the repetition of the movement to the words of command and the subsequent running, the accelerating rhythm of the flight, the agitation, the negative emotions provoked by the girl's subsequent confrontation with the part of the body of the dictator she had to display: “*Now I'm his disgusting mouth*”. The mouth here is not only an organ of speech, but also a ‘sexual organ’ in the sense that it can be understood in terms of sexuality since it is represented in a highly eroticized way in the text. The dictator's mouth, which does not utter slogans – it only “vomits” out letters without meaning – nevertheless begins to possess the adolescent girl sexually in her imagination, creating in her a feeling of disgust, first with physical contact and then with herself. The detail is full of adjectives (two and three adjective structures) and reinforces the disgust in the recipient by alliterations, repeating the initial sounds 'f' and 'h' (in Hungarian: “*fehér, fröcsögő betűket*” and “*batalmas, habzó száj*”):

*Now I'm his disgusting mouth*, came suddenly into her head, and she felt sick as she thought of herself and the overalls that she'd not long taken off, she felt as if cold, drooling lips were kissing her defenceless body, as if this huge frothing mouth were vomiting white, foaming letters over her, and she was becoming a bit of living, loathsome, pink flesh, torn off and displayed to public view" (Tomba, 2021, 27)

In the English version the "f" is dominant (frothing, foaming) and the alliteration is given by the words "living, loathsome" and "were vomiting white".

The red dress that she has to wear takes on multiple meanings as the text progresses, first with the romanticizing description of the dictator – in which his mouth takes on feminine features – ("blood-red cherry lips"), blood as a colour, then the dress as a representation of the mouth, "blood-red overall", and then the mythology of the victim ("the transfusion of blood, the child's blood" for the demon to survive). These processes of metaphorization through transference provide the structural arc of the chapter: first we start with a post-situation and questioning ("What *part of him* are you?"), after that there is a misinterpretation ("Aren't we *letters*?"), a withholding of information and lack of information ("no one had officially told them *what* they were portraying"), a lack of self-reflection ("and so the girl hadn't thought about what the colours meant"), a recollection ("How many *reds* do you think there were?"), and a realization or recognition ("it has suddenly dawned on her that she could only be *his mouth*"). In the middle of the text it turns out that the reference of the picture is perhaps only a fiction ("*the tiny original of the picture* [...] He won't come because he doesn't exist"), the girl makes an identification ("Now I'm his disgusting *mouth*"). After that the problem is raised to community level ("we are all him") and finally comes mythologization ("it is I, I, I in *my blood-red overalls* that keep him alive" and "this blood transfusion, this *children's blood* which the demon receives every week to keep him alive"). (Tomba 2021b, 29, my emphasis)<sup>6</sup> Thus the chain of signifiers results in a continuous metaphorical shift: *part of him* – *letters* – *what* – *reds* – *blood-red cherry lips* – *his mouth* – *we are all him* – *blood-red overalls* – *children's blood*. The body becomes a sign, these signs are constantly open to interpretation, and are sometimes referred to as the signified, sometimes given meaning through multiple transpositions, whereby the children are represented as mythical victims, as unconscious upholders of the system.

<sup>6</sup> Although the direct quotations and internal monologues are in italics in the text, I have written them in roman type to make the emphasis clear.

In many ways, it is interesting to compare this chapter with the one in György Dragomán's novel *The Bone Fire* (*Máglya*, first Hungarian edition 2014), in which the protagonist, Emma, finds the torn photograph of the dictator in the school's bathroom after the revolution. Emma continues to dismantle the pictures of the previously damaged wooden panels. Here, only pieces of the photograph remain and recall the whole image, while in *The Hangman's House* the whole gigantic picture is pieced together. In both cases, the contemplation and recollection of the image gives the characters insight into the system. In Dragomán's case, "everyone just lied" becomes a theoretical truth; in Andrea Tompa's case, the mode of operation is more complex, understood on several levels: the doubt in the existence of the dictator, the disappearance of the individual as subject, and more specifically, the Romanianization of the school. In the context of this parallel, Bányai points out that the scene recalled in *The Bone Fire* "becomes a system theory told in an accessible way, at a child's level." (Bányai 2016, 91)

An interesting similarity is that eroticism is also present here, because while Emma is looking at the One-Ear's mouth, the girls are talking about kissing in the toilet, the narration of which has textual similarities with Tompa's text quoted above:

I don't want to listen but still I hear as they mention some boy who told everyone that he had been *kissing* someone, and it was real grown-up kissing, not only her cheek, but *her mouth* too; [...] Even in the semidarkness I recognize the curly hair of the Comrade General, *a piece of his earlobe, a piece remaining from his mouth* as well, the exact middle of *his lips*, the part that was always shiny; enough of the gold lettering remains for all the slogans and mottoes to complete themselves in my head.

[...]

I reach over to the wooden panel, and with the nails of my thumbs I begin to scratch off pieces of Comrade *General's lips*, *I feel the repulsion in my throat*, but even so I can't stop. (Dragomán, 2021, 64-65, My italics)

While Emma is the first-person narrator of her own story, Tompa's text uses a third-person narrative, but there is a striking similarity between the two novels in the language of the narrative based on the figure of congeries and the use of the coordinative clauses. The two simultaneous narratives are layered on top of each other: the narrated experience of the others' lovemaking and the protagonist's tactile perception of it, its aggressive, destructive nature (she scratches the pieces of the

mouth with her nails), and it is as if both simultaneously evoked a sense of disgust in her. The gesture of putting the pieces together is typical of the period when the system was in operation, as we have seen in the case of the dictator's picture, which served to maintain a cult of personality, and the period after the overthrow of the system is characterized by the disintegration of images and representations.

As historical context, it should be pointed out that the pictorial and sculptural representations of dictators served to maintain dictatorships and cults of personality in the communist countries of Eastern Europe, including Hungary. The destruction of these symbols was a quintessential act of rebellion against the regime. Such was the case with the destruction of the statue of Stalin during the 1956 revolution in Budapest. The picture of the statue's head between the rails in Blaha Lujza Square captures the iconic gesture of the destruction of the statue. For decades, pieces of the statue were hidden as secret, forbidden souvenirs. The ear was purchased by the Hungarian National Museum for half a million forints in 2009, with the help of a donor.

## 2. The writer's tongue and the B6

*Home's* protagonist is an unnamed writer who is headed for a class reunion in her hometown. An important theme of *Home* is to show the links between language and home. The first online review after the novel's publication in the UK also reflects this in its title: "The only liveable space is language: *Home* by Andrea Tompa." (Schreiber 2024) The problem of language is central in the narrative-reflexive structure, and one aspect of this is the relationship between language and home. If we subject the corpus to a machine text analysis and explore it in a quantitative manner, we find that the word *nyelv* (language, tongue) occurs 63 times in its root form, and if we count all other forms, including the subjunctive forms and word compounds, we can find 289 occurrences. By comparison, the most frequent occurrences of nouns are the phonemes "fiú" (boy) (156) and "festő" (painter) (111), which are primarily character names ("Fiú" in the English translation is the *Son*, and *Painter* is used for "Festő").<sup>7</sup>

The chapter "Tongue in Mouth", Chapter 15 in the 45-chapter novel, which tells the story of a visit to the dentist, may be a *mise en abyme* (small mirror) of this

---

<sup>7</sup> This analysis is made with Voyant Tools program. <http://www.voyant-tools.org/>

language–home problem. This is the chapter which the author read in an interview,<sup>8</sup> and which was published first in English translation as *Tongue in Mouth* (Tomba 2021c) before the publication of the complete text. The text plays with the phonemic ambiguity of the Hungarian word *nyelv* ('1. language 2. tongue 3. style') using both the speech organ of the writer-protagonist and the dentist's medical style of speech (the use of the plural first person, which he adopts involuntarily): "It feels like new, and adopting *Dr. Rostam's style*, she adds, even though we haven't touched these teeth at all." (Tomba 2024, my italics) In the original text the word *nyelv* is used "Rostam doktor *nyelvé*", an ambiguity that cannot be reproduced in English, and so the Hungarian word *nyelv* is translated as either *tongue* or *style*. This is why Jozefina Komporaly, in her one-sentence introduction to her translation, may speak of "the complex connections between teeth and home", and not between tongue and home, but on closer inspection, there are several different connections. Although it is true that the protagonist first complains to the dentist about the foreignness of her tongue, later on she also talks about grinding her teeth and fillings.

Elements of medical jargon are also incorporated into the text, representing the problem of the familiar and the foreign in multiple ways. For example, first of all the scientific name of the teeth (B6, B7, B8) are used, then "the back of the tongue" and the marked appropriation, i.e. "bridging" in quotation marks. The very title – *Tongue in Mouth* – sounds strange, since it is obvious where the tongue as an organ is located, but this clarification is also necessary because of the polysemy of the Hungarian word *nyelv*, and it can be the source of humour or irony as well. In the first sentence, the writer's own tongue is thematized as a foreign tongue: "So she's ready to discuss the issue of foreign tongues, or to put it differently, the issue of one's *own foreign tongue* in the mouth, with Dr. Rostam." (Tomba 2024, 133, my italics) In the opening of the sentence, the adjectival structure "foreign tongue" does not appear as the hitherto thematized "idiom spoken as a non-native language", although this would correspond to the reader's expectation.

The writer then complains that her tongue seems to have grown, and we are later informed that the teeth B6 or B7 feel as "if somehow they weren't really her own". During the reading, the writer is alienated from her own text:

Her tongue, like a heavy inelastic block, is barely rolling, always smashing into either the B6 or the B7, or even the barely there yet still semiprotruding B8,

<sup>8</sup> When she was interviewed, the author found it suitable and easy to pick out of the text and read it out: Andrea Tomba: Home, In conversation with the author László Valuska. <https://www.margofeszt.hu/hu/fesztival/program/tomba-andrea-haza>, (5:00 -11:18)

the latter seemingly displaying sharp edges despite Dr. Rostam's attempts at smoothing it at least six times with that slow but extremely loud drill. The text intended for reading out loud has become inaccessible in the course of the process, *despite consisting of her own sentences, woven together slowly and meticulously. She can no longer relate to it, and, what's more, the words pulverize like sand dust as soon as they are uttered and said out loud.*" (Tompa 2024, 135 My italics)

Rebeka Seres draws attention to the fact that the feeling of nervousness arises in the process of utterance, in speech, which can be contrasted with the process of writing. "For the writer at the centre, it is also a problem when the writing becomes spoken word. [...] First she goes to the dentist with her problem, blaming it on the sharpness of his teeth, but eventually she realises that the problem is her struggle with language. And by pronouncing it, she alienates herself from what he has to say [...]." (Seres 2020, 29)

Then the parallel between the writer and Dr Rostam is established: the doctor, of Persian origin, who arrived in the country at the age of two, had to learn the correct way of articulating sounds (not through the nose but through the mouth), which he mastered perfectly. Strangeness must be disguised, in his interpretation – both the dentist and the writer seek to disguise it with perfection. In the novel, the writer herself disguises (and it is rarely unveiled) how painful it is for her still to be considered a stranger, an emigrant in her new homeland even if she did not have to change language.

If we allow ourselves an autobiographical and auto-referential parallel with the author herself, we may consider a quotation from a Facebook post by Andrea Tompa on 18 October 2019, in which she briefly explores the question of the emigrant writer: "I am increasingly preoccupied with the not at all theoretical question of until when we are considered immigrants and from when." She also stresses the problem of language, i.e. concepts and designations: "(If it seems that I am playing with words, then yes, I am. Words are dreadfully important.)" (Tompa 2019) This problem – namely her ambivalent relationship with her new home – certainly plays a role in the fact that the protagonist's mother tongue is never identified as Hungarian, nor is it stated that she lives in Hungary. Furthermore, the author wants to present the subject as universal. The fiction continues in this direction and explores this ambivalent status in the next chapter, entitled "I'm Not an Émigré". The mouth hides the tongue, but it cannot be hidden at the dentist's. The question "So where do you come from?" (Tompa 2024, 139) sounds painfully at the end of the chapter, and presumably the amalgam fillings have unmasked the writer. This

chapter speaks of the writer's persistent sense of alienation in her own country. It can also be interpreted as an allegory of the strangeness that is to be concealed, but is repeatedly revealed, and an allegory of the *stranger in the familiar*. The theory of *transculturalism* can be brought into the interpretation here, in which the concept of transfer is particularly suited to this problem.

The concept of transfer can be understood as a voyage of discovery of the foundations of cultural dynamics, with the aim of discovering the *alien in the self*, the known in the alien. Josip Užarević, quoting Descartes, transforms *cogito ergo sum* into *transfero ergo sum*, calling for a new exploration of cultural transfer.” (Thomka, 2018, 40 *My italics*)

In the context of the whole novel, the problem of the alienation of the self is part of the process of the writer's search for her mother tongue, of her writing, and in order to do this, she must alienate herself from her mother tongue. In contemporary literary studies, questions of switching languages and the relationship of translingual writers to language have become increasingly important. Akira Mizubayashi, a Japanese writer who has published in French, said: “La première qualité d'un écrivain est d'être étranger à sa propre langue.” (A writer's greatest virtue is his ability to be alienated from his own language). (Darfeuille, 2014) In this sense, the novel's protagonist is also trying to renew herself as a writer by distancing herself from her mother tongue. Translation is one way of moving away from the mother tongue, as when the writer is forced to think in English<sup>9</sup> in a conversation with an American girl, Kincső on her way to a class reunion. We also see this in the question of the translation of *salvation* (üdvösség) and the reflections on it.

According to another, similar approach, writing is not based on the habitual use of the mother tongue, but on the creation of a new language, a poetic language, one might say. One language-shifting Bosnian-German author considers it so:

For me, writing itself is a *foreign language*. For every story, for every play, for every new creation, I have to learn a new language: I have to find the narrator's voice, I have to decide on my figure's specific verbal characteristics, and I have to learn and keep the rhythm and flow of the whole. [...] A *language* is the only *country without borders*. Writers, indeed anyone, can (and should) use the privilege to make a language bigger, better, and more beautiful by planting a wordtree here or there, one never grown before.” (Stanišić 2008, *My italics*)

<sup>9</sup>The writer can express herself better in English when talking about intimate or painful topics, as in the case of her presentation for the conference “Guest in your country”: “Fortunately, the talk will be in English. It's reassuring to avoid the traps of one's mother tongue, with its exceedingly complicated twists and endless ramifications. Instead, there's an opportunity to proceed in English, as if navigating a safer and less busy dual carriageway, where things can be named a lot easier because they already have names in foreign languages. No need to be afraid, foreignness is a safe shield.” (Tompa 2024, 8)

This kind of literary ingenuity and Tompa's individual word creations are particularly well exemplified in *Home*, for instance in “*házabetegség*” a literal translation of “homesickness”, “*házaszerelem*” (homelove), “*emberszomj*” (thirst for human), “*szóhámozás*” (peeling back of words), and so on.

This linguistic strangeness is heightened by the fact that, on the one hand, a Russian phrase in italics, printed in Cyrillic letters, is wedged into the text, which at the same time testifies to a positive emotional attitude:

In this time-gap, where, using her favourite Russian phrase, there was от нечего делать, and, as a result, she was overwhelmed with inertia, she could have had them replaced indeed, even if not with sparkling white but with the recommended shade 2 composite filling, in lieu of the old gray metal mixture, of mercury and another metal, perhaps silver.” (Tompa 2024, 136)

Quotations in Russian and French are often literary quotations while English ones represent an everyday communication tool. The phrase “от нечего делать” (“nothing to do”) is clearly a reference to Anton Chekhov, since this concept is at the centre of his poetics.<sup>10</sup> He also wrote a short story with this title (“Nothing to be done!”, 1886), and it is of course also found in his drama, *The Three Sisters*. In the second act, Andrey says to Ferapont: “Today, *out of sheer boredom*, I took up this book—old university lectures, and I couldn't help laughing.” (Chekhov, 2022) This – the fact that it is her favourite phrase – cannot be a coincidence, since, if we look at autobiographical references, the author's work as a theatre critic and theatre scholar is well known.

Moreover there is a quotation in Hungarian translation from a Russian poet in exile, Joseph Brodsky, who, starting from a similar dental theme, bases his poem “In the Lake District” (or in another translation “At the edge of the Lake”) on the contrast between the badly preserved yet valuable teeth and the teaching of rhetoric: “She would have had the opportunity to have her large, dark amalgam fillings replaced with pretty, white ones in two, maximum three appointments. *Wisdom tooth, for, Hiding in the mouth, / The ruins of the Parthenon cleaner*, as Joseph Brodsky writes, preoccupied, like all poets, with foreign matter in the mouth.” (Tompa 2024, 136) I would like to point out that the English translation of the chapter contains a longer excerpt from Brodsky's poem – originally written in Russian – than the Hungarian

<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the same Russian phrase already appeared in the first chapter, and this repetition only emphasizes it: “She stops in front of a stationery shop, having just remembered a favourite Russian expression: от нечего делать, meaning idleness. The reason for going into the shop is simply to use up excess time.” (Tompa 2024, 11)

one. The Hungarian translation “*romnál tisztább romok szájamban lakoztak*” (“my mouth was inhabited by ruins cleaner than ruins”) allows the above interpretation.

I have interpreted the Parthenon metaphor that appears in this quotation in the light of the whole poem. Here, the Wisdom tooth is given a symbolic meaning (written with a capital W), as a contrast between the old home and the new home, and is identified with the cradle of culture (the Parthenon), where the common trait is decay, desolation, and wisdom, since it was dedicated to the goddess of wisdom, Pallas Athena. On the other hand, the identification is based on a metonymic, geographic contact: the other continent (Europe). The teeth in the mouth in this poem, as we have seen in *Home*, are also markers of the old country – decaying (the teeth of an emigrant speaker bearing the traces of a “rotting culture”), but still reminiscent of the homeland (cf. amalgam fillings waiting to be replaced).

However, the poet referred to it in an interview as a humorous poem, and when talking about its genesis, he took the text literally. He responded to the interviewer’s claim – “I think of the metaphor of the ruins of the Parthenon as decaying teeth” – thus: “The whole point is that is not metaphor actually – it is very literal especially since I came to Ann Arbor with my Russian dental work, so to speak.” (Brodsky 1979, 64)

In the Brodsky poem, however, there is no mention of foreign matter, but rather the focus is the theme of the dentist. On the other hand, the figure of Brodsky plays a very important role in the whole novel, and concerning him, in the Hungarian tradition we might link him to Sándor Márai, in the sense that, at least in the interpretation of the narrator, as an emigrant poet he considers language to be his homeland. The chapter “The Speech” reflects on the moment when Brodsky was expelled by the Soviet authorities. He was asked why he would not emigrate to Israel: “According to the record, all Brodsky had to say was: ‘Я русский литератор.’ I am a Russian writer. This sentence meant that he wanted to live there. In the Russian language.” (Tomba 2024, 303)

The foreignness of the tongue and the teeth is represented by *the own*, which becomes strange from one moment to another (this is only perceptible to the subject, it is a sensation). The third foreignness, the visible foreignness, is “the foreign matter in the mouth”, the amalgam filling, which contrasts sharply with the colour of the teeth. It is alien, yet it represents the abandoned home. The emigrants carry the abandoned home with them, like the amalgam fillings that the patient refuses to replace. If we take it as a metaphor of adaptation, she does not want to adapt to her new home, she wants to keep something of her homeland. The figure

of the “common mouth” is formed; this heritage creates a community, somewhat ironically, between those from the old homeland.

This chapter also condenses the whole novel by introducing the contrast between the Painter and the writer: the difference between the two media and artistic attitudes. The Painter is immersed in the study of the head, in the spirit of portrait painting, while the writer’s domain is language, in which he does not feel at home. Outside this chapter, the whole text of the novel also makes fascinating use of the ambiguity of the word *nyelv* (“tongue, language”) and the concrete meanings of the organs of speech and the abstract meaning of the expression. The title of the chapter in question (“Tongue in Mouth”) is also alluded to in the section on the character Ari, when the loss of one’s own language (mother tongue), the lack of an authentic, self-identical language and the conquest of English are also discussed: “Proof of the fact that *language has ceased to exist in the mouth*,<sup>11</sup> using instead other people’s borrowed language, which for them is at most a hired hut, a cheap bread and breakfast, a rental room but never a proper home. Triggers.” (Tompa 2024, 123, my italics) Ari’s loss of language is reported by the narrator: “Ari rarely posts, and if she does, then it’s usually some drawings by her children or herself, most recently she posted a series of screams – five ageless and genderless faces screaming. *Teeth, tongue, veil of the palate in the wind*, long wrinkles on the faces, all drawn in biro. One of the drawings is on a thick restaurant napkin, from a Punjabi Restaurant. Other times, she posts photos or films, without any *captions*.” (Tompa 2024, 125, my italics)

Here again, the text brings into play the semantics of the second member of the compound word *veil of the palate*, “*inyvitorla*” (*vitorla* ‘sail’) in Hungarian, and amplifies it with the locative (in the wind), while the word *nyelv* is also used in two senses in the passage.<sup>12</sup> Whereas here the gesture of howling makes the inside of the mouth visible, the description of the unrestrained laughter in *The Hangman’s House* becomes linguistically very similar: “and the blood-red *wvula*<sup>13</sup> could be seen in Juci’s wide-open mouth, tossed in the gale of laughter that tore, free and unrestrained, from her throat, like the heavy, bloodstained but victorious banner of a fighter for freedom standing proud atop the peak.” (Tompa 2021b, 257, my italics) We may note the parallel between the two phrases (*veil of the palate in the wind* and *tongue in*

<sup>11</sup> Here again the choice of ‘language’ rather than ‘tongue’ eliminates the linguistic ambiguity, though in Hungarian it is one word (*nyelv*.)

<sup>12</sup> It is used once for *tongue* and twice for *captions* in a new sentence: “Nyelv nincs.”

<sup>13</sup> Although the Hungarian texts both (*Home* and *The Hangman’s House*) use the same word (*inyvitorla*), the two translators rendered it in two different ways. In the citation from *Home* is translated *veil of the palate*. But in the second case using the word *wvula* this metaphor (sail - banner) based on the common idea of fluttering in the wind is not strongly founded.

*mouth*): both are locative phrases syntagms. This helps to maintain the simultaneity of concrete and figurative meanings.

The tongue is linked to the home not only through speech, but also through gastronomy as an organ of taste. The painter misses the flavours of his home, the taste of the spice in his chosen homeland is different, even though the name is the same: “His *tongue* and his tastebuds, those eighty-year-old warts, which are none other than his memories, do know that tarragon is French back home and Russian over here.” (Tomba 2024, 155, my italics) In another part of the text, when reading the father's observation dossier, the writer ironically contrasts the materiality of writing, of fiction (page number), and “reality” (the physical materiality of the person observed):

According to page 276, in “*Toma's fictional mouth the tongue finds it hard to roll, it has always found it hard, perhaps even from the very beginning, because 'Toma' had never really believed in language, while he is displaying threatening behaviour, he points out that one can also use language in order to lie [...]*” (Tomba 2024, 206, my italics)

Andrea Tomba succeeds in exploiting the multidirectional possibilities of meaning-making offered by this dental scene. Perhaps the play with the word *'nyelv'* is too obvious, too easy, and she has made too much of this linguistic correspondence in her writing. However, it is a fine example of how a personal, painful trauma can be stripped away and wrapped in simple ordinariness.

## References

- András, Orsolya. 2023. *Szabadra írni. Nyelv, identitás, emlékezet. A kommunista diktatúra időszakának feldolgozása kortárs romániai származású női szerzők regényeiben* [Writing to be free: Language, Identity, Memory. Processing the period of Communist dictatorship in the novels of contemporary Romanian women authors]. Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület.
- Balogh, Magdolna. 2023. “Genre hybridity, self-discovery and trauma: Andrea Tomba's *The Hangman's House*”, *World Literature Studies* 15, no. 4: 83 – 95. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/WLS.2023.15.4.6>
- Bányai, Éva. 2016. *Fordulat-próza. Átmenetnarratívák a kortárs magyar irodalomban*. [Prose of the Turn. Transitional narratives in contemporary Hungarian literature.] Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület.

- Brodsky, Joseph. 2003. "Interview with Joseph Brodsky. Eva Burch and David Chin/1979." In *Conversations*, edited by Cynthia L. Haven and Richard Avedon. Series: Literary Conversations Series. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Chekhov, A.P. *Three Sisters*. Translated by Julius West, <https://theatrelinks.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/the-three-sisters-anton-chekhov.pdf>
- Dánél, Mónika. 2018. "A (meg)hallgatás képessége – kép és hang törésvonalai, ekphraszisz és hangkölcsonzés." [The ability to listen – the fracture lines of image and sound, ekphrasis and sound borrowing] *Prae* 20, no 2:113-121.
- Darfeuille, Claire. 2014. "La première qualité d'un écrivain est d'être étranger à sa propre langue." *ActuaLitté*, September 10, 2014. <https://actualitte.com/article/46998/archives/la-premiere-qualite-d-039-un-ecrivain-est-d-039-etre-etranger-a-sa-propre-langue>
- Deczki, Sarolta. 2013. "A krízis fenomenológiája." [The phenomenology of the crises], in *Az érzékiség dicsérete* [The praise of sensuality], 193-211. Pozsony-Budapest: Pesti Kalligram.
- Dragomán, György. 2021. *The Bone Fire*. Translated by Otilie Mulzet. Boston, New York: Mariner Books.
- Földes, Györgyi. 2018. "Szövegek, testek, szövegtestek (A testíráselemélet irányai)." In *Test – szöveg – test. Testreprezentációk és a Másik szépirodalmi alkotásokban*. [Texts, bodies, bodies of texts (Directions in body-writing theory). In Body - text - body. Body representations and the Other in fiction.] Budapest: Kalligram. 11-73.
- Kovács, Flóra. 2011. "Továbbírás?" [Preparing for writing?] *Helikon* 22, no 13 (579): 15.
- Kövecses, Zoltán. 2005. *A metafora. Gyakorlati bevezetés a kognitív metaforaelméletbe*. [The metaphor: A practical introduction to cognitive metaphor theory.] Budapest: Typotex.
- Seres, Rebeka. 2020. "Köztes lét" [Being in between. Andrea Tompa, *Home*], *Székholion*, a De-Btk Hök művészeti és szakfolyóirata [Art and academic journal of the University of Debrecen, De-Btk Hök], no. 2: 26-31. [https://szkholion.unideb.hu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/szkholion-2020\\_2.pdf](https://szkholion.unideb.hu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/szkholion-2020_2.pdf) (Last accessed 02.05.2024)
- Schreiber, Joseph. 2024. "The only liveable space is language: Home by Andrea Tompa." Posted May 2024. <https://roughghosts.com/2024/05/08/the-only-liveable-space-is-language-home-by-andrea-tompa/>
- Stanišić, Saša. 2008. "Three Myths of Immigrant Writing: A View from Germany." <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/three-myths-of-immigrant-writing-a-view-from-germany>. (Last accessed June, 01, 2024.)

- Szilágyi, Júlia. 2010. “Tompa Andrea: A hóhér háza.” [Andrea Tompa: The Hangman’s house]. *Látó* 21, no. 11: 82-83.
- Szilágyi, Zsófia. 2010. “Tehát elkezdődött.” [So it’s started] *Jelenkor* 14, no. 2: 214-218.
- Thomka, Beáta. 2018. *Regénytapasztalat. Korélmény, hovatarozás, nyelváltás* [The Novelistic Experience: Encountering an Epoch, Belonging, Language Change]. Budapest: Kijarat Kiadó.
- Tompa, Andrea. 2019. Facebook post of 18 October 2019. (Last accessed 06.04.2024).
- . 2020. *Haza*. Budapest: Jelenkor Kiadó.
- . 2021a. *A hóhér háza*. (Fifth edition.) Budapest: Jelenkor Kiadó.
- . 2021b. *The Hangman’s House*. Translated by Bernard Adams. Kolkata: Seagull Books.
- . 2021c. “Tongue in Mouth.” Translated by Jozefina Komporalý. *World Literature Today* 95, no. 3: 23-25. <https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2021/summer/tongue-mouth-andrea-tompa> DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wlt.2021.0070>
- . 2024. *Home*. Translated by Jozefina Komporalý. London: Istros Books.
- Varela, Francisco J., Thompson, Evan and Rosch, Eleanor. 1991. *The embodied mind: cognitive science and human experience*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

# The Resonance of *Bios* and *Zoe* in Several of Ágnes Nemes Nagy's Poems Written around 1960<sup>1</sup>

Adrienn Pataky<sup>2</sup>

---

## Abstract

After a brief explanation of Agamben's concepts of *bios* and *zoe*, and a discussion of Ágnes Nemes Nagy's specific use of sound devices, this paper analyses a few of her poems that relate to the genesis of her 1967 collection *Napforduló* [Solstice]. These poems attempt to give voice to those that, in a worldview constructed from a human perspective, are voiceless. Essentially melopoetic, these poems are also examples of *ars poetica* performative texts. Using to the full the phonetic and rhythmic resources of poetry, the poems also give an account of their own genesis. The study seeks to answer how these formal aspects of the poems contribute to their power, and how, in combination with their theme, they relate to the question of (im)personalisation and the suspension of the human factor, as well as of entering into the perspective plants might have on the world. It examines the means by which Ágnes Nemes Nagy was attempting to bring nature's non-anthropomorphic (yet organic) creatures to the fore, and to give them a voice.

## Keywords

Ágnes Nemes Nagy, poetry, modern Hungarian literature, *bios*, *zoe*, Agamben, biopoetics, melopoetic, sound devices, nature, plants

The poems discussed here are from the 1950s, a decade of political oppression in Hungary, and from the period following Nemes Nagy's divorce (from 1944 she was married to Balázs Lengyel, with whom she co-edited the influential postwar literary journal *Újhold* between 1946 and 1948) and were published in her third collection, entitled *Napforduló* [Solstice]. This volume signified a turning point in Nemes Nagy's life; her contemporaries and critics saw it as the pinnacle of Nemes Nagy's objective poetry. For years prior,

---

<sup>1</sup>This text was written within the framework of the OTKA project *Biopoetics in the 20th–21st century Hungarian literature* (NKFIFK 132113). A fuller Hungarian version can be found in *Irodalomtörténet* 104. no. 1. 2023, 65–83.

<sup>2</sup>Eötvös Loránd University, [pataky.adrienn@btk.elte.hu](mailto:pataky.adrienn@btk.elte.hu)

she had not been permitted to publish her poems, and from 1949 it also became impossible to publish *Újbold*. “Nemes Nagy’s answer to censorship was to focus the repression inward and to work it through the intellect into precisely cut, passionate, philosophical shapes.” (Szirtes 2011, 1617) Survival and annihilation are themes and concepts that she emphasises constantly in her poems, and that she later made explicit in her essays and interviews. One way she responded to social and private events in poetry was by distancing herself from the personal, from the self. Ágnes Nemes Nagy’s poetry is often described as ‘objective’, and she refers to herself as an ‘objective poet’ (after Rilke, Eliot, and the Hungarian poet Mihály Babits). She extracts the ‘I’ from her poems: “a certain ellipsis-mass, I tell you, the mass of what is left out. And more importantly, the removal of the first-person singular from the centre of the poem. From now on, this poetic ‘I’ is somewhere else. In fact, it may not even be present” (Nemes Nagy 2004c, 240), says Nemes Nagy in an interview conducted by Lóránt Kabdebó in 1981. And this is how Nemes Nagy describes herself and her own poetry in an introduction (from 1980) to an English-language selection of her poems:

Poetry knows something that we who make poetry do not. [...] This unknown is communicated to me mainly by objects; that is why I try to relay objects to the reader: a geyser, a branch, the fragment of a statue, a tram, which may bring with them memories of war (the fundamental experience of my generation), or the experience of *natura* (living with nature: one of the threatened nostalgias of modern man), perhaps the myth of an Egyptian pharaoh (the modern myth: a model of our awareness of life). (Nemes Nagy 1980a, 93–94)

Related to this objectivity is a discussion of the non-human natural world. This is done with a wide range of poetic tools, in which besides the visual images, the sound, the rhythm, the coherence, the paronomasia, the rhyming of the words and the rhyming of the poem are also very important. As if

[...] language itself, the sounding-performative language, were speaking. This is why we get the impression that the unity of sound, rhythm and prosody, of ideas, images, and semantic relationships in Nemes Nagy's poems is, so to speak, indissoluble. Or as Valéry put it, “the value of a poem lies in the indissolubility of sound and meaning”. (Kulcsár Szabó 2022, 126)

The materiality and affectivity of the (poetic) word creates an atmosphere in which one cannot help but be absorbed, through which the poem resonates,

evoking impressions and feelings, but which is not merely an acoustic phenomenon; it is also a performative act of language. Wilhelm von Humboldt held that what is said shapes or makes ready the unsaid. Nemes Nagy repeatedly refers to the poet's task as being to record the "so far nameless and inexpressible vision" (Nemes Nagy 1998a, 14). Elsewhere she says: "I am a poet, and therefore I mine the inexpressible, the unexpressed or that which is difficult to express" (Nemes Nagy 2004b, 660). In fact, her poems also contain the following *ars poetica*: "*ne mondd soba a mondhatatlant / mondd a nebezen mondhatót,*" that is, 'never say the unsayable / say what is difficult to say,' as found in the famous early poem, *Elégia egy fogolyról* [Elegy on a Prisoner] (1946). One of the most significant examples of this, and perhaps the greatest challenge in Nemes Nagy's poetry of experimentation with the untouchable, is when she "gives voice" to the living creatures of nature (*zoe*), and within this, when she "voices" plants. As evidenced by a great number of close readings over the past decade,<sup>3</sup> Nemes Nagy's work was, in terms of poetic devices and themes, a corpus ahead of its time, raising inspiring questions about the various manifestations of life (such as our relationship to plants, animals, and the transcendent, and the reassessment of our ideas related to them). Zoltán Németh recently commented on the prominent role of plants in two contemporary poetry collections:

Plants, which had been relegated to the background and had hitherto been the backdrop of our existence, have suddenly become the focus of these texts, and they are asking questions about ontology, epistemology, philosophy, and ethics – in short, about the writeability – of vegetative existence. They are confronting us, through literary writing, with propositions about the individuality, intelligence, nature, and communication of plants. The plant speaks, or rather the plant is given voice and language through the poems in these volumes, the plant speaks through them. (Németh 2022, 316)

The fact that it is only in the new millennium that literary criticism and history have brought the study of organicity, the "voice of the plant", to the fore does not mean that the phenomenon has not been present for a long time in arts such as the writing of fiction.

Man, as the apex of the world's hierarchical system of living, constructs his image of himself by distinguishing his own being from that of *zoe*. He is *bios*. Of the many categories of philosophical investigation and divisions of life, it is

---

<sup>3</sup> Four of the twenty texts in the following volume deal with the connection between Ágnes Nagy Nemes and Biopoetics: Balajthy and Mezei, eds. 2022.

Agamben's dichotomy of *bios* and *zoe* which has become popular, and which currently characterises the methodological trend. The works of later, differently oriented but essentially eco- or even post-humanist theorists are irrelevant to this study, as it is not the ecological–ecocritical aspect of the poems that are of interest here but the manifestations of *bios* as life. Agamben's ideas also chime with this biopoetics angle because he places the phenomena of language and poetry at the intersection of nature and culture. While this paper does not aim at an extended study of their conceptual history, it is nevertheless worth introducing (sketching) and characterizing the conceptual pair *bios*—*zoe* insofar as it may influence how the poems under discussion are approached.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, the study uses the terms *bios* and *zoe* according to Agamben's interpretation.

This specific pair of concepts has been definitive since ancient philosophy, and attempts have often been made to capture the essence of human existence through this duality. Aristotle wrote that the path to human happiness (*eudaimonia*) leads through the *bios*, i.e., through being in culture, in society (being organised in a larger community or polis).<sup>5</sup> *Zoe* also means life, a vitality that is not endowed with specifically human characteristics. In his 1995 book *Homo Sacer*, in which he wrote about “bare life”, Giorgio Agamben explained the concepts of *bios* and *zoe* (Agamben 1998), reinterpreting the Aristotelian dichotomy through the ideas of Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault (Dubreuil–Eagle 2006, 84), as well as Károly Kerényi (Fenyvesi 2014, 45–68). For Agamben, *bios* is sovereign human life and existence (with its sociality and cultural embeddedness) while *zoe* is life itself, which can be applied to all vitality (organic life without *bios*), from the self-organising processes of nature, from weather through plants to animals. Man is a part of both, but if he shares only in *zoe*-life (i.e., bare, biological life: *nuda vita*), he is merely “a survivor” and excluded from the kind of living that characterizes an individual or even a group, i.e., from the perspective of a meaningful life. He is excluded from a life which goes beyond simply being, a life which has a reason and a purpose.

*Bios* and *zoe* are the central concepts of biopoetics, since authors associated with biopoetics in literature mostly investigate how life as a being, a living organism, can be made available through texts, specifically through their language(s), or more

---

<sup>4</sup> See Dubreuil and Eagle 2006, 83–98, for more on *bios* and *zoe*.

<sup>5</sup> The *oikos*, the domestic sphere, is separated from the *polis* (the arena of political life), as a place where biological needs are dominant and subsistence is important; the *oikos* is driven by more subjective and momentary goals than the *polis*. *Bios*-life is partly equivalent to the *polis* (communal existence) and *zoe*-life to the *oikos* (self-preservation). Aristotle writes that “We have good reasons therefore for not speaking of an ox or horse or any other animal as being happy, because none of these is able to participate in noble activities. [...] Happiness, as we said, requires both complete goodness [perfect virtue] and a complete lifetime [fulfilled life].” (Aristotle 1934, 47)

precisely, how our concepts of life are shaped by poetry, and how our concepts of life shape poetry. Biopoetics is presented as a way of reading that approaches poems from the perspective of life and, in this context, nature. It is motivated by questions such as what vitality is, how a body can be captured, what the relationship is between the living and the inanimate, human and animal, human and plant, nature and culture, and, above all, how this is expressed in the space of language arts, i.e. how it is expressed at the (lyric) linguistic, poetic level.

These two contrasting concepts are not mutually exclusive:<sup>6</sup> in Agamben's example, Pulcinella, a character in the Italian *commedia dell'arte* "has chosen nothing: he is that which has never chosen to do or be – not even by mistake [...] [His] is not a chargeable action, it entails no responsibility" (Agamben 2018, 49, 64). Veronika Darida compares Pulcinella to the Hungarian character Vitéz László, a vulgar, masked, "embodied ideal, [...] neither a human being nor divine. [...] he is outside or beyond death, which does not touch him" (Darida 2017, 47–48). Pulcinella is also a representative of *zoe*, and his life "seems to stand outside the common and collective concept of life: *bios*. He represents a form of life which cannot therefore be subject to biopolitics, i.e., life at its freest and least expropriated." (Darida 2017, 48) Agamben also discusses how in the concentration camps, Nazi power (the sphere of existence) reduced the lives of vulnerable people to *zoe* by taking control of them (Agamben 2018, 71–101).<sup>7</sup> Nemes Nagy had indirect experience of this, as when she was young she lived through the Second World War and the siege of Budapest; she experienced what it was like to be a vulnerable woman. Her best friend was deported and died (about which she wrote the poem *Elegy on a Prisoner*), and Alaine Polcz, with whom she later survived the street warfare of 1956, was raped by soldiers several times during the Second World War.

This paper analyses some short poems written after 1956, which the author published in *Napforduló* [Solstice] or which were published posthumously. The personal and professional difficulties Nemes Nagy encountered in this period were not inconsequential: an immediate threat to life and limb, an existential crisis, the aftermath of the closing of the literary magazine she had been involved with, the breakdown of her marriage, abortions, and other losses. These crises are inevitably reflected in her poems.

In these poems, *bios* and *zoe* are both present, offering a stimulating contrast. They are an ambitious attempt at overriding anthropocentric-system thinking,

---

<sup>6</sup>Thus, in Agamben's theory, criticized by Jacques Derrida and others, *bios* and *zoe* are not exclusive opposites of each other, and even Aristotle (whom he misinterprets, among others) does not see them as such.

<sup>7</sup>Part Three: The Camp as Biopolitical Paradigm of the Modern

at not considering the non-anthropomorphic *zoe* as inferior life at all. They try, in this way, to get closer to *zoe* through processes of de-anthropomorphisation, and through their own inner questions. We are witnessing a kind of repositioning of anthropogenesis in which there is no qualitative difference between the two components of human life, *bios* and *zoe*, which are both part of nature and, indeed, of human life. Agamben, on the other hand, could see these two concepts as the main pair of opposites in Western politics precisely because he saw them as separable through the mere existence of life and politics, or exclusion and inclusion (Agamben 2018, 11–12): what is excluded from *bios* is obviously not (a) human. Rosi Braidotti relates nonhuman or posthuman theory to the rise of *zoe* (Braidotti 2013, 60). The poetry of Nemes Nagy can be seen in synergy with this: her poems operate from a nonhuman perspective, a perspective of *zoe*. These stances seek to eliminate the anthropomorphic perspective and, in order to do so, make use of less and less personification, attempting to discuss (organic) objects from their own, imagined point of view. This period is characterised by stripped-down language, the elimination of personal pronouns, and a tendency towards impersonal speech. At the same time, there is an increasing focus on nature, animals, and plants, especially trees and plant “survivors”, which are capable of reviving with just a little water (a symbol of life).

Other important motifs are the spiral or circular shape, and hardness, including vulnerability and enclosure in some kind of hard material construction (degraded life: *zoe*).

The first poem under discussion is *Csigalépcső* [Spiral Staircase], which was written in 1958 or 1959. Never published in this form while Nemes Nagy was alive, it was only printed in 2016:

### Csigalépcső

A csigalépcsőn *hogy* leszöktem,  
*mint* a kavics, *úgy* lepörögtem,  
 bűgött a csigahéj utánam,  
*mint* az emlék a puszta házban,  
 zörögtem,  
*mint* a szilánk a koponyában.<sup>8</sup>

### Spiral staircase

A Down the spiral staircase *as* I leaped,  
*like* the pebble, [*so*] I whirled,  
 B after me the snail shell boomed  
*like* the memory in the bare house,  
 A I rattled,  
 B *like* the splinter in the skull.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The whereabouts of the manuscript version is unknown; the text was first published in 2016 and written by the author in 1958 or 1959, according to the publisher, see Nemes Nagy 2016. (Emphasis mine.)

<sup>9</sup> Translated by Boglárka Hardy. (Emphasis mine. A. P.)

The structure of this short poem reflects its title, as the lines are connected to each other like a spiral staircase or a spring; they are intertwined not only by their motifs but also by their grammatical structures. The whole poem is a single sentence, coherence being ensured by the conjunction *bogy* ‘as’, the adverb *úgy* ‘so’ and the three instances of *mint* ‘like’, a conjunction. The twisting shape of the spiral stairs also recalls the form of the DNA double-helix, i.e., the shape of organic cells. The spiral staircase and the enclosed space in which the stairs (as a human, architectural construction, of course) lead from somewhere to somewhere else, look like a skull or a bare house. The spiral shell itself, meanwhile, is brought to life. The words *csigalépcső* ‘spiral stairs’ and *ház* ‘house’ are created in the grammatical space by the words *lépcsőház* ‘staircase’ and *csigaház* ‘spiral shell’ or ‘snail’s house’. The stair<sup>10</sup> as a human construction is basically a symbol of ascension, purification, knowledge, and is often used in initiation stories and rituals. Accordingly, downward movement can mean the bringing down to earth of some unconscious immersion or celestial knowledge.

In Hungarian, the word *szökés* ‘escape, leap, jump, jump down, run away, disappear’ has multiple meanings, but there is no precisely equivalent term in English. The word *leszökés* (here in the English poem it has been replaced by ‘leaped’) is also ambiguous; *szök(ell)és* means not only to jump and to leave a place in a hurry, but also to be mysterious, to act without the knowledge of others. In this vast, empty, human-made space (and body), sound is complemented by a kinetic event: the *búgás* and *zörgés* ‘booming’ and ‘rattling’ are a consequence of jumping down the stairs, of bouncing off. These themselves provide the ‘action’ in the poem; no other verbs are used except these.

All the lines of the original six-line poem are nine syllables long, except the fifth line, which consists of a single three-syllable word, *zörögtem* [I rattled], and uses a rare metre, an amphibrach: (U — U). The reader’s mind supplies the missing syllables by ‘hearing’ a twice-repeated echo of the word (with these echoes, the line consists of exactly nine syllables). This word is, after all, connected to all three structures beginning with the word *like*. Rattling as a sound is a continuous, self-replicating action: ‘I rattled like the pebble’ (1). It is clear in the last three lines of the poem that the single ‘rattled’ applies, on account of the enjambment, both to the line before and the one after: ‘I rattled like the memory in the bare house’ (2) and ‘I rattled like the splinter in the skull’ (3). The onomatopoeic word *zörög* ‘rattle’ sets

<sup>10</sup> In her essays, Nemes Nagy writes several times about staircases, for example: “Because the complexity of objects, of a stone, of a potato bush, of a staircase, of a Ruffle Elephant’s Ear as it is – is, after all, unreachable.” (Nemes Nagy 2004a, 105)

the tone of the 'I' both in the house and in the skull. This activity (rattling) invades the passive space and the silence. It dominates the poem and is connected to the speaker's self (the first-person singular) and to 'pebble,' 'memory' and 'splinter.' The dominance of the sounds *ɰ* /tʃ/, *sʒ* /s/, *g* /g/ and *k* /k/ in the Hungarian poem (*csiga, kavics, koponya, emléke, szilánke*) evokes the noises themselves: the velar plosives of the voiceless–voiced pair *g–k* make a knocking sound. (This cannot be very well reproduced, nor is it fully translatable in the English version: 'snail, pebble, skull, memory, splinter.') The voiceless consonants *ɰ* (the affricate /tʃ/) and the fricative *sʒ* /s/ add a characteristic scratching and hissing respectively. In particular, the consonants (*ʒ*, *r* and *g*) in the word *ʒörögtem* 'rattled,' which is already onomatopoeic, reinforce these sounds: the *ʒ* fricative is accompanied by the *r* trill consonant and the hard *g* sounds.

What is exciting is the space of the poem, a space which is delineated and bounded. This spatial structure is like the closed domain of a house or a skull; apart from the top-down movement there is no other direction, no change of position, no way to get out of it. (Again, we feel obliged to find parallels to this sense of claustrophobia in the biographical details of the poet's life.)

It is worth referring to T.S. Eliot – and noting the adjective he uses – when he writes about the staircase in his poem *Ash Wednesday* as “the *toothed* gullet of an aged shark”.<sup>11</sup> Nemes Nagy was clearly familiar with the poem, as she herself quoted this passage in an essay: ‘Öreg cápa *reszelős* torka’ (Nemes Nagy 2004a, 96).<sup>12</sup> (*Reszelős* is not equivalent to ‘toothed,’ but it has a similar meaning: ‘grating or rasping’). Mihály Babits, editor-in-chief of *Nyugat* and a poet Nemes Nagy greatly admired, wrote a famous poem which likewise relates to this: *Jónás könyve* [The Book of Jonah]. There is also an obvious Rilkean parallel with the seventh part of *The Duino Elegies* (which Ágnes Nemes Nagy translated into Hungarian), in which the movement is also vertical, but there it is from the bottom up, to a transcendent plane.

In Nemes Nagy's poem the 'skull' represents organicity – the human body is present rather as *zoe*. However, in a figurative sense, the skull embodies the place of thoughts because it is in the brain. It is in the skull that the thoughts are formed which make us human. Thus, through thoughts or memories it is also a manifestation of *bios*. Ágnes Nemes Nagy was already using the snail in connection with the skull and memory in her early poems, for example in *Hadjelvény* [Military Colours] where we find 'snail of my brain,' 'bone' and 'skull' and in which the speaker holds up its

<sup>11</sup> Emphasis mine. A. P.

<sup>12</sup> Emphasis mine. A. P.

crushed skull like a standard. In *Emlékezet* [Memory], we see a different image used for the mind and memory. Here, ‘little guys’ are ‘hurrying up and down’ inside the brain as if in a building, relaying messages. There are corridors, shelves, drawers, files etc. In this way *bios* is represented as dominating *zoe*, the human mind as controlling biological function while anthropomorphizing *zoe*. In the imagined world of the mind, little people run around the brain as in a building, relaying messages. There are corridors, shelves, drawers, files, etc.

The lines of *Csigalépcső* [Spiral Staircase] are contained within the dialogic-dramatic poem *Szobrok* [Statues] (Hernádi 2017, 230–253), an emblematic poem written before 1966 as part of the cycle entitled *Között* [Between] and published with some alterations in the collection *Napforduló* [Solstice]. While *Szobrok* was widely commented on when it was published, there is insufficient space to discuss its reception here, and analysis must be restricted to some aspects related to the poem *Csigalépcső*. The opening stanza of the forty-four-line poem is a version of the previous poem:

Keserű.

Keserű volt a tenger, amikor  
a sziklatorokon legörögtem,  
csigalépcsőn kavics, pörögtem,  
búgott a csigahéj utánam,  
mint az emlék a puszta házban,  
zörögtem,  
mint *vasszilánk* a koponyában. [...] <sup>13</sup>

Bitter.

It was bitter, the sea, when  
I rolled through the rock-throat down  
a spiral staircase, A shingle, I spun,  
behind me the hum of snail-shell  
like memory in an abandoned house  
I rattled  
like a *skullful* of shrapnel. [...] <sup>14</sup>

Nemes Nagy modified the text so that the number of syllables remained the same, ensuring all lines have nine syllables, except two, the first and the penultimate one. She used, for example, “*mint a szilánk*” ‘like the splinter’ instead of “*mint vasszilánk*” ‘like [...] shrapnel’ – in this way in Hungarian the word, the line, is made more powerful, more resonant, while in English the definite article makes the splinter more specific, but creates quite a different image compared to the original. Szirtes’s translation better reflects the original: “like loose metal, shrapnel in the skull” (Nemes Nagy 2004d). Unlike *Spiral Staircase*, in *Statues*, the view, the image is

<sup>13</sup> Emphasis mine. A. P.

<sup>14</sup> Translated by Bruce Berlind (Nemes Nagy 1980b, 32). (Emphasis mine. A. P.) On this poem, its meaning and translation, see Berlind 1993. This translation is very different from the other translation of this poem by Szirtes (Nemes Nagy 2004d, 31) or another by Maxton (Nemes Nagy 1988, 35).

immediately expanded by being set in nature: on a cliff by the sea. The (downward) spinning on the spiral staircase is of course only a metaphor here: the scene takes place in a much wider space, and the pebble or snail shell is a much more integral part of it, whose 'humming' (the translators did not, however, choose the best term; whispering sounds like 'murmuring' or 'susurration' would have been preferable) is also semantically connected with the sea.

In this poem, the sense of enclosure in a house or a skull is also dissolved (as a pebble rolling down) by the speaker, who directs the reader's gaze to the water's edge. Down there, there are statues, and the speaker's anthropomorphic form is revealed through the use of the possessive adjective 'my:' 'my skull', 'my shoulder', and 'my helmet'. (The last of these confirms that the speaker is not an animal, a helmet being a man-made object, an item of clothing.)<sup>15</sup> The pebbles rolled down, and "I lay there spread against the cliff / an animated filth laid over stone" Nemes Nagy 2004d, 31 (translation by Szirtes). (Another translation by Berliand renders it as: "I lay smeared out on the rock, / life – the filth of it – on a stone", Nemes Nagy 1980b, 32.) This can be read as a kind of *zoe*-life confession. We may be reminded once again of Mihály Babits and the following extract from his long poem, *The Book of Jonah*: "eleven állat, nyult el a homokban" (in a literal translation: 'alive animal, stretched out in the sand').<sup>16</sup> In this line of Nemes Nagy's ("life – the filth of it – on a stone") the representation of vulnerability and helplessness is important. Mária Hernádi considers this section of the poem, the dramatic fall, as evoking the passage through the birth canal, the movement as following the direction of gravity. The object that is moving down a hard channel, falling downwards, is also hard, making the birth dramatic:

In the poem, both the one being born and the one from whom the newborn emerges are wounded, and so is everything that is being created on the shore of birth and is changing its mode of being. [...] In the middle section of the poem, however, the speaker appears as the opposite of the landscape that receives it: a soft and vulnerable body of organic matter in the inorganic, in what is hard and inviolable. The nouns 'tortoise-egg,' 'my skull,' 'bubble,' 'filth,' 'shoulder' and 'blood' belong to the organic world as well as the verb 'boil' the verb 'smeared,'

---

<sup>15</sup>The helmet is primarily a military type of head protection. The *sisakvirág*, literally 'helmetflower' (also known as wolfsbane or aconite) is obviously so named because of its shape and its poisonous nature. This brings with it the interpretation: in nature (against nature?), man must defend himself.

<sup>16</sup>Emphasis mine. A. P.

the adjective ‘leather-covered’ and the repeatedly used, highly emphatic adjective ‘filthy’. (Hernádi 2017, 239–240)

In Ágnes Nemes Nagy’s poetry, statues are even more permanent objects than the oak, writes Mária Hernádi in another study. (The tree is one of the central motifs in her poetry: it is a mediator between heaven and earth, between the living and the dead, and is also a ladder, a transmitter, etc. Of all the trees, the oak appears particularly frequently and plays a significant role in Nemes Nagy’s poetry.) In contrast to trees, statues are not living organisms but man-made objects. A statue is timeless and held up as an example. It “is made of hard material to express its timelessness; it is tall, usually larger than a human body, and is often placed on a pedestal to be visible to all. To raise a statue is to make someone timeless, to take him out of his temporal existence, bound to the integral organism of nature, and to place him before people as an example, an idea.” (Hernádi 2015, 91)

Also in the same collection is the famous *Akbenaton*-cycle,<sup>17</sup> including, for example, *Amikor* [When]: “Wherefore when I made a god / made I him of adamant. / Mightier than body / so I might trust his mercy.”<sup>18</sup> Nemes Nagy identifies the Easter Islands and the statues there as the source of the poem. As she wrote in her *American Diary* of 1979: “I long to go to Europe like I long to enter a cave – But I still think of the Pacific Ocean. I will look across it, all the way to the Easter Islands. Which I wrote about in my poem *Statues*.” (Nemes Nagy 2015, 254). Easter Island (an island, not islands) is home to more than eight hundred anthropomorphic stone sculptures (*moai*), standing with their backs to the sea. The 1957 book on the sculptures by the Norwegian researcher Thor Heyerdahl (*Aku-Aku: The Secret of Easter Island*) was popular in the 1960s, although many of its basic theses were later disproved. (According to recent research the sculptures may have marked water sources, freshwater coastal seeps.)

In contrast to *Spiral Stairs*, *Elvesztett hangok ülnek itt* [Lost Voices Are Sitting Here] focuses on plants and operates with more extensive sound effects. It was originally untitled and dated 10 January 1960. As the poem shows, muteness is related to dehydration; the poem refers to the impossibility of making a sound in the context of thirst. In the first half of the poem, the word *hang* ‘sound’ appears four times and is then replaced by certain repeated sounds from the natural world (the words

<sup>17</sup>The word *pharaoh* (Egyptian per-aa) means ‘great house’, which originally did not refer to a person, but to the royal palace or court itself, see Bartha 1933.

<sup>18</sup> Trans. by Hugh Maxton (Nemes Nagy 1988, 49). Another translation: ‘In carving myself a god, I kept in mind / to choose the hardest stone that I could find. / Harder than flesh and not given to winching: / its consolation should appear convincing.’ (*When*) – by Szirtes (Nemes Nagy 2004d, 49).

*reszelős, zörgő* and *szétzizeg*, dominated by the consonants *s/sz/*, *z/zs/*, *r/r/* and *g/g/*, rendered in English as *rasping, rattling, rustling*, similarly dominated by */r/*, */s/*, */ŋ/* and the hard, aspirated */p/* and */t/*). This contrasts with 'muted nature' at the end of the poem. The poem is a prayer-like example of giving voice to *zoe*, of asking for a voice (i.e., for life).<sup>19</sup>

**[Elvesztett hangok ülnek itt]**

Elvesztett hangok ülnek itt  
apró bokrokban, szárazon,  
egy hangot adj, egy hangot adj,  
szikkadtan is felfuttatom,  
egy jerikói-rózsa-hang,  
egy reszelős ördögszekér,  
egy szürke, fekete, szürke, zörgő  
szakadt gubanc-gyökér,  
szakadtan is csak karikázzon,  
szálljon, kerek tövis-köteg,  
zizegje szét avarcsomókkal  
az elnémult természetet –

**[Lost Voices Are Sitting Here]**

Lost voices are sitting here  
in tiny bushes, withered,  
give me a voice, give me a voice,  
I raise it up even desiccated,  
a Jericho-Rose-sound,  
a rasping white-devil sound,  
a grey, black, grey, rattling  
torn tangled-root,  
torn as it is, let it tumble  
let it fly, balled thorn-bundle  
with clumped-up leaves let it  
rustle muted nature apart –<sup>20</sup>

The poem also mentions specific plant types (weeds / herbs): the sounds and nature (form and movement) of the Rose of Jericho and the “white-devil” provide the metaphor web of the poem. (In the Hungarian poem the literal meaning of *ördögszekér* is ‘devil’s chariot,’ but it is the folk name of *Eryngium campestre*, a plant similar to tumbleweed. When tumbleweed is torn out of the desert ground by the wind it can be blown along for considerable distances.) As the dead structure of the plant Nemes Nagy calls “white-devil” rolls in the wind, the outer stalks are gradually broken off and it becomes ball-like. If it happens to come to rest in a damp area, it can germinate rapidly, even given very little moisture. The Rose of Jericho is the name of a desert grass, the branches of which curl up when dry and open when wet. This is why the plant is a symbol of resurrection and is used in this context in this poem. Even when it appears to be withered, it is still alive and can be revived by water in a short time.

<sup>19</sup> Mária Hernádi calls this piece a fragment and considers it a twin of the poem *Parable*, because the poem “seems to restate the same theme – the knowledge of the power of faith in life: in the life of words and poetry. [...] it can itself be considered an experiment in writing a parable poem [...]” (Hernádi 2015, 68).

<sup>20</sup> My translation. P. A

The great Hungarian poet of the 19th century, János Arany, also wrote a poem about plants surviving in the desert. (“The thorny white-devil is riding in the wilderness”)<sup>21</sup> as did the 20th century poet Attila József (“My summer is coming to an end so quickly. / The wind carries me on a white-devil ...”).<sup>22</sup> A generation later, the poet Lőrinc Szabó wrote a poem entitled *Számártóvis* [Musk Thistle], about a similar plant. The musk thistle is well adapted to rocky, grassy, desert habitats, and clings easily to other organisms, making it a fast-growing weed, one to be wary of on account of its prickly nature. The poem includes an exclamation (a self-reflexive invocation): ‘Don't hurt me!’ In Lőrinc Szabó's poem this plant ‘just wants to live’; where life kills others, it, the ‘wedge of desert roads’ stands still (this plant stays put, it does not roll away). Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó writes that:

[...] it bears witness not only to its own aggressive character (or to the instinctive thorniness of existence), but also, conversely, in a way to the destructive intervention of the human, of culture, in nature. What is more, it even asks [...] whether the opposition of nature and culture in Lőrinc Szabó's poem is sustainable. [...] But what [...] is the message for the future of the living, the self-surviving plant? This message, according to the instruction given in the poem's conclusion, is in a way a message of life, of life surviving itself, which, at the moment of the ‘death of summer’, is aiming at a ‘new spring’. (Kulcsár-Szabó 2018, 11–12.)

In Nemes Nagy's poem too, the common feature of the two plants (the Rose of Jerico and the white-devil) is that they are both survivors, able to recover their vitality even from a state of death. Here too, it may be useful to refer to what we know of the poet's personal life. Perpetually threatened with censorship and even of being erased altogether, Nemes Nagy was continually having to reinvent her professional life (and her private life). The risk of being plunged into an existential crisis, being in physical danger, resurrection, new beginnings, and revival (survival as *zoe*) are therefore constant motifs in her poetry. (In the 1940s and 1960s, a whole generation of *Újbold* writers had a similar experience).

Both plants, as a ‘balled thorn-bundle’ are able to fly. As the poem's apostrophic conclusion says, they do so in order to shake and stir-up ‘muted nature,’ to spread the news of life. For there is news in things: “this is the sacred conviction of the objective

<sup>21</sup> My translation. P. A “Tüskés ördögsekér nyargal a pusztában” (*Rózsa és Ibolya* [Rose and Violet]).

<sup>22</sup> My translation. P. A “Íly gyorsan betelik nyaram. / Ördögsekéren hord a szél—” (*Nyár* [Summer]).

poet; what she believes or experiences is that objects are inhabited by gods who send her signs, signs of intelligence beyond recognition.” (Nemes Nagy 2004a, 108).

In order to spread this news, the poem becomes performative, with the iterative-magical-rhythmic (spondee–iamb–spondee–iamb) third line of ‘give me a voice, give me a voice’, the rasping–rattling onomatopoeic words (the wind) and the continuous use of the sounds *sz* /s/, *c* /ts/ and *z* /z/ (*elvesztett, szárazon, szikkadtn, reszelős, ördögsekér; szürke, szürke, zörgő, szakadt, gubanc, szakadtn, szálljon, zizegje, szét, természetet*) ‘lost, withered, desiccated, rasping, white-devil, grey, grey, rattling, torn, tangled, torn, fly, rustle, apart and nature,’ all of which is further intensified by internal rhythm (*szikkadtn is – szakadtn is; szürke, fekete – szürke, zörgő; zizegje szét – természetet*) ‘desiccated – torn; grey, black – grey, rattling; rustle apart –nature’.

In the poems under discussion, *melos* dominates over *opsis*, with language itself playing a very special role. “[A literary text] must not only be read, it must also be listened to – even if only mostly with our inner ear.” (Gadamer 1989, 42–43) These poems by Nemes Nagy are melopoetic (from the ancient Greek word *melopoiós* ‘song-maker, poet’) in the sense that they are melodic and singable. According to Ezra Pound, there are three kinds of poetry: *phanopoeia*, *logopoeia*, and *melopoeia*. *Melopoeia* is “wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or tend of that meaning. [...] melopoeia can be appreciated by a foreigner with a sensitive ear, even though he be ignorant of the language in which the poem is written. It is practically impossible to transfer or translate it from one language to another, save perhaps by divine accident, and for half a line at a time.” (Pound 1968, 25)

The poem [*Lost Voices Are Sitting Here*] points out that the apparent silence and desiccation of nature is not permanent, but part of a circular system. The leaf litter is a piece of dead nature (as it consists of rattling leaves and other dry, fallen, dead plant debris), but mixed in with them is *zoe*: the ‘tangled-root’ of living plants.

The speaker appears only in the fourth line of the text: “*szikkadtn is felfuttatom*” ‘I raise it up even desiccated’ with the use of the first-person singular verb and is perceptible in the following section: “*egy hangot adj [nekem]*” ‘give me a voice,’ which seems to be a prayer to a supreme being, a god: a single sound is enough, a sign of life, and the silence will be over.<sup>23</sup>

The poem gives the illusion that it rhymes throughout, although only every second line contains a rhyme. This structure speeds up the rhythm of the reading, which is also enhanced by the fact that the poem consists of a single sentence. It begins

<sup>23</sup> Emphasis mine. A. P.

with a capital letter and reaches its conclusion through a series of juxtapositions and expository clauses, culminating in a dash instead of a period, as if to demonstrate the calming, exhaling effect of a single breath after a single request, but also to suggest that the text itself is a circular unit: it can be read in a circle, starting again from the beginning.

Mention should also be made of the poem *Fügefák* [Fig Trees], which is also melopoetic, and in which the presence of circularity is striking through the moon–grains–figs relationship. The iambic slope of the poem, which begins with anapaests, then dissolves into spondees and tribrachys to finally mark the performative silence with a single long syllable: “*Csönd.*” ‘Silence’. [*Fig Trees*] contains rhyming couplets until the middle of the poem (*fügefák–holdvilág, alatt–balad, konganak–a magvak*) ‘fig-tree–moonlit, below–passes, gong– the seeds,’ but from the eighth line onwards the poem runs into silence. Although the last word of the ninth line – *hallgat* ‘silence’ – still resonates with the last pair of rhymes, semantically it prepares to fade out to the silence of the last three lines.

Beyond the stanzas and the rhymes, there is a maturity, even a softness to the words and the sounds which suggest different sound effects. In the first two lines the two anapaests begin with hard sounds: the voiceless *cs* /tʃ/ and *sç* /s/ (affricate and fricative) are followed by a hard fricative *f* /f/ and then the velar plosives *g* /g/ and *k* /k/. This hardness is then dissolved through the sounds *m* /m/, *l* /l/, and *n* /n/ in the sound combination *ld* /ld/ ‘hold’ ‘moon’ and especially *ng* /ng/ (in which the *g* is pronounced as a hard /g/): ‘*csengős, konganak, csengenek, döngése*’ ‘ringing, jingling, belling, tinkling’.

Later, in [*Fig Trees*], the inner ringing of the fig (‘In their bosom the seeds are ringing’)<sup>24</sup> is contrasted with the spaciousness of the outside world (giant sky) – the internal ringing is thus contrasted with the external rumbling (*döng*, meaning ‘to make a deep, dull, echoing sound’). Finally, the lines invite us to carefully consider what the human ear perceives as silence: “*Ércből / Rezeg a / Csönd*” [‘From the ore / Vibrates / The / Silence’] (Nemes Nagy 2016, 117). There is no subject, no speaker, no person in the poem. Although the human, the intervention of *bios* appears in it through the herding of goats and their ringing, life is directly present through fig trees, goats, and ores – the various *zoe*-entities of nature.

*Majom* [*Monkey*], from 1959, also features figs and, like [*Fig Trees*], is linked to the theme of life through its form and tone. In this poem, the bell motif, the instrument, already implicit in the previous poem, is amplified. The first two lines are an *ars*

<sup>24</sup> My translation A. P. ‘Öblükben csengenek a magvak’.

*poetica*-like alliterative opening, and the passage from the third to the eighth line describes the shore visible from the boat and its distance. The speaker does not take possession of the territory that is solid ground, and which has no possessor yet. Something or someone – a plant, an animal and human construct, an organic or inorganic object (a tool) is hanging from a tree on the waterfront. A tiny monkey (in Hungarian: *csepp* ‘drop’) hangs on the branches like a big fig or a glass lute – the three objects are not only close in shape but also in size. The word *csepp* has a double meaning in Hungarian: on the one hand, it refers to the smallness of the animal, and on the other hand, the shape of the drop resembles that of a fig or a lute. In the poem [*Fig Trees*] the fig resembles a bell, and it swings and sways like a bell. In *Monkey*, however, an animal is added to the fig along with a similar-shaped object, the lute. The lute has been recently abandoned and is still vibrating. It is described as *pobos* (meaning ‘big-bellied’). This stringed instrument (lute or lyre) is one of the oldest *toposes* in poetry – in [*Monkey*] the speaker sees it from a moving vessel and is not certain what he or she is looking at. Still vibrating-trembling, the speaker longs for the shore but declares ‘I will not land.’ So, the speaker does not take the *opportunity* in their field of vision, they pass it up (they do not land on the shore and do not come into contact with the instrument), putting their faith in reason instead. The speaker represents the *bios* point of view, they have anthropomorphic attributes: a face, hands and a coat. Like the helmet before, here the rubberised jacket is a reference to humanity – clothing is not characteristic of any other species but man, so it is a distinguishing mark that separates us from plants and animals. The poem implies that the world on the shore is one without meaning – in the first two lines the speaker says, “I sidle cautiously / towards meaninglessness,” i.e., towards a nonsense world.

According to Martin Heidegger, the hand possesses the essence of man (Heidegger 1982, 118–119). The image of the hanging monkey is exciting, if only because it seems to contradict this: in the world of nonsense, the monkey hangs with his *hands*; in such a world you can use your hand, but in a much less conscious, more instinctive (‘animalistic’) way. The monkey carries a dual meaning: it is a source of levity and humour, but also the animal closest to man. It has highly developed limbs and – together with other primates (chimpanzees, gorillas, orangutans etc.) – is the only type of animal other than humans that possesses true hands. In the poem [*Monkey*] (whose title is after all, taken from the animal), the other functions of the hand are implicit, but there are also explicit indications at several points: the

hand guides, directs, writes, plays the instrument, (and extremely hidden, implicit:) blesses, makes the sign of the cross, etc.

The owner of the gaze in the poem is an outsider, i.e., the spectator and the spectated are in ‘separate worlds.’ The viewer is separated from those they are looking at by the sea, even if they are very close to them (near the shore). They gaze at undisturbed, unconquered nature (in which the monkey seen in the landscapes is part of *zoe*-life), and the desire is born in the speaker to be part of this nearby world, a world which seems to be calling them, yet distancing itself from them. This world, a world of meaninglessness, “may mean the freedom to escape from the domination of rationality and the poetic challenge of a completely new way of speaking, perhaps more separated from the intellect.” (Hernádi 2015, 98)

The conclusion to be drawn from the interpretations here is that melopoetic factors are integral to these poems. As *ars poetica* and performative texts, they also report on their own genesis in the phonetic-rhythmic way a poem can. The poems analysed (and their variants) are not Nemes Nagy’s best-known, nor are they widely discussed, despite containing features that would reveal themselves later in her oeuvre. The poetic change in her oeuvre that began in the late 1950s (but took place gradually and was only fully realised a decade later) can be seen for the first time in these pieces. Nemes Nagy’s poetry was epistemological and phenomenological, seeking to understand the phenomena of ‘life’ and dealing with existential questions. The use of Agamben’s concepts helps us to understand the qualities of ‘life’ in the chosen period, in the chosen poems, with a strong emphasis on the dichotomies of predestination vs. choice, vulnerability vs. freedom, and speaking vs. silence. It seems that in the early 1960s Nemes Nagy was able to ‘process’ the past in her lyric poems through impersonality, and that this went hand in hand with the use of natural imagery and metaphors.

What I mean by this change is that the subject eclipses itself, and thus the human quality (*bios*), which is unique to humanity, is replaced by objects, in this case nature and its non-human inhabitants (which can be described by the word *zoe* in Agamben’s constellation). Because the “force fields of objects are comforting,” and objects help “in finding the nameless” (Nemes Nagy 2004e, 33., transl. by me. A. P.), the objective poet is “continually addressed by objects. [...] In order to capture in poetry what is beyond the known, in order, that is, to express one of the chief poetic aims of our century, the objective poet’s inner life makes use of a frequency band which allows us to hear the signals emitted by the nameless – most often bouncing back off objects,” writes Nemes Nagy (Nemes Nagy 2004a, 107., transl. by me. A.

P). The poems analysed here, then, attempt to give voice to the *zoe* with the tools of poetry: that is, to give words to the landscape, the plant, the mineral – to everything that has no voice in a worldview constructed from the human perspective.

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Redwood: Stanford University Press.
- . 2018. *Pulcinella, Or Entertainment for Kids in Four Scenes*, London: Seagull.
- Aristotle. 1934. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by H. Rackham, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.183333/page/n3/mode/1up/>)
- Balajthy, Ágnes, and Gábor Mezei, ed. 2022. “*Jényem nő: magam termelem*”. *Biopoétika a 20–21. századi magyar lírában* [my light grows: I produce it myself. Biopoetics in 20th–21st Century Hungarian Lyrics]. Budapest: Prae.
- Bartha, Tibor, ed. 1933. *Keresztény bibliai lexikon* [Christian Biblical Encyclopaedia]. Budapest: Kálvin János Kiadója.
- Berlind, Bruce. 1993. “Poetry and Politics: The Example of Ágnes Nemes Nagy.” *The American Poetry Review* 22., no. 1: 5–10.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 2013. *The Posthuman*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Darida, Veronika. 2017. “Összegzések kora. Széjlegyzetek Agamben két új könyvéhez [The Age of Summaries: Notes on Two New Books by Agamben].” *Korunk* 28, no. 10: 46–51.
- Dubreuil, Laurent and Clarissa C. Eagle. 2006. “Leaving Politics. bios, Zōē, Life.” *Diacritics* 28, no. 2: 83–98. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2008.0013>
- Fenyvesi, Kristóf. 2014. “Dionysian Biopolitics: Karl Kerényi's Concept of Indestructible Life.” *Comparative Philosophy* 5, no. 2: 45–68. [https://doi.org/10.31979/2151-6014\(2014\).050208](https://doi.org/10.31979/2151-6014(2014).050208)
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1989. “*Text and Interpretation*.” In *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, edited by Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer, 21–51. Albany: University of New York Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1982. *Parmenides* (Gesamtausgabe 54), Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann
- Hernádi, Mária. 2015. “Nemes Nagy Ágnes példázatversei” [Parable poems by Ágnes Nemes Nagy]. In “...mi szépség volt s csoda”. *Az Újbold folyóirat köre – tanulmányok és szövegközlések*. [“...what beauty was and wonder”: The Circle of literary journal

- Újbold* – Studies and Texts] edited by Attila Buda — Luca Nemeskéri — Adrienn Pataky, Budapest: Ráció.
- . 2017. “A dramatikus verskompozíció Nemes Nagy Ágnes költészetében.” [The dramatic composition of poems in the poetry of Ágnes Nemes Nagy] In “*fohýékony szobor vagy szilárd szökőkút. Tanulmányok Nemes Nagy Ágnesről és más újboldasokról*” [“liquid statue or solid fountain”: Studies on Ágnes Nemes Nagy and Other Writers from the *Újbold* Circle], edited by Attila Buda, Gábor Palkó and Adrienn Pataky, 230–253. Budapest: Petöfi Irodalmi Múzeum.
- Kulcsár Szabó, Ernő. 2022. “Költészet és költőiség. Nemes Nagy Ágnes a hatástörténetben.” [Poetry and Poeticity: Ágnes Nemes Nagy in the History of Influence] In Kulcsár Szabó, Ernő, *Mi a műalkotás? Az irodalmi olvasás kérdései*, [What is a Work of Art? Questions of Literary Reading]. Budapest: Akadémiai. 118–131.
- Kulcsár-Szabó, Zoltán. 2018. “A (túl)élő üzenete (Szabó Lőrinc. ‘Szamártövis’). [The Survivor’s (The Living Person’s) Message (Lőrinc Szabó: Szamártövis)] *Prae* 20, no. 1: 4–19. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-05728-0\\_21002-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-05728-0_21002-1)
- Nemes Nagy, Ágnes. 1980a. “The poet’s introduction.” Translated by J. E. Sollosy. In Nemes Nagy, Ágnes. 2004. *The Night of Akhenaton: Selected Poems*. Translated by George Szirtes. Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 87–94.
- . 1980b. *Selected Poems*. Translated by Bruce Berlind. Iowa: University of Iowa.
- . 1988. *Between: Selected Poems*. Translated by Hugh Maxton. Budapest: Corvina; Dublin: Dedalus.
- . 1998a. “Negative Statues.” In *Nemes Nagy Ágnes on Poetry: A Hungarian Perspective*, edited by Győző Ferencz and John Hobbs, 13–18. Translated by Mónika Hámori. Lewiston, N.Y.; Queenston, Ont.; Lampeter: Mellen.
- . 1998b. *Nemes Nagy Ágnes on Poetry. A Hungarian Perspective*, edited by Győző Ferencz and John Hobbs. Translated by Mónika Hámori. Lewiston, N.Y.; Queenston, Ont.; Lampeter: Mellen.
- . 2004a. “A költői kép.” [The Poetic Image] In *Az élők mértana. Prózái írások I* [The Geometry of the Living: Prose I], edited by Mária Honti, 89–126. Budapest: Osiris.
- . 2004b. “Filozófia és jó modor.” [Philosophy and Good Manners] In *Ibid.*, ed. Mária Honti, 658–659.
- . 2004c. “Látkép, gesztenyefával.” [View, with Chestnut Tree] In *Ibid.*, *Az élők mértana. Prózái írások II* [The Geometry of the Living: Prose II], edited by Mária Honti, 189–252. Budapest: Osiris

- . 2004d. *The Night of Akhenaton. Selected Poems*. Translated by George Szirtes. Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books.
- . 2004e In Nemes Nagy, Ágnes, *Az élők mértana. Prózái írások II* [The Geometry of the Living: Prose II], ed. Mária Honti, 24–33.
- . 2007. *51 Poems*. Translated by Peter Zollman. Budapest: Maecenas.
- . 2015. *Amerikai napló, 1979* [American Diary, 1979], edited and annotated by Attila Buda. In “...mi szépség volt s csoda”. *Az Újhold folyóirat köre – tanulmányok és szövegeközlések* [‘...what beauty was and wonder’: The Circle of the Literary Journal *Újhold* – Studies and Texts], edited by Attila Buda, Luca Nemeskéri and Adrienn Pataky. Budapest: Ráció.
- . 2016. *Nemes Nagy Ágnes összegyűjtött versei* [Ágnes Nemes Nagy: Collected Poems], edited by Ferencz Győző. Budapest: Jelenkor.
- Németh, Zoltán. 2022. “A líra növényforradalma. Critical plant studies – a növényesített nyelv perspektívái.” [Poetry’s Plant Revolution: Critical Plant Studies – Perspectives on Language Made Plant-Like] In “fényem nő: magam termelem”. *Biopoétika a 20–21. századi magyar lírában* [‘My Light Burgeons: I Grow it Myself’: Biopoetics in 20th—21st Century Hungarian Poetry], edited by Ágnes Balajthy and Gábor Mezei. Budapest: Prae, 316–327.
- Pound, Ezra 1968. *Literary Essays*, New York: New Directions.
- Szirtes, George. 2011. “New Life: The Poetics of Transition.” *Europa–Asia Studies* 63, no. 9: 1611–1626. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2011.611649>