

Translation as latency, latency as translation: Ágnes Nemes Nagy, Fernando Pessoa, and the hidden life of Hungarian modernism

[Tradução como latência, latência como tradução
Ágnes Nemes Nagy, Fernando Pessoa e a vida oculta
do modernismo húngaro]

Gábor Bednaries*

Keywords

Hungarian modernism, Translation, Literary censorship, Late style, World literature.

Abstract

This essay examines the 1964 Hungarian premiere of Fernando Pessoa —four poems translated by Ágnes Nemes Nagy and published in the journal *Nagyvilág*—as an episode in the politics of literary transmission under the Kádár dictatorship. Drawing on theories of lateness, contrapuntal reading, and world literature, it argues that translation in 1960s Hungary functioned not merely as cultural mediation but as a form of literary latency, allowing suppressed modernist voices to persist within the public sphere. The essay further proposes that Hungarian modernism survived and renewed itself through translation as pretext, with Pessoa's work playing a decisive role in this process.

Palavras-chave

Modernismo húngaro, Tradução, Censura literária, Estilo tardio, Literatura mundial.

Resumo

Este ensaio examina a estreia húngara, em 1964, da poesia de Fernando Pessoa – quatro poemas traduzidos por Ágnes Nemes Nagy e publicados na revista *Nagyvilág* – como um episódio da política de transmissão literária sob a ditadura de Kádár. A partir de teorias do estilo tardio, da leitura contrapontística e da literatura mundial, argumenta-se que a tradução funcionou, na Hungria dos anos 1960, não apenas como mediação cultural, mas também como forma de latência literária, permitindo a sobrevivência de vozes modernistas silenciadas no espaço público. O ensaio propõe ainda que o modernismo húngaro se renovou através da tradução como pretexto, tendo a obra de Pessoa desempenhado um papel decisivo nesse processo.

* Eszterházy Károly Catholic University – Eger, Hungary.



Any account of Fernando Pessoa's international reception must begin with a recognition that its most revealing episodes are often the least expected ones: not the consecration of the poet in the major metropolitan centers of world literature, but the oblique and sometimes underground routes by which his work reached readers working under conditions nothing like those of Lisbon or Paris. The arrival of Pessoa in Hungary in 1964—four poems in a single issue of a Budapest literary journal, translated by a poet who could barely publish her own work—is one of these episodes, and attending to it closely illuminates something important about how literary modernism survives and renews itself in conditions of political constraint. It also illuminates what Pessoa's poetry, specifically, makes available to a poet in such conditions: a formal language for the dispersal and concealment of the lyric subject that has both aesthetic and political dimensions. As Terry Eagleton has observed, modernism is "fascinated by time but disenchanted with history" in the progressive, teleological sense (EAGLETON, 2022: xix)—and it is this constitutive ambivalence that makes the encounter between a Portuguese poet and a Hungarian translator, mediated across three languages and two decades, something other than mere belatedness.

The organizing concept is lateness—not lateness in the simple chronological sense, as if Hungarian readers merely arrived late to a modernism already established elsewhere, but what Hutchinson calls epochal lateness. To inhabit a *Spätzeit* in which all the primary moves have already been made is not a condition to be overcome but a source of formal energy. The decisive theoretical move, borrowed from Adorno, is the claim that "modernism is that which is 'obsolete in modernity'" [*das Veraltete an der Moderne*]: that the apparent backwardness of modernism, its refusal to update and conform and assimilate, is precisely the form its critical force takes (HUTCHINSON, 2016: 278). Anachronism becomes the refuge of modernity.

The Hungarian literary situation of the 1960s inhabits this paradox with particular intensity. Hungarian modernism was structurally late—it was positioned at the periphery of world literary space, obliged to import the achievements of Western literary culture through translation, its relationship to metropolitan modernism always mediated and delayed. But to this structural lateness the political situation of the Kádár era added a second, qualitatively different condition: an enforced latency, a suspension of the tradition's capacity for public self-expression, that was specifically political in character. The distinction matters. A literature that is late can continue its development, however belated; a literature that is made latent—whose major voices are present and active but denied access to the public sphere—develops otherwise, through indirection, displacement, and the strategic deployment of forms that the censorship apparatus cannot readily identify as subversive. Translation was one of these forms, and understanding how it functioned in this role requires attending to both the specific historical conditions of the Kádár era and the broader theoretical question of what translation can do when pressed into service beyond cultural mediation.

For readers unfamiliar with the specific character of Hungarian cultural politics in the 1960s, some contextual orientation is necessary, since the conditions that shaped Nemes Nagy's encounter with Pessoa are inseparable from them. The Kádár regime—established in the aftermath of the Soviet suppression of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and maintained until 1989—was a left-wing authoritarian system of a specifically late-Stalinist variety, distinct in significant ways from the Stalinist cultural politics it partially replaced but no less controlling in its management of the public sphere. Its cultural management was, if anything, more sophisticated than its predecessor's, precisely because it operated not through outright prohibition alone but through a calibrated system of permissions and refusals that gave it the appearance of relative liberalism while maintaining effective control over what could be said publicly and by whom.

This system came to be known, with characteristic Hungarian irony, as the policy of the "three Ts": *tiltott* (forbidden), *tűrt* (tolerated), and *támogatott* (supported). The three categories were applied not to genres or forms in the abstract but to individual authors, determining at any given moment what they could publish, in what venues, and under what conditions. The "supported" were the regime's cultural favorites—those whose work aligned with the socialist state's ideological program and received awards, large print runs, and prominent placement. The "forbidden" could not publish at all; in the most extreme cases, they could be imprisoned or driven into exile. The "tolerated"—and this is the category most relevant to understanding the situation of Nemes Nagy and her generation—occupied a deliberately ambiguous middle ground. They were permitted to exist within the cultural landscape, to publish in certain venues and genres. Still, they were denied the visibility and institutional support that would have allowed them to develop and transmit their work in normal ways.

The theoretical basis for the cultural politics of the Kádár era was a version of socialist realism that identified Western modernism as ideologically suspect—as the expression of bourgeois individualism, formal decadence, and political quietism. This identification had a specific historical content: the poetry of the *Újhold* (New Moon) generation, to which Nemes Nagy belonged, was associated with a tradition of aesthetic autonomy and formal rigor that the regime understood as implicitly hostile to its project of social transformation through culture. The *Újhold* journal itself had been suppressed in 1948, along with several other non-aligned literary publications, when the Stalinist cultural apparatus moved to consolidate its control over Hungarian intellectual life. The journal's very name—New Moon, with its connotations of hidden light and cyclical renewal—took on, retrospectively, an almost programmatic resonance: it named the condition of a literature that existed but could not be seen.

For the poets of the "tolerated" category, two modes of literary activity remained relatively accessible. One was children's literature, which the regime regarded

as politically innocuous and, therefore, relatively unregulated. The other was literary translation, which occupied a complex and interesting position in the cultural politics of the period: it was licensed as cultural-educational work—the enrichment of Hungarian literary culture through the importation of world literature—, but it was also, inevitably, a form of aesthetic engagement that could not be entirely controlled. A translator who was “tolerated” as an original poet might nonetheless exercise considerable influence through the selection and rendering of foreign texts, shaping the literary sensibility of a generation of Hungarian readers without appearing to speak in her own voice.

Nemes Nagy published six children’s books and a substantial volume of translations during the 1960s. Her translation volume, *Vándorévek* (Wandering Times), appeared in 1964; it was surrounded and followed by further translation work throughout the decades, including the 1964 *Nagyvilág* publication of Pessoa. That this was not simply accommodation to external constraint—not merely making the best of a bad situation—is clear from the quality and seriousness of the work and from Nemes Nagy’s own theoretical reflections on translation, which consistently understand it as a mode of genuine poetic engagement rather than a secondary activity. But it is also clear from the trajectory of the work itself: the poets she chose to translate, the formal problems she brought to their work, and how her translations fed back into her own poetic practice, all suggest a sustained and deliberate creative program rather than an opportunistic use of the one mode of literary activity the regime permitted.

To understand why translation could function in this way—as genuine creative practice rather than mere substitute—it is necessary to understand the tradition within which Nemes Nagy was working. The *Nyugat* (West) journal, founded in 1908 and published until 1941, was the principal organ of Hungarian literary modernism and one of the most significant little magazines in the history of European literature. As Szegedy-Maszák Mihály has argued, the problem of how world literature is mediated and received within Hungarian literary culture is inseparable from the history of the *Nyugat* generation and its successors (SZEGEDY-MASZÁK, 2010: 11-35). The process by which foreign forms were absorbed into Hungarian literary culture is what Szigeti Csaba calls ‘nostrification’—domestication or naturalization—the complex of creative and critical practices through which a form that begins as alien becomes, through sustained engagement, genuinely Hungarian (SZIGETI, 2005: 304-305). Its name announced a program: the orientation of Hungarian literary culture towards the West, the engagement with the formal innovations of French symbolism, German expressionism, and the developing Anglo-American modernism. But the *Nyugat* generation’s relationship to Western literary tradition was not simply one of imitation or reception; it was a creative engagement that involved transforming imported forms through their encounter with the specific resources and resistances of the Hungarian language.

Literary translation was central to this project in ways that went well beyond the provision of cultural information. The *Nyugat* poets—Mihály Babits, Dezső Kosztolányi, Árpád Tóth, Lőrinc Szabó, and their contemporaries—understood translation as a form of poetic training, a laboratory in which the possibilities of the Hungarian language were tested and extended through sustained encounter with the formal innovations of European modernism. When Babits translated Dante’s *terzina* into Hungarian, or when Kosztolányi assembled his anthology of world poetry in *Modern Költők* (Modern Poets, 1914), they were not merely making these works available to readers who lacked access to the originals; they were, simultaneously, teaching Hungarian what a *terzina* could be, discovering what formal possibilities the language offered and what resistances it presented, and generating, in the process, a new set of models for Hungarian original poetry.

The sonnet provides the most vivid illustration of this dynamic. What Csaba Szigeti, in his comprehensive study of Hungarian strophic forms, calls a ‘cosmopolitical form’—a form whose presence or absence in a given national literature functions as a litmus test for that literature’s engagement with European tradition (SZIGETI, 2005: 304)—the sonnet had long been regarded as alien to Hungarian verse, a form appropriate to the Romance languages or to German, whose prosodic structures more readily accommodate its syllabic demands, but not to the agglutinative, accent-timed structure of Hungarian. Kazinczy, who did more than anyone else to introduce the sonnet to Hungarian literary culture, laid out the difficulty in 1809 in terms that have become the locus classicus for understanding the form’s troubled relationship with the language: “Sonettet magyarul soha nem írt még senki” [No one has yet written a sonnet in Hungarian]. “Nyelvünknek épen oly kevés Reimjai vannak, mint sok az olasznak” [Our language has just as few rhymes as Italian has many], he wrote, going on to enumerate the form’s demands as a series of near-insurmountable obstacles (KUNSZERY, 1965: 22-23). Kölcsey, who had begun as an enthusiast, arrived at the same conclusion a decade later: “A mi nyelvünk a Reimokban oly szegény, hogy csak makacsságból nem akarunk a görög manierre egészen áltamenni” [Our language is so poor in rhymes that only stubbornness prevents us from turning entirely to the Greek manner] (KUNSZERY, 1965: 47). Kunszery’s survey of the form’s early history in Hungary arrives at the lapidary conclusion that the sonnet remained “periférális jelenség, nem ‘honosodik meg’ nálunk, csak átutazó vendég” [a peripheral phenomenon, not yet domesticated, merely a passing guest] (KUNSZERY, 1965: 21). It is worth pausing on the date of Kunszery’s study: 1965, the year after Nemes Nagy’s Pessoa translations appeared in *Nagyvilág*. The two events are products of the same cultural moment—the systematic recovery, in the relative thaw of the mid-1960s, of a Hungarian literary tradition whose development had been interrupted and distorted by two decades of political constraint. Kunszery’s historical investigation of how the sonnet finally found its footing in Hungarian

through the labors of translators and adapters is, in this sense, the scholarly counterpart to what Nemes Nagy was doing in practice: both are acts of recovery, of reconnection with a European formal tradition that the official culture of the preceding period had declared superfluous. It was the sustained practice of translating European modernist poetry in sonnet form—bringing Verlaine and Baudelaire, Keats and Rilke into Hungarian through their preferred forms rather than around them—that gradually disclosed the conditions under which Hungarian could sustain the sonnet's demands. The discovery was made in the course of translation, and the translated sonnet then fed back into original composition, providing Hungarian poets with a precedent for what had previously seemed impossible. Form moved from foreign text to translation to original poem through a circuit of creative appropriation that left all three elements transformed.

Babits, who was Nemes Nagy's most important precursor and the figure she returned to most consistently in her critical essays, theorized this process with characteristic precision. For Babits, translation was not a secondary activity carried out in the margins of original creation but a primary mode of engaging with the formal possibilities of world literature—a way of extending the range of what Hungarian could do by confronting it with what other languages had already achieved. His *Dante*-translation—the Hungarian *Divine Comedy*, which he worked on for decades—was not simply a monument of Hungarian translation literature but a sustained investigation of what Hungarian syntax and prosody could bear, a project that fundamentally shaped his own poetic practice and that of subsequent generations. When Nemes Nagy wrote about Babits in her essays, she consistently emphasized this aspect of his work: the understanding of translation as “a mode of mastery,” a way of internalizing the achievements of the tradition by working through them in one's own language.

The *Újhold* generation inherited this understanding as a living practice, not a historical curiosity. When the journal was suppressed in 1948 and the Stalinist cultural apparatus progressively marginalized its contributors, the tradition of creative translation became one of the primary means of maintaining the modernist poetic sensibility. The poets who could not publish their own work could sometimes publish translations; the formal laboratory of translation remained open when the space of original publication was closed. And within that laboratory, the work continued: the exploration of form, the testing of possibility, the development of a poetic language adequate to the pressures of the present moment.

In her own critical essays—above all in the essay “A fordítás mint alkotás” (Translation as Creation), collected in her collection of essays *Metszetek* (NEMES NAGY, 1982: 147-168)—Nemes Nagy elaborated a theory of translation that makes the full scope of its creative function explicit. The translator, she argued, operates under “the double obligation”: fidelity to the source text and responsibility to the target language, held in productive tension rather than resolved in favor of either.

To surrender to the source text entirely is to produce a translation that sounds foreign in the wrong way—not productively strange but simply inert. To surrender to the target language is to produce a domestication that loses the specific pressure of the original. The only adequate response is to maintain both demands simultaneously, to hold the two languages in a relation of creative tension from which neither can withdraw without damage to the work. This is not a theory of equivalence, and Nemes Nagy was explicit about this: translations are not reproductions of originals but transformations, new configurations generated by the encounter between two linguistic and cultural systems, each of which is changed by the contact. The latency of the foreign text—the potential stored in it that has not yet been activated in the receiving language—is what the translation releases, and in releasing it, changes both the foreign text and the receiving tradition.

Fernando Pessoa's entry into Hungarian literary culture through the pages of *Nagyvilág* in 1964 was made possible by a specific institutional configuration. *Nagyvilág*—whose title, “The Wide World”, announced its ambition to bring world literature to Hungarian readers—was founded in 1956 and began regular publication in 1957, as the Kádár regime consolidated itself following the suppression of the 1956 revolution. The journal occupied a carefully calibrated position within the cultural politics of the period: it was licensed as a vehicle for the importation of world literature, a project that the regime could present as evidence of Hungary's cosmopolitan engagement with global culture while maintaining effective control over what actually appeared. The journal's editors were not mere *apparatchiks*; many were serious literary intellectuals who used the journal's institutional position to introduce texts and authors that would otherwise have been inaccessible to Hungarian readers. The early 1960s marked the journal's most productive phase, as it systematically introduced Western literary achievements that had been inaccessible during the preceding decade and a half of Stalinist cultural isolation.

Pessoa's position within the world literary space in 1964 was itself transitional. He had died in 1935, leaving the bulk of his work in the famous *arca*—the trunk in his room at Rua Coelho da Rocha that contained tens of thousands of manuscript pages, poetry, prose, philosophy, and correspondence by Pessoa and by his heteronyms. The publication of his work proceeded slowly and unevenly in the decades following his death. The sole book-length collection published in his lifetime was *Mensagem* (1934), a cycle of hermetic, Sebastianist poems in Portuguese—already a kind of latency, since it appeared under a nationalist imprimatur that obscured rather than revealed the full range of Pessoa's achievement. The systematic publication of the manuscripts began only in the 1940s with the *Obras Completas* series (from 1942), which began to make the heteronymic poetry available in a more sustained form; yet what we now regard as his major achievements—the *Livro do Desassossego*, the late odes of Álvaro de Campos, the complete arc of the heteronymic system—were not yet available in anything approaching their full and real scope.

His international reputation, mediated primarily through French translations and critical essays, was beginning to form but remained thin. Armand Guibert's study *Fernando Pessoa ou l'Homme Quadruple* (GUIBERT, 1955)—whose title already names the defining feature of Pessoa's work, the multiplication of identities—had played a significant role in establishing the French gateway through which Pessoa would reach international readers in the following decade. It was through this French gateway that Nemes Nagy approached him, as she states in the prefatory note (NEMES NAGY, 1964: 1143): her encounter with the Portuguese poet was mediated through Guibert's French study and translations, not through direct access to the Portuguese originals. The 1964 publication was, as Pál Ferenc has documented, the inaugural moment of Pessoa's reception in Hungarian—the first of a series of encounters whose full arc Pál traces across four subsequent decades (PÁL, 1999).

The path from Lisbon to Budapest thus ran through Paris, a route that Casanova's analysis of world literary space identifies as structurally characteristic of how peripheral literatures access the achievements of other peripheral literatures. For a literature occupying what Casanova calls a dominated position within the world republic of letters—a literature with limited international reach, whose language is spoken by a relatively small number of people and carries relatively little prestige in the global literary marketplace—the direct importation of another dominated literature's achievements is rarely possible. The journey must pass through a dominant center that has already conferred legitimacy on the work, consecrating it through translation, critical commentary, and the apparatus of metropolitan literary culture. Paris, in Casanova's account, occupies precisely this position as the chief consecrating authority within world literary space, the "meridian" against which the temporal position of other literatures is measured (CASANOVA, 2004: 88). A Portuguese poet becomes available to a Hungarian translator not because of any direct exchange between Lisbon and Budapest, but because Paris has mediated the connection, has recognized in Pessoa's work something that deserves consecration and has therefore made it available to the international literary system.

This mediating function of the dominant center should, however, not obscure what was genuinely creative in Nemes Nagy's engagement with Pessoa's work. Damrosch's account of the gains that a literary work can make as it moves across linguistic and cultural borders offers a productive counterbalance to Casanova's emphasis on the hierarchical structure of world literary space. Works of world literature, in Damrosch's analysis, "take on a new life as they move into the world at large," gaining in the process dimensions of meaning and resonance that were not available in their original context (DAMROSCH, 2003: 21). The reframing that Pessoa's poems underwent in Nemes Nagy's translations was not simply a matter of linguistic transfer but of contextual transformation: poems written in response to the specific historical conditions of early twentieth-century Portuguese modernism—the mythopoeia of Sebastianism (rooted in the messianic nationalism of *Mensagem*, 1934),

the encounter with European symbolism that shaped the early orthonymic lyrics, the heteronymic dispersal of authorship formalized from 1914 onward — were transposed into a context in which they resonated with entirely different but structurally analogous pressures. What they made available to Hungarian readers in 1964 was not primarily information about Portuguese literary culture but a formal and philosophical vocabulary for conditions that Hungarian modernism was living through in its own way.

In conditions of systematic censorship, translation acquires a pretextual function that goes beyond anything envisaged in the standard accounts of literary circulation. The word “pretext” is worth dwelling on: in its etymological sense, it names a text that stands before another text, a public presence that serves as a cover or screen for something that cannot appear directly. A translator who is *tűrt*—tolerated—can more easily secure permission for a translation than for an original collection, partly because translation is classified as cultural-educational work rather than creative self-expression, and partly because the ideological risk associated with a specific foreign text can in principle be managed through selection, framing, and editorial contextualization. The translation arrives accompanied by a preface or introductory note that can, at least nominally, subordinate the foreign text to an authorized framework of reception, presenting it as a historical curiosity or a document of the bourgeois literary past rather than as a living formal intervention in the present.

But the pretextual function operates at a deeper level than this institutional one, and it is at this deeper level that Nemes Nagy’s translations of Pessoa are most significant. For the translator working under censorship, the foreign text provides cover not merely in the institutional sense—not merely as a genre that the apparatus treats with relative leniency—but in the poetic sense: it provides a voice in which to speak when one’s own voice has been interdicted. The translator who inhabits the foreign author’s persona, who reproduces the foreign author’s formal choices in the target language, who makes the foreign author’s concerns resonate within the receiving literary tradition, is doing something that is at once genuinely collaborative—genuinely giving oneself over to the service of the foreign text—and self-expressive in a displaced and mediated way. The translator’s choices reveal her. They reveal what she finds significant in the foreign work, what formal features she attends to and what she elides, what aspects of the original she amplifies, and what she quietly adjusts. A reader who knows both the original and the translator’s own work will hear, in the translation, a voice that is neither purely Pessoa’s nor purely Nemes Nagy’s but the productive residue of their encounter.

This structure is what Adorno identifies as characteristic of late style in its most radical form: the mode in which the work’s formal shell is maintained while its subjective content recedes, or appears to recede, beneath the surface. In the late quartets of Beethoven, Adorno argues, the “conventions” of the form do not disappear but become “fragments of convention” [*Konventionstrümmer*] husks that retain

their outward shape. At the same time, their inner content has been evacuated and replaced by something new and unreconciled (ADORNO, 2002: 566). Hutchinson summarizes the dynamic with precision: “the outer shell of harmonic convention remains—‘something mask-like or husk-like... a convention keeping things upright, but largely drained of substance’” (HUTCHINSON, 2016: 270, quoting Adorno). What fills the hollowed-out convention is nothing but an unresolved subjectivity, a “flight of subjectivity” that the conventional form can contain but not fully domesticate. Applied to the censored translator: the outer form is the translation, the culturally legitimate activity of making a foreign text available to domestic readers; what fills the hollowed-out convention of the literary translation is the translator’s own creative engagement, her formal choices, her sense of what matters in the original and why, her implicit claim about the relationship between the foreign work and the situation of the receiving tradition.

Said’s concept of the contrapuntal, developed in *Culture and Imperialism* as a methodology for recovering suppressed voices within canonical texts (SAID, 1993: 51) and extended in *On Late Style* as a characterization of late style’s constitutive refusal of resolution, provides a complementary account of this structure. For Said, late style is defined above all by its maintenance of tension—by a “deliberately unresolved” quality, an “intransigence, difficulty, and uncompromising” character that refuses the harmonious closure that conventional accounts of artistic maturity promise (SAID, 2006: 7). The late work does not move towards resolution but insists on irresolution, holding contradictions in productive suspension rather than dissolving them into synthesis. Said’s model of the contrapuntal reading—attending simultaneously to multiple voices and their unresolved tensions—has a literal application to the translation as pretext: the Hungarian translation of Pessoa is a text in which two voices are held in productive and unresolved tension, neither canceling the other, both remaining audible to the reader who knows how to listen. The voice of Pessoa and the voice of Nemes Nagy do not merge in translation; they form a counterpoint, and what makes the counterpoint productive is precisely the irreducibility of each voice to the other.

The four poems Nemes Nagy selected for translation in 1964 are not randomly chosen. “Autopsicografia”, the poem that opens the selection, formulates with extraordinary economy Pessoa’s theory of poetic impersonality: the poet is “a faker | who fakes so completely | that he even fakes the pain | he truly feels” (PESSOA, 1998: 247; cf. <https://disquiet.com/thirteen.html>). The poem simultaneously states and enacts the theory of heteronymic dispersal; it is at once a claim about what the poet does and a demonstration of the claim’s truth, since the “I” who speaks in the poem is neither Pessoa nor a heteronym in the full sense but something in between, an authorial voice at one remove from both sincerity and fiction. The terminological complexity here—the distinction between heteronym, orthonym, and the various

semi-autobiographical personae—is itself a symptom of the system’s formal elaborateness; as Pizarro has shown, the vocabulary Pessoa developed to describe his own project evolved across decades and admits of no fully stable resolution (PIZARRO, 2020: 34-36). For Nemes Nagy, whose own poetic practice was founded on the rejection of the confessional lyric in favor of an objective, thing-mediated mode of utterance, this poem must have had the force of recognition: here was a Portuguese poet formulating, in thirty-six lines, the theory of poetic impersonality that her own work embodied.

The connection is not merely thematic. Rabaté’s account of modernism’s “splintered subject” situates both poets within a broader European movement in which the stable bourgeois ego gives way to a multiplicity of voices, masks, and personae. “Among the most extreme manifestations of this fragmented subject,” Rabaté writes, “is the final dissociation of the self when it generates fully fledged personalities as different selves, as with the ‘heteronyms’ invented by Pessoa and Valéry Larbaud” (RABATÉ, 2007: 142). Pessoa’s heteronymic project—the creation of Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, Álvaro de Campos, and the oronymous Pessoa himself, each with their own biography, aesthetic commitments, and characteristic style—is, in Rabaté’s reading, not an eccentricity but a systematic formalization of a tendency visible across European modernism from the first decade of the twentieth century onward. It is the logical culmination of the same pressure that generates Trakl’s masks and alter egos, Benn’s radical rejection of lyric interiority, and the multiple narrative voices of Biely’s *Petersburg*—the recognition that the unified self is a fiction, and that the creative energy previously invested in maintaining this fiction can be redirected into the productive multiplication of voices. As Urbán has argued, the public debut of the heteronymic system through the pages of *Orpheu* in 1915 is inseparable from the journal’s broader modernizing project: the heteronyms were not merely a private creative strategy but a programmatic intervention in the Portuguese literary field, a demonstration that the condition of peripheral modernism could be transformed into a formal resource (URBÁN, 2025: 174-176).

For Nemes Nagy, working in Budapest in 1964 under the specific pressures of the Kádár cultural apparatus, the heteronymic logic must have resonated in a way that went beyond aesthetic appreciation. The regime’s cultural politics identified the poetry of the *tárgyias*—the objectivist, thing-oriented lyric that Nemes Nagy practiced—as insufficiently engaged with the social realities of socialist construction, characterizing it as a form of bourgeois aestheticism that retreated into formal complexity rather than addressing the needs of the socialist reading public. Against this demand for a poetry of transparent social engagement, Nemes Nagy’s work insisted on the productive distance between the lyric subject and its objects, on the impersonality of genuine attention, on the formal rigor that the regime had identified as decadent. To encounter in Pessoa a poet who had theorized and practiced this impersonality with extraordinary depth and consistency—and who had developed, in

the heteronymic system, a structural solution to the problem of maintaining multiple creative registers simultaneously — was to find a powerful intellectual ally and a formal resource of immediate relevance.

Rabaté's account of Pessoa's 1913 activity gives further texture to this connection. He describes the letter Pessoa wrote to his friend Mário Beirão in 1913, in which Pessoa expresses the sensation of a creative overabundance that cannot be contained within a single identity: "a whole literature, my dear Mario, which comes from a mist, passes through a mist, vanishes into a mist" (quoted in RABATÉ, 2007: 163). The heteronymic project emerges from this sensation of excess as a structural solution — a way of accommodating the multiplicity of creative voices without either suppressing them or allowing them to collapse into incoherence. The analogy to the censored poet's situation is not exact, but it is suggestive. In both cases, a creative energy that cannot find adequate expression through a single, unified public voice is redirected into a structure of dispersal and multiplication. Pessoa multiplied himself voluntarily, driven by creative logic; Nemes Nagy was driven into a form of dispersal by political necessity. But the formal resources that made both strategies workable overlap significantly.

This structural parallel has a precise theoretical analogue in James C. Scott's account of how subordinated groups operate under conditions of domination. In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), Scott distinguishes between the "public transcript" — the officially sanctioned performance of compliance that subordinated actors produce for the benefit of the dominant power — and the "hidden transcript", the discourse that takes place offstage, beyond direct surveillance, and which encodes the resistances, critiques, and alternative values that cannot be expressed openly without risk (SCOTT, 1990: 2-4). Pessoa's voluntary dispersal of authorial identity across the heteronyms operates as a kind of self-generated hidden transcript — a private creative logic conducted beneath the surface of the public literary field. Nemes Nagy's forced dispersal into translation operates as an infrapolitical practice in Scott's third, intermediate sense: resistance conducted not in a separate hidden space but within the authorized form itself, through the strategic manipulation of what the dominant apparatus has licensed. Both are structures in which a creative energy that cannot find adequate expression through a single, unified public voice, is redirected into dispersal — but the dispersal in each case is shaped by the specific pressures, voluntary or imposed, that generate it.

The textual details of Nemes Nagy's translations reveal the character of her engagement with Pessoa's work. The four poems selected — *Önlélekrajz* (Autopsicografia), *Sebestyén, Portugália Királya* (D. Sebastião, Rei de Portugal), *Ez a régi szorongás* (Esta velha angústia que tenho), and *Kálvária, VI. stáció* (Via sacra, VI) — spans a range of Pessoa's modes: the theoretical poem about poetic impersonality, the poem of Sebastianist myth, the poem of existential anxiety, the devotional poem in sonnet form. The selection is not random; it maps a range of Pessoa's concerns while focusing

consistently on poems in which the relationship between the lyric subject and its formal vehicle is most explicitly at stake.

The textual complications of the 1964 translations are part of their interest rather than simply deficiencies. The subtitle of *Ez a régi szorongás* incorrectly identifies the poem as an excerpt from *Tabacaria*; this attribution error almost certainly derives from the French intermediaries through which Nemes Nagy encountered the poem, and it is worth noting that she does not simply reproduce the error without comment but acknowledges in her prefatory note the mediated character of her access to the Portuguese originals. The departures from Pessoa's syllabic count—lines that grow, rhythms that shift, the strict syllabic regularity of the Portuguese becoming something more flexible in Hungarian—are similarly revealing. Nemes Nagy is not attempting to produce a scholarly facsimile but to release the force of the original into Hungarian, and this requires formal transformation rather than mechanical reproduction. The Hungarian language's prosodic structure—its characteristic patterns of stress and its agglutinative morphology, which tends to produce longer words than the Romance languages—makes precise syllabic equivalence impossible in most cases, and the attempt to achieve it would produce a Hungarian that is prosodically distorted. Nemes Nagy's departures from Pessoa's syllabic count are, in this sense, evidence of formal seriousness rather than formal carelessness: they reflect a principled decision to prioritize the prosodic integrity of the Hungarian over the metronomic equivalence of the syllable count (PÁL, 1999).

The *Kálvária* translation is particularly instructive in this regard. The poem is a sonnet in the Portuguese original, maintaining throughout the formal discipline of fourteen lines with a consistent twelve-syllable count. Nemes Nagy's translation preserves the fourteen-line structure—the structural dimension of the sonnet form—while allowing the syllabic count to vary in a characteristically Hungarian way (PÁL, 1999). This is not a failure to achieve formal equivalence but a demonstration of the *Nyugat* tradition's understanding of what formal equivalence means: not the mechanical reproduction of the original's surface features but the recreation, in the target language, of the formal experience that those features generate. The Hungarian sonnet tradition that Babits and his contemporaries had established through precisely this kind of principled adaptation provided Nemes Nagy with a framework within which her departures from the Portuguese syllabic count were legible as choices rather than errors—contributions to an ongoing conversation about what Hungarian verse can do.

The encounter between Nemes Nagy and Pessoa in 1964 acquires its fullest significance when set within the longer temporal frame of both poets' careers and the traditions they inhabited. Both Pessoa and Nemes Nagy withheld substantial portions of their work from publication during their lifetimes. In both cases, the posthumous disclosure of this work has fundamentally transformed our understanding of what they achieved. Pessoa's *arca* is legendary: the trunk in his room

that contained tens of thousands of manuscript pages, the bulk of his creative production, including the *Livro do Desassossego* in its multiple and unfinished forms, poems in English and Spanish as well as Portuguese, critical essays, philosophical fragments, astrological charts for his heteronyms. What he published in his lifetime was, by his own design or circumstance, a small and carefully selected sample of a vast creative enterprise whose full scope his contemporaries could not have imagined.

Nemes Nagy's situation is analogous, though for different reasons. At the time of her death in 1991, she had published six volumes of original poetry — *Kettős világban* [In a Double World] (1946), *Szárazvillám* (also contains translations) [Dry Lightning] (1957), *Napforduló* [Solstice] (1967), and the collected *A lovak és az angyalok* [The Horses and The Angels] (1969, 1973) *Között* [Between] (1981), *A Föld emlékei* [The memories of Earth] (1986)—alongside significant volumes of critical essays and translations. The posthumous publication of her manuscripts revealed that the published work represented only a fraction of what she had written: the unpublished poems amount to approximately twice the published output, and many are of comparable quality. The reasons for this self-withholding are not entirely clear. Some of the unpublished poems are evidently more personal, more directly expressive of subjective experience, than the objectivist poetics she had publicly committed herself to; it is possible that she regarded them as insufficiently aligned with her own theoretical standards for what modern lyric poetry should be. But it is also possible that the decades of censorship had produced a form of internalized constraint—an extension of the external prohibition into the domain of the poet's own judgment about what was appropriate to make public—that persisted even after the political conditions that had generated it had changed.

What is certain is that, for both poets, the published oeuvre can be seen as a selection from a much larger body of work, and the selection is itself a poetic act. The decision about what to make public is as significant as the decision about what to write; the withheld work is not simply unpublished but latent, present and active in its influence on what is published but not yet manifest. In this sense, both the *arca* and Nemes Nagy's desk drawer are homologous spaces—sites where the latency of modernism is preserved. And the translation, in this context, occupies a specific position within the economy of latency: it is neither the published original poem nor the unpublished private one but something between them, a public text that is also a displacement, a mode of public presence that is simultaneously a mode of concealment.

The *Historical Modernisms* volume edited by Rabaté and Spiropoulou frames this dynamic through the concept of retrospective arrangement—the recognition that “modernism has not been a movement as such [...] but a label applied retroactively by critics, poets and reviewers who were trying to make sense of the amazingly original works” that preceded it (RABATÉ and SPIROPOULOU, 2022: 6). The latency of the *arca*, of the desk drawer, of the translation that speaks in another's voice—all of these are forms of the same structure: the preservation of a creative

potential that can only be fully recognized in retrospect, when the conditions that suppressed or deferred its public expression have changed sufficiently to allow it to emerge. Hungarian modernism of the 1960s was, in this sense, constitutively retrospective: it looked backward toward a tradition that the political apparatus had declared finished, maintained that tradition's formal and aesthetic commitments under the cover of the forms that the apparatus permitted, and waited for conditions that would allow it to re-emerge into the public sphere on its own terms.

The story of Fernando Pessoa's arrival in Hungarian literary culture through Ágnes Nemes Nagy's translations in 1964 is, in isolation, a minor episode in the history of Portuguese literature's international reception. Four poems, a brief prefatory note, a single issue of a Budapest journal with a specialist readership—the event does not announce its own significance. But, carefully examined within the frameworks of literary sociology, translation theory, and Hungarian cultural history, it reveals a complex of practices and conditions that illuminate an important aspect of how literature survives under political constraint.

The convergence between Pessoa's project and Nemes Nagy's situation is not accidental. Both poets were responding, from different positions and in different historical conditions, to the same fundamental problem: how the lyric subject can survive its own dispersal, maintain its creative energy under conditions of enforced latency, and remain productively active without the full public presence that would render it immediately legible as subversive. Pessoa's solution—the heteronymic system, which disperses authorial identity among multiple fully realized personae—is formally very different from Nemes Nagy's—the translation-as-pretext, which conceals authorial identity behind the foreign author's voice. But both solutions share a fundamental logic: the productive use of indirection, of displacement, of the formal convention maintained while its content is transformed.

What these frameworks collectively disclose is something that the Hungarian case makes unusually visible: the logic of productive indirection is not a contingent response to specific political pressures but a constitutive feature of modernist practice as such. Anachronism as formal energy, irresolution as aesthetic commitment, the dispersal of the subject as creative resource—all describe, from different angles, a practice that draws its force precisely from the conditions that demand its abandonment.

The image that best captures the condition of Hungarian modernism in the 1960s is the hidden stream. This underground watercourse disappears below the surface only to re-emerge elsewhere, sometimes far away, sometimes much later. The tradition did not cease to flow under the pressure of censorship and enforced latency; it found other channels. Translation was one of the most important of these channels, precisely because it occupied the paradoxical position of being simultaneously legitimate—sanctioned by the cultural apparatus as cultural-educational work—and productive, capable of maintaining and developing the formal resources

of the modernist tradition through the sustained encounter with foreign texts. The foreign poem provided the cover under which the domestic tradition could continue its work; the translation was the latent space within which the suppressed lyric voice could remain active without being publicly identified as such.

When the political conditions changed—when the underground stream re-emerged—the layered complexity of what had been preserved underground became visible. The posthumous publication of Nemes Nagy's manuscripts, the eventual full reception of Pessoa in Hungary through the translations of György Somlyó and others in subsequent decades, the retrospective recognition of what the *Újhold* generation had achieved: these revelations were not simply additions to the literary record but the activation of a latency that had been preserved for decades. The literature that emerged from the enforced latency of the 1960s was not a diminished version of what it might have been had the political conditions been otherwise; it was a literature that its latency had shaped into something that could only have been produced in those specific historical conditions, under that specific pressure, through those specific creative strategies.

Fernando Pessoa, arriving in Budapest in 1964, was one of the agents of this shaping. His poetry gave Hungarian modernism a language for its own condition of latent presence—a formal vocabulary for the suppression and dispersal of the lyric subject that was both aesthetically innovative and, in the specific context of the Kádár era, politically apt. That this language should have come from a Portuguese poet, mediated through French, arriving by an indirect route that exemplifies everything Casanova describes about the structure of world literary space—this is not a paradox but an illustration of the capacity of world literature to generate unexpected and productive connections between peripheral traditions, connections that the logic of metropolitan influence and provincial imitation cannot adequately account for. In attending to the encounter between Nemes Nagy and Pessoa in Budapest in 1964, we attend to the possibility—realized here, in minor and provisional form—of a genuinely plural world literature.

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GÁBOR BEDNANICS is a Hungarian literary historian, critic, and professor at Eszterházy Károly Catholic University in Eger. His work focuses on literary modernism, modern poetry, mediality, and spatiality in literature, with particular attention to twentieth-century Hungarian and European writing. He earned his PhD from Eötvös Loránd University in 2007 and completed his habilitation at the University of Debrecen in 2014. Author and editor of numerous studies on modernist poetics and literary theory—including *Irodalom és sport* (2022) and *Rendíthetetlen, mint a közet: Tanulmányok Pilinszky Jánosról* (2024)—he received the József Attila Prize in 2011 and the Alföld Prize in 2023.

GÁBOR BEDNANICS é historiador literário, crítico e professor na Universidade Católica Eszterházy Károly, em Eger, Hungria. O seu trabalho centra-se no modernismo literário, na poesia moderna, na medialidade e na espacialidade em literatura, com particular atenção à escrita húngara e europeia do século XX. Doutorou-se em Estudos Literários pela Universidade Eötvös Loránd, em 2007, e obteve a agregação na Universidade de Debrecen, em 2014. Autor e organizador de numerosos estudos sobre poéticas modernistas e teoria literária – entre os quais *Irodalom és sport* (2022) e *Rendíthetetlen, mint a közet: Tanulmányok Pilinszky Jánosról* (2024) – recebeu o Prémio József Attila em 2011 e o Prémio Alföld em 2023.