

The Resonance of *Bios* and *Zoe* in Several of Ágnes Nemes Nagy's Poems Written around 1960¹

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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,

¹This 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.

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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,³ 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

³ 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.⁴ 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).⁵ *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

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

⁵ 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:⁶ 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).⁷ 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,

⁶Thus, 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.

⁷Part 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,
 búgott a csigahéj utánam,
mint az emlék a puszta házban,
 zörögtem,
mint a szilánk a koponyában.⁸

Spiral staircase

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

⁸ 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.)

⁹ 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 stair¹⁰ 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

¹⁰ 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 agèd shark”.¹¹ 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).¹² (*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

¹¹ Emphasis mine. A. P.

¹² 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. [...] ¹³

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. [...] ¹⁴

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

¹³ Emphasis mine. A. P.

¹⁴ 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.)¹⁵ 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').¹⁶ 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,'

¹⁵The 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.

¹⁶Emphasis 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,¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ 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

¹⁷The 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.

¹⁸ 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/z/, 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).¹⁹

[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 –²⁰

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.

¹⁹ 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).

²⁰ 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”)²¹ 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 ...”).²² 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

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

²² 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/ (*elvezített, 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.²³

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

²³ 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’)²⁴ 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 / Rezge 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*

²⁴ 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.

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