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## Ágnes Nemes Nagy and religious poetry

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### Abstract

*The writer of the following lines presents the life of the poet-writer and translator Ágnes Nemes Nagy. It includes her schools and also mentions her study trips abroad. In the first part of András Ménes's scripture/lecture, he presents the life and family relationship of Ágnes Nagy Nemes in great detail.*

*The second part of the scripture/lecture presents the religious poetry itself. It is very interesting that many Hungarian poets and writers became religious. This may be due to the fact that Hungary has always been at the crossroads of history. In the poet's life, there was also a world war, a revolution and a change of regime.*

### Keywords

*poetess, religion, way of life, poems, magazines*

### The life of Ágnes Nemes Nagy

Ágnes Nemes Nagy was born in Budapest, on 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 1922. During all her life she used her original name for publication. In 1939, graduated with honors from the Baár-Madas Reformed (Calvinist) Girls' High School. After that, she became a student of Pázmány Péter University majoring in Hungarian-Latin art history, where she graduated in 1944. During her university years, she entered into a working relationship with Antal Szerb and Gábor Halász.

She wrote poems from her student days and published them in magazines from 1945. Her first book of poems was published in 1946, she joined the Hungarian Writers' Association in 1946, and was later a member of the Hungarian PEN Club. Still in 1946, together with her husband Balázs Lengyel, she founded the literary magazine Újhold, which could only be published until the fall of 1948, but after its ban, it became an emblem of the idealism of the Babits West and the writer's literary endeavors undertaking quality.

Between August 1947 and August 1948, with a scholarship - together with the greats of Hungarian science, art and literature such as János Pilinszky, Amy Károlyi, Géza Ottlik or Sándor Weöres - she stayed at the Hungarian Academy in Rome and in Paris on a study trip, as if to process the horrors of the war [1] [2] [3] [4].

Ágnes Nagy Nemes also worked as a translator. She primarily translated French and German works into Hungarian, but her translations from other languages were also published in anthologies. From 1946, she was a staff member of the pedagogical journal Public Education. Between 1954 and 1958 she was teacher at the Petőfi Sándor Secondary School of Budapest. As of 1958 she was a freelance writer.

Taking into consideration the extent of the poetic oeuvre and the number of the published books, she did not published too much. She published more of her new poems in "Napforduló" (Solstice) in 1967, and then in a new cycle of her three collected volumes.

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During this period, she wrote her cycle of poems (considered by many to be her masterpiece), the "From the Notes of Akhenaten".

In addition to her poetic work, she was an outstanding practitioner of Hungarian essay literature.

Starting in 1975, she published her essays, poem analyzes and interviews with her in several volumes. He devoted an independent volume to the poetic portrait of Mihály Babits. Her art analyses, her writings about the purpose of poetry and the nature of the poem are examples of professionalism and even enjoyable lively insight, examples of a fine combination of objectivity and personality.

In the 1970s and 1980s, she became a significant and defining personality of Hungarian literary life. She also kept in touch with many prominent members of the Hungarian literary emigration. She represented our country and our literature on several occasions at foreign reading evenings and international writers' meetings. And in 1979, she spent four months in Iowa, at the university's international writers' camp.



*Picture 1: Ágnes Nemes Nagy photo*

In 1986, together with her husband - Balázs Lengyel - they relaunched Újhold (New Moon) in the form of a yearbook under the title Újhold (New Moon) Yearbook. The twelve volumes bear witness to the fact that Ágnes Nemes Nagy considered the core realization of the New Moon idea to be part of her life's work [5].

In the last year of her life, she became an invited founding member of the Széchenyi Academy of Literature and Arts, which was established within the Hungarian Academy of Sciences [6] [7].

Ágnes Nemes Nagy gave her soul back to her Creator on August 23, 1991 in Budapest. During her lifetime, she received the Baumgarten prize in 1948, the Attila József prize in 1969, the gold degree of the Work Order of Merit in 1983, the Kossuth prize in 1983, and the Book of the Year prize in 1985. After her death, in 1998, together with Balázs Lengyel, posthumous she was recognized with the honor of Righteous Among the Nations .



*Picture 2: Tomb of Agnes Nemes Nagy*

### **Poem and experience of God**

„ Like the beautiful  
faithful stream  
The deer wishes,  
My soul longs for my Lord,  
And pleads with him, ...” [8]

Perhaps it is not the most appropriate time to ask the seemingly astonishing, rather radical question after singing old and new songs and poems: is literature, or in a broader sense, a work of art, possible at all? My question, one might say, sounds quite familiar, since there is a huge literature on the "aesthetics of disappearance" or "art after art". The theorists of "exhaustion" have already formulated the same question in many different ways, and of course they have always tried to come up with remarkable answers. The question is not new, and what's more, it goes back to a very rich tradition. If the existence of literature is constantly questioned by literature itself, its art is limited by art, and the scope of validity of the word is limited by the word. From the position of the reader, it seems to be an inescapably valid question whether the poem - let's stay with the genre that interests us closely - reveals creation to us or, on the contrary, hides creation. Do we not attach too much importance to the aesthetic knowledge of the world and ourselves compared to the knowledge of grace through divine revelation? If the original meaning of aesthetics is perception, then do we really encounter God in the course of our readings when we read about God, when the poet mentions him in her poem? To put it more jokingly: isn't God included in the poem for the sake of the rhyme? [9].

We can in no way consider it a coincidence that one of the most bitter writings in the Holy Scriptures (which perceives the distance between the Creator and the creature as the longest - we mean: impassable and evaluates and describes it accordingly) also speaks of the writing itself, we read in it that there is no end to the writing of the many books, and the body is tired from much learning. Yes, what is the point of multiplying the long, long list of futility. Has God revealed Himself perfectly in Scripture? However, the author of the preacher's book draws and conceals with sharp humor the very attitude that makes the strange thing that God can be passed on perfectly possible aesthetically. The existence

of God can and must always be passed on, the transmission should take place from generation to generation and from person to person. The revelation about the futility of books is also spoken by Ágnes Nagy Nemes, and in the same place she questions all possible things and thoughts with light irony. But why? Perhaps because the one we approach, the one we try to approach, is infinitely greater than what we approach it with. God is always greater than the words we mere mortals use to speak of Him. And before we catch a glimpse of him, he is no longer there, he disappears from our sight, and all that we have built up to see him or hear him is gone. In the case of Ágnes Nagy Nemes, the poem is a reverberating building in which time, by means of linguistic memory, is able to condense the past and future into itself by evoking the rhythm of the steps approaching God, from which our present time is mysteriously kneaded.



*Picture 3: Ágnes Nemes Nagy photo*

„ My God, you beautiful faithful stream,  
Where did you run away from me  
Where can I quench my burning thirst?” [10]

This is what Ágnes Nagy Nemes asks, certainly one of the most important - Protestant? reformed? - of the second half of the twentieth century in her poem. Without a doubt, you yourself experienced the heaviest burden of human existence, of our life, of personal existence. Where is God? Why do you hide from us when you want to make yourself known to us? What is the purpose of this one-sided, metaphysical hide-and-seek that exposes people to such an extent?

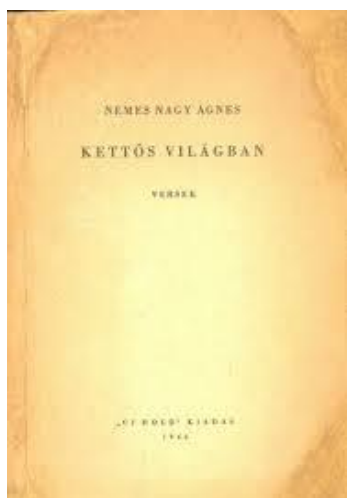
„ Zigzag shingle,  
You're drying right there  
Where thirst is most scorching in the heat,  
And causes a stranger - legions of pain  
Only new torment, but not a spring in the stone.”

Incredible poem, we could say it easily. The words of Albert Szenci Molnár in Psalm 42 do not exactly describe this state, but the fact that the poet is not only questioning God, but also the rhetorical traditions of addressing God, which are too familiar for us, only proves the question-posing of the poem. What I think of? Ágnes Nemes Nagy lives a

sacredly holy turn of prayer, resorts to the crystal-clear wording of the Protestant tradition, transforms a sanctified form into her own voice, and transforms her own voice into a sanctified form. It's as if she takes the safe path in order to talk to God, with whom she has things to discuss that cannot be postponed. In her poem "Shouting", she raises even more openly the drama of the exhaustion of her own Protestant heritage:

„ Do not abandon the unbelieving grandchildren  
of many of your priests,  
Don't leave my miserable head!”

No human being can address God directly, between her and God is the inherited language, the learned and transmitted, tried and passed meaning. The linguistic tools at hand and the established rhetorical forms often turn out to be unusable. The rhetorical tradition, the self-enclosed, fixed phenomena, the movement and the voice delivery proved to be insufficient, even an obstacle, to bridge the distance between the ancestors of the "many priests" and the "unbelieving grandchildren", or at least to show them, to experience them intimately. Fathers look at their sons confused, how can it happen that the well-established, safe path shows itself to be untraveled? And behold, not only do fathers look at their sons and daughters with incomprehension, but the offspring also look at themselves with incomprehension. Did our fathers see God, or did they only honor their desires as God? But it doesn't matter how they died, if they could have been happy in their life, their suffering, their death, except that only the bones can be experienced, some kind of frightening frailty and utter meaninglessness. The image of the complexity of the rich spiritual tradition also appears in the poem Stream by Ágnes Nagy Nemes.



Picture 4: Book of poems of Ágnes Nemes Nagy

Where is God? there is, however, an answer to this question in the poem, but we find it formulated in the language of poetry and music. It escapes there in the poem, in the flawless iambs, which the poet, as if repeating the rehearsed movements of prayer, deliberately follows, condemning the matter of winning faith to be heard. This is the transitional revelation, the real reformation hidden in the poems. However, faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of God. Hearing is not a given, only the divine speech, the revealed word, can make one hear. In the tradition of speaking, it is as if we ourselves hear the distant, barely recognizable echoes of the divine word, but as long as it does not become a divine word, the meanings that become present can be a source not only of faith, but also of doubt.

Let's put tradition to testing, suggests Ágnes Nagy Nemes. Because while we are trying to address God directly, it is as if God is already speaking to us and in us, we think we are hearing someone who is infinitely different from us and yet considers language as her own home. This strength of search in Ágnes Nemes Nagy, the Protestant hardness, makes it possible for me to read that the poetess is artistically and intellectually honest. She is honest both in seeking and finding God. She also gives her readers the hope that through her poems everyone can find holiness and through it reach God. What a state of grace all this means! To be present at the moment of finding [11].

The divinely godless, or, if you like, ungodly godly poems of the Ágnes Nemes Nagy must be connected to her compositions that look back on a rich past within the tradition of psalms. Perhaps the most scandalous line of the poem Pata can be most fruitfully interpreted in this world of forms:

„ And how to forgive you while disappearing?” Do we also hear the sinner's plea for forgiveness here? We are human, sinful, fallible and mortal. It is difficult for us to forgive and it is also difficult to say this [12].

The god of Ágnes Nemes Nagy dwells in silence, and God's silence is replaced in vain by his followers with endless speeches. There are well-trodden paths, such as the Psalms and parables, but these are impassable for many. They need help, we need spiritual support. The sacred scandals of the poems are usually the specialties of the poems The Stream and The Outcry. The poet aims to refine our methodological hearing. With refined hearing, it is easier to hear God's approaching steps.

If we claim that the trodden paths are impassable, and if we even declare that the God who expresses himself in words and in silence, then we are speaking of the personal experience that our experiences with God are, above all, unrepeatable and is characterized by an existential and human desire to repeat and relive. This is a duality that never cancels each other out, but keeps it alive.

Ágnes Nemes Nagy has a poet-disciple who guides us through her unique experience with the help of a one-sentence poem that is incomparably witty, but terrifying in its ultimate meaning. It is about Dezső Tandori, and the title of his poem is Heraclitus Memorial Column, the poem can be found in the volume “Conditional stop” (Feltételes megálló), published in 1983 [13]. It sounds like this:

„P/r/ó/b/á/l/j/u/k/e/l/s/ő/o/l/v/a/s/á/s/r/a/m/e/g/m/o/n/d/a/n/i/h/á/n/y/s/o/r” (In English: L/e/t/'s/t/r/y/t/o/s/a/y/h/o/w/m/a/n/y/l/i/n/e/s/t/h/e/r/e/a/r/e/o/n/t/h/e/f/i/r/s/t/r/e/a/d/i/n/g/ - Let's try to say how many lines there are on the first reading//

Dezső Tandori calls for the fulfillment of the impossible, he sets a condition for a particularly interpreted understanding of the poem, which is simply not possible with our ingrained reading habits, and beyond that, with the poem-breaking habits at hand. And the habit, the posture of the mouth, empties the text, silences the poem, domesticates Psalm 42, making the cry articulate as well. The sacred texts are beautiful and terrible at the same time, and their most adequate form is a fragment, because the perception of God does not quench, but increases the thirst for God. In the infinite space of linguistic memory, in the undivided sea of words and sentences, there are the words of God, the revealed words, as well. The believer struggles with this formless inheritance - including Ágnes Nemes Nagy in disbelief.

According to a medieval master, a work of art multiplies blessings. Ágnes Nemes Nagy did not live in vain. Her life exemplified that we can get closer to God through her creations, that is, her poems.



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