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**FINDING HOME FOR POETRY IN A NOMADIC WORLD:  
JOSEPH BRODSKY AND ÁGNES LEHÓCZKY**




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## **Finding Home for Poetry in a Nomadic World:**

**Joseph Brodsky and Ágnes Lehóczky**

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PhD thesis

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*To Anna, Filippo, and Carlo*

## SOMMARIO

La linea di ricerca qui seguita mi è stata suggerita dalla vita e dall'opera del poeta e saggista di origine russa Joseph Brodsky, già oggetto della mia tesi di laurea in lingua e letteratura russa, nel 1994. Dopo l'esilio dall'Unione Sovietica, nel 1972, Brodsky trova residenza negli Stati Uniti, conducendo nondimeno una vita di spostamenti e viaggi continui, un'esistenza che potremmo definire culturalmente 'nomade', culminata nell'abbandono, negli ultimi anni, della lingua madre a favore di una piena adozione della seconda lingua, l'inglese, sia per la prosa che per la poesia.

Ho cercato quindi di vedere se il dislocamento e uno stile di vita contrassegnato da una continua ricerca culturale attraverso il viaggio, nato per Brodsky a seguito dell'esilio, possa configurarsi come status 'voluto' ed indispensabile allo scrittore contemporaneo – argomento che ho affronto nel primo capitolo. Avvalendomi del campo interdisciplinare in continua evoluzione dei *Migrations Studies*, ho preso spunto dalla lettura di alcuni testi guida, tra i quali *Nomadic Subjects* di Rosi Braidotti (1994), *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* di Stephen Greenblatt (2010), e *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* (2011) di Zygmunt Bauman.

Partendo quindi dall'ultima produzione di Brodsky, e ripercorrendo le tappe che lo hanno portato all'avvicinamento e poi all'elezione della lingua inglese quale mezzo privilegiato dell'espressione dell'autore – necessario per l'attuazione di una sua evoluzione personale ed artistica – nella mia analisi ho preso in esame le liriche e la prosa relative all'ambiente urbano, scegliendo nella fattispecie quelle relative alla città di Venezia.

Nel capitolo secondo, ho quindi condotto una veloce ma esaustiva panoramica relativa all'opera di Brodsky ambientata nella città di Venezia, epitome dell'esistenza stessa dello scrittore, per poi approdare alla poesia inglese contemporanea – alla quale, per la critica, Brodsky di fatto apparteneva – e cercare una corrispondenza tematica riguardo al nomadismo culturale, al dislocamento, e all'adozione dell'inglese come lingua ultima di espressione artistica.

Ho trovato una risonanza alle tematiche di mio interesse nell'opera recentissima di Ágnes Lehóczky, saggista e poetessa, appartenente al movimento culturale del "British Poetic Revival". Fuoco principale della mia ricerca è stato quindi l'approfondimento della poesia 'post-avanguardista' di Lehóczky, ungherese di nascita, ma che vive ed opera nel Regno Unito da una decina d'anni, come illustro nel capitolo terzo di questo studio.

Avvalendomi come spunto di indagine iniziale di un materiale critico ridotto, rappresentato da un saggio su Lehóczky, due interviste e una lunga recensione, ho cercato di interpretare le prime tre collezioni di poesia in inglese e alcuni altri componimenti raccolti in collezioni minori, per rintracciare nelle liriche i temi dell'alienazione, e della ricerca di una nuova identità attraverso la lingua d'adozione, appunto l'inglese.

L'analisi mi ha portato ad evidenziare alcune affinità, in un certo senso sorprendenti, nelle opere dei due autori, i quali – benché appartenenti a due generazioni e a due registri stilistici sostanzialmente diversi – trovano modalità simili per scrutare la realtà che li circonda. I testi di Lehóczky presi in esame offrono nuove visioni dello spazio urbano, nell'incrocio culturale offerto dalle città tecnologizzate d'oggi, dove le relazioni globali e la convivenza di più linguaggi contribuiscono alla creazione di nuove identità, ma dove la storia diviene elemento fondante per la comprensione del presente.

Prendendo come filtro di lettura le *Social Sciences and Humanities*, ho osservato come l'ambiente, nello specifico quindi della sua forma urbana, diviene spazio privilegiato della sperimentazione poetica contemporanea, descritto attraverso gli occhi del poeta, che è qui turista, immigrato e cittadino.

Nei *prose poems* di Lehóczky, spazio, tempo e lingua sono categorie che giocano un ruolo fondamentale e vanno a costruire un'originale visione del mondo olistica e allo stesso tempo 'palinestica', che affonda le proprie radici nel passato per cogliere elementi esplicativi del presente.

È una visione che, pur riconoscendo nella mobilità dell'uomo contemporaneo le tracce di un nomadismo di fatto sempre esistito, si fonda nei poemi di Lehóczky su dei continui cambi di prospettiva, per offrire al lettore visioni che spaziano in orizzontalità ma soprattutto in verticalità: dal panorama

ad esempio offerto dall'alto di una collina di Budapest, alla visione delle catacombe di una cattedrale gotica inglese, nella convinzione che la realtà necessiti di più punti di vista per essere descritta.

L'inglese, lungi quindi dall'essere semplicemente una 'lingua franca', dopo aver assorbito le influenze linguistiche e contenutistiche della lingua madre – e 'fagocitando' in qualche modo quest'ultima – si arricchisce di nuove caratteristiche, divenendo non solo una lingua nuova, ma uno 'spazio di mezzo' che protegge e accoglie lo scrittore nomade, permettendogli di forgiare la sua nuova identità, e raggiungere così un'individualità personale e artistica, sempre più difficile da ottenere nel mondo contemporaneo. L'inglese offre quindi a questi autori nuove opportunità creative, oltre ad essere fonte di un nuovo riconoscimento sociale.

Nel tentativo di abbracciare le molteplici forme culturali del nostro tempo, gli autori esaminati cercano quindi di 'localizzare' lingua e identità: chi da un'angolazione strettamente personale, chi partendo da un discorso più ampio di spostamenti globali e commistioni culturali.

Di fronte all'impossibilità, in una società oggi concordemente definita 'liquida', di dare un contorno definito a lingua e identità d'appartenenza, anche a causa della natura fluida e nomade del linguaggio stesso, questi autori suggeriscono se non risposte, linguaggi e modalità nuovi, allargando così i confini dell'espressione letteraria.

## ABSTRACT

This new line of research has been suggested to me by the life and work of the Russian poet and essayist Joseph Brodsky, object of my MA degree in Russian literature, in 1994. After his exile from the Soviet Union in 1972, and his subsequent transfer to the United States, Brodsky led indeed a life of displacement and continuous travels: a culturally ‘nomadic’ existence, which culminated, in his last years, in the abandonment of the mother tongue and the full adoption of his second language, for both prose and poetry.

Starting from Brodsky’s last production and following the steps that directed him to approach and then elect English as his privileged means of authorial expression – necessary for his personal and artistic evolution – I have examined in the present study his prose and poetry focused on the urban environment, namely the one located in Venice.

I have then tried to see if displacement and repeated cultural travels can be considered a ‘sought-after’ and indispensable status of the contemporary writer, addressing this topic in Chapter One. I started from the reading of some guiding texts, including *Nomadic Subjects* by Rosi Braidotti (1994), *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* by Stephen Greenblatt (2010), and *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* (2011) by Zygmunt Bauman, drawing from the interdisciplinary and rapidly evolving field of Migration Studies.

After presenting in Chapter Two a quick but exhaustive overview of Brodsky’s work referring to the city of Venice – epitome of his personal and artistic change – I addressed my research to contemporary English poetry, to which Brodsky was considered by many critics to belong.

I decided to look for a correspondence with a new author, who also focuses on cultural nomadism, displacement, and the adoption of English as vehicle of artistic creation and I found a thematic resonance in the recent work of Ágnes Lehóczky, essayist and poet, Hungarian by birth, and British by adoption for a decade, who belongs to the cultural movement of the ‘British Poetic Revival.’

Taking as a starting point of my analysis the few critical material represented by an essay on Lehóczky, two interviews, and a long review, I

examined her first three volumes of poetry in English and other compositions included in minor collections, tracing themes as displacement and estrangement, and the search for a new identity through her language of adoption, i.e. English.

The focus of my research has been therefore the investigation of Lehóczy's 'post-avant-garde' poetry – still unpublished in Italian – as I have illustrated in Chapter Three of this study. The analysis has led me to highlight some affinities in the works of the two authors, who, although belonging to two generations and two essentially different stylistic registers, find similar ways to explore the reality around them. Lehóczy's texts offer new visions of the urban spaces in the cultural intersections offered by today's technologized cities, where global relationships and the coexistence of multiple languages contribute to the creation of new identities, but where history must also become a fundamental element in understanding the present.

Taking the *Social Sciences and Humanities* as a filter, I have observed how the environment, in its specific urban form, becomes the privileged space of contemporary poetic experimentation, and is described through the eyes of the poet – a tourist, a citizen and an immigrant, all in one in Lehóczy's prose poems. Space, time and language are categories that play the main role in building her original, 'holistic' and at the same time 'palimpsestic' view of the world, rooted in a past explanatory of elements of the present.

It is a vision that, while recognizing in the mobility of contemporary man the traces of a nomadism which has always existed, finds in Lehóczy's poems a correspondence in the perspectives of the lyrical observer, to offer the readers visions that span in horizontality and in verticality: from the landscape from the top of a hill in Budapest, to the catacombs of an English gothic cathedral, in her belief that reality requires more than one point of view.

English, far from being simply a *lingua franca*, has absorbed the influences of the authors' mother tongues – 'phagocytizing' in some way these latter – and is thus enriched with new features, becoming not only a new language, but a 'space in-between' that protects and welcomes the nomadic writers, enabling them to forge their new identity. The authors can thus achieve a personal and



artistic individuality, a status increasingly difficult to obtain in today's world, which they reach through their 'transcultural evolution' and thanks to a second language, which offers them further creative opportunities, as well as being the source of a new social recognition. In an attempt to embrace the many cultural forms of our time, the authors examined try to 'localize' language and identity – one from a strictly personal angle, and the other from a wider discourse of global movements and cultural interaction – in a society today commonly defined as 'liquid.'

Faced with the impossibility of defining the boundary of language and identity, because of the fluid and nomadic nature of language itself, these authors suggest if not answers, new richer languages and modalities, to extend the boundaries of contemporary literary expression.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Russian-born poet Joseph Brodsky's life and work, object of my master's degree dissertation in Russian language and literature, have inspired me this new line of research, focused on the themes of cultural nomadism and the adoption of English in contemporary literature.

"I have a love affair with the English language," Joseph Brodsky used to say when interviewed about his attitude towards his second language: this sometime-troubled relationship had started long before his emigration to the United States, his adoptive country since his expulsion from the Soviet Union in 1972.

Joseph Brodsky became internationally known as poet and essayist when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1987 and when he was nominated "Poet Laureate" of the United States, in 1991. This second achievement proved a last turning point for his work, since, from that moment on, he published almost exclusively in English. If this was undoubtedly a way to avoid the endless corrections he made to the translations of his poems, it testifies also the accomplishment of a process that led one of the most representative contemporary authors in Russian, 'Iosif Brodskiy' to leave his mother tongue and adopt English as his privileged artistic vehicle. Thus, he became 'Joseph Brodsky,' an honoured professor and lecturer, who travelled extensively in the United States, South America and Europe.

In what can well be defined a 'travelling exile,' Brodsky showed a special affection for Italy, where he used to come every year: he saw in Rome the representation of classicism and empire, in Florence the embodiment of language and exile, while Venice represented the ideal site to feel the estrangement that he deemed necessary for an artist, besides reflecting his home city Leningrad/St. Petersburg. Venice discloses for Brodsky a discursive space from where to analyse all his major themes: home and displacement, culture and transculturation, language and identity. From his early poems in Russian – later translated into English – through the intense prose of the autobiographical essay *Watermark*, Brodsky testifies to the transformation of his lyric-self: from

a Russian poet in exile, into an American ‘*flâneur*’ writer. To this transformation of the author, the adoption for both prose and poetry of English undoubtedly contributed, as the language ‘par excellence’ of his ‘nomadic life.’

Chapter One is dedicated to a brief reflection on the figure of the nomad writer in the contemporary world. Notwithstanding that nomadism has always been part of the essence of culture – the complex relationship between language, consciousness and identity has engaged the debate of philosophers and linguists for centuries – in today’s global landscape characterized by people’s displacement, we can assert that a new figure, the nomadic intellectual, seems to emerge. This is further testified by the successful attempts of intellectuals to wander among disciplines and among many areas of contemporary culture, with ideas and approaches of the most diverse backgrounds. In this sense, cultural nomadism is considered a typical manifestation of what we call ‘postmodernity.’

Departing from the reading of some guiding texts, such as *Nomadic Subjects* by Rosi Braidotti (1994), Stuart Hall’s *Modernity – An Introduction to Modern Societies* (1996), *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* by Stephen Greenblatt (2010), and Zygmunt Bauman’s *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* (2011), I have tried to see if this physical and cultural displacement – caused for Brodsky by exile – can be considered nonetheless a ‘sought-after’ status pursued by other authors, as the ultimate possible condition for the contemporary writer.

Focusing the research on the themes of displacement and identity, and on the relation between the first and second language and the adoption of English as a vehicle for literary creation, I have found a correspondence with the contents and forms of the work of Ágnes Lehóczky, emerging poet and essayist on the British literary scene. The Hungarian-born poet Lehóczky has nevertheless kept a strong link with her mother country and scrutinizes in her poems the changing reality around her, seeking to define her identity as a modern nomad intellectual.

Trying not to force the comparison between the two authors, I can say that the red thread that unites them is first to be found in their full adoption of English, in Brodsky for both prose and poetry, and in Lehóczky in the hybrid

form of her prose poems. The study has offered me evidence of the affinity that connects them, testified by the very last development of Lehoczky's literary work, and further confirmed by the same Lehoczky, whom I met in Sheffield, in summer 2017.

Chapter Two of this study will be dedicated to a theoretical analysis of Brodsky's transculturation and adoption of English as the epitome of his changed artistic persona.

In Chapter Three, I will examine Lehoczky's three main collections in English, published between 2008 and 2014, and three small publications, recently released, centred on the theme of water.

The last section concludes with some considerations that have arisen from the research, in the conviction that this will offer further hints to investigation.

The study, in part conducted at the University of Sheffield under the supervision of the same Ágnes Lehoczky, professor of Creative Writing, will depart from tracing Brodsky's progressive fascination for his second language – I will analyse his last production in English – to come to Lehoczky's work, which will be at the focus of this project, representing the novelty.

English, far from simply being a *Lingua Franca*, becomes then a new language, having absorbed the influences of the authors' mother tongues. Enriched by new features, it is more than a language: it is a space 'in between' that welcomes and protects the nomadic writers, while allowing them to forge their new identities. The mastery of an acquired language, and the decision to adopt it as vehicle for their artistic manifestation, offers the bilingual writers new creative opportunities, also of social recognition. It is not a coincidence that both authors found working opportunities in the academic world of their new host countries.

As I will show, in Lehoczky's 'post-avantgarde' poems – as she likes to define them – the environment, mainly in its urban form, is the privileged space for contemporary poetic experimentation, and it is described through the eyes of the tourist, the immigrant and the new citizen. Lehoczky's poems offer new visions of the urban space, in the criss-cross of technologized cities, whose global relationships and the cohabitation of languages cannot ignore

connections with history. It is a vision that, while recognizing the mobility of contemporary man, searches for traces in the past to explain the present.

Lehóczy's view of the world could be described as 'holistic' and at the same time 'palimpsestic,' in which aspects of reality are linked to many others to create a greater picture. As our life moves on multiple parallel or intersecting levels, any aspect of experience hides under its appearance unseen layers, which must be unveiled by the scrutinizing eyes of the lyric observer. In her poems, indeed, Lehóczy offers continuous changes of perspective, mainly in verticality – from the panorama, for instance, offered from the top of a hill in Budapest, to the catacombs of an English cathedral – adopting what is defined a 'psychogeographical' approach. This method of discovery the city is drawn from the Situationists and can be found also in Brodsky's prose of *Watermark*.

In Lehóczy's prose poems, the categories that play the main role are space, time and language, and will be examined in their conceptual and stylistic relations, through the filters offered by the Social Sciences and Humanities.

The nomadic authors seek to define new conceptions of their selves by going beyond the traditional assumptions of identity, culture and homeland. Either from a strictly personal view – which nevertheless opens to concerns on the surrounding American cultural environment, for Brodsky – or underlining the common historical features of European cities, for Lehóczy, the two authors express their quest through their unique writings in English, the means which has allowed the creation of their personal and artistic identities.

Striving to 'locate' language and identity, these authors face the limits of doing so, due to the fluid and nomadic nature of language itself. If not answers, they propose new ways of expression which extend the boundaries of conventional language. Brodsky and Lehóczy seem to embrace the multiple cultural forms of our time, to offer a clue to reach an individuality which is increasingly difficult to attain in a globalized world. With their texts, interspersed by innumerable references, the two authors go beyond language and culture, to suggest a common ground from which to draw the language of our future.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Cultural Nomadism: A Few Theoretical Reflections

### 1.1. Introduction

There is an urgent need to rethink fundamental assumptions about the fate of culture in an age of global mobility, a need to formulate, both for scholars and for the larger public, new ways to understand the vitally important dialectic of cultural persistence and change (Greenblatt 2010: 1-2).

This quotation from Steven Greenblatt's *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (2010) offers the hint to begin a discussion focused on topics related to cultural mobility – or ‘cultural nomadism’ – an aspect which underlies Joseph Brodsky and Ágnes Lehoczky's works.

Culture must reflect today the new characteristics of a society defined as ‘liquid’ - an issue irrevocably called into question by many scholars, amongst whom is Pierre Joris, with his famous work “A Nomad Poetics: Essays.” Joris provocatively invokes an international “nomadic poetics,” which “will cross languages, not just translate, but write in all or any of them [...] in a material flux of language matter” (2003: 5). Joris refers to a “protosemantic” nucleus, from which all languages have derived, and to which all languages, according to him, must return. This concept is related to people's nomadism, a phenomenon which has always existed and is the point of arrival, or departure, of Lehoczky's poetry.

In this chapter, I will address the theme of cultural mobility, mainly related to a second language, finding support in some guiding texts, which have become touchstones for the study of today's cultural phenomena. All this done in the awareness of the vastness of the subjects approached, which makes the discourse difficult to synopsise. Themes range from people's displacement, cultural mobility, intercultural communication, bilingualism and the adoption of the second language, and I am conscious that all of them would require



extensive separate argumentations. The discourse has no claim, then, to be exhaustive, but simply aims at guiding us to understand better some aspects of the work of the two ‘nomadic’ authors.

## **1.2. Liquid Society**

"Liquid Society" has now become a sort of label for our world, in which there are no more fixed points of reference, and where the certainties of the past have disappeared to be replaced by uncertainties and fears for the future, in a general crisis of values. The definition, which synthesizes with an effective metaphor the nature of our society, is among the luckiest and most popular of recent years and is due to the Polish philologist and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who in his books extensively explores aspects of contemporaneity, analysed in the multiple nuances of its ‘fluidity.’ As well as in his famous book *Liquid Life* (2005), Bauman discusses issues related to contemporary forms of culture in *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, from which the following passage is taken, and which offers us an interesting synthesis of the concept of “liquid modernity:”

I use the term ‘liquid modernity’ here for the currently existing shape of the modern condition, described by other authors as ‘postmodernity’, ‘late modernity’, ‘second’ or ‘hyper’ modernity. What makes modernity ‘liquid’, and thus justifies the choice of name, is its self-propelling, self-intensifying, compulsive and obsessive ‘modernization’, as a result of which, like liquid, none of the consecutive forms of social life is able to maintain its shape for long (2011: 11-12).

In his studies, Bauman emphasizes that the choice for culture is left today to the individual, who is often ‘overwhelmed’ by stimuli and cultural offers that come from all over the world. People today can ‘technically’ correspond in real time with any part of the world, but, they may be, at the same time, deprived of the necessary cultural and linguistic background to communicate effectively. Bauman stresses the role played by any individual in making the choice for culture:

It can be said that in liquid modern times, culture (and most particularly, though not exclusively, its artistic sphere) is fashioned to fit individual freedom of choice and individual responsibility for that choice; and that its function is to ensure that the choice should be and will always remain a necessity and unavoidable duty of life, while the responsibility for the choice and its consequences remains where it has been placed by the liquid modern human condition – on the shoulders of the individual, now appointed to the position of chief manager of ‘life politics’ and its sole executive (Bauman 2011: 12).

The theme of culture in post-modern society has been studied by many scholars, amongst whom is Stuart Hall, whose works cover notions of cultural, ethnical and diasporic identities. Hall believes that identity is the product of multiple historical and cultural factors. Therefore, identity today cannot be but fragmentary and unsettled, as he writes, a “‘moveable feast:’ formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural system which surround us” (Hall 1992: 277).

Throughout history, culture has expanded beyond the borders of nations – with phenomena of cross-fertilizations between cultures – and thanks to technology today it has become potentially available to anyone, in a sort of global “cultural supermarket” (Hall 1996: 622), dominated by consumerism.

Within the discourse of global consumerism, differences and cultural distinctions which hitherto defined identity become reducible to a sort of international lingua franca or global currency into which all specific traditions and distinct identities can be translated. This phenomenon is known as “cultural homogenization” (Hall 1996: 622).

Culture seems to have lost then its ‘social function,’ in order to be dominated by market logic – a concept expressed also by Fredrick Jameson, in his seminal essay *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).

The need for a society to become more ‘multicultural’ to survive – and succeed – in the interconnected global world is emphasised by Milton Bennet, who makes a reflection on the fact that “Just a few decades ago, this question

was one faced mainly by diplomats, expatriates and the occasional international traveler.” We now live – Bennet seems to stress – in a “pluralistic society” that needs to raise the question about what kind of communication must be implemented “to be both cultural diverse and unified in common goals” (2013: 3). He writes:

By definition, members of different cultures experience different organizations of reality, and thus the use of one’s self as predictor of how others will respond to messages is unlikely to be successful. Approaches to communication in cross-cultural situations must guard against inappropriate assumptions of similarity and encourage the consideration of difference. For this reason, intercultural communication is *difference-based* (Bennet 2013: 3).

Preserving the cultural differences is then of utmost importance, and the following assertion by Bauman, slightly polemical, prompts a reflection on this topic: “The new indifference to difference presents itself in theory as an approval of ‘cultural pluralism’: the political practice formed and supported by this theory is defined by the term ‘multiculturalism’” (2011: 46). ‘Multiculturalism’ is therefore a difficult goal, in trying to reach a balance between recognizing the differences still existing amongst individuals and the needs of a pluralistic society.

This said, I deem it necessary to first clarify the meanings of some terms, pertaining the issues we are discussing, and which are often used confusingly. I will refer again to Bennet’s *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication: Paradigms, Principles and Practices*:

The term “multicultural identity” commonly refers to people with primary socialization or strong socialization in more than one culture who identify with reference groups in multiple cultural contexts. People with multicultural identity are generally not confused by their multiple cultural affiliations any more than multilingual people are confused by switching from one language to another (Adler 1998). The term “cross-cultural” refers to a particular kind of contact among people, one in which the people are from two or more different cultures. The term “intercultural” refers to a particular kind of interaction or communication

among people, one in which differences in cultures play a role in the creation of meaning. [...] The term “intercultural” may also refer to the kind of skills necessary to deal to cross-cultural contact (2013: 10).

One term is missing from the list above, a term recently used in socio-linguistic analysis, and which in my opinion best suits Brodsky’s and Lehoczky’s nature: ‘transnational,’ which identifies people who enjoy “regular and sustained” cross-cultural contacts (Garrett 2011: 18). Besides to ‘transnational’ I will add a further definition to our authors’ nature: ‘nomadic,’ which has acquired in recent years a new meaning, as I will now try to explain.

### **1.3. Cultural Nomadism: From “Roots to Routes”**

Rita Wilson, who coined the effective definition in the title, discusses the history of transnationalism, asserting that it became a topic of cultural analysis in the second half of the 1990s “under the impact of the communication revolution and in close relation with the immense interest in globalization as a new kind of phenomenon that has already started to radically change our world” (2011: 247). Political science, Wilson writes, is concerned on international relations and the effects caused by transnationalism, while sociology is focused on the creation of “transnational identities,” and how they act in social relations. “The humanities, in their turn, stress the idea of ‘border’ and use the term ‘transnational’ in a much broader sense ‘to signal the fluidity with which ideas, objects, capital, and people now move across borders and boundaries’” (Wilson 2011: 247).<sup>1</sup>

The concepts of translated identities and literature have been addressed by numerous theorists in postcolonial cultural studies, amongst whom is Katharine Harrington, who, in her essay “Writing the Nomadic Experience in Contemporary Francophone Literature,” introduces the concept of ‘nomadism’ related to culture. She starts her discourse by saying that: “To accommodate

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson is quoting the volume *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States*, by Linda Green Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Szanton Blanc. London: Routledge, 1994, 27.

these global changes and their effects on the literary world, a number of subcategories have emerged over the years, such as immigrant and second-generation immigrant writers, exiled and diasporic writers” (Harrington 2013: 1). These definitions, nevertheless, are not enough, since, she writes,

For an increasing number of individuals around the world, it is the experience of nomadism that most accurately reflects their situation. In our modern world, it is possible to speak about nomadism in both literal and figurative terms, whether referring to the reality of a plethora of individuals in transit around the world or a philosophical mindset and aesthetics based on the experiences of nomadic peoples (Harrington 2013: 1-2).

I think this last description of nomadism as a “philosophical mindset” and “aesthetics” may well describe Brodsky and Leńóczy’s lifestyles and works: it is a trait that influences significantly the form and content of their writings. Harrington writes that it is indeed nomadism, in a “metaphorical” sense, that “serves as a postmodern way of thinking about place and identity,” and makes us think “beyond traditional notions of borders” (2013: 4).

Brodsky and Leńóczy’s lives seemed doomed to acquire success abroad: more than a fall-back consequence, their ‘nomadism’ is the natural response to their thirst for knowledge, which could not have been confined within national borders. Harrington introduces a fundamental element which also characterizes the work of the authors I am considering: nomadism as a source of inspiration.

The nomadic author’s point of view offers a detached perspective, coming from someone from ‘elsewhere.’ As Harrington writes:

The experience of nomadism lends itself well to the act of writing due to the outsider perspective that the nomad inevitably develops and adopts. The nomad, on the other hand, is able to maintain an even more consistent distance since he or she resists “membership” to any nationality or group altogether and therefore occupies an advantageous position for observing and commenting on societal practices and beliefs from both the country of origin as well as the host country. The viewpoint made possible by a nomadic experience also allows one to see one’s own past and identity in a new and often revealing light (2013: 8).

I will address this topic further in this study, referring to Brodsky, who was famous for expressing unconventional opinions on many themes, aware of the strength which lays also in his being a foreigner.

A word which recurs in the nomadic authors' writing – in Lehoczky's verses, as well as in Brodsky's works – is 'map,' whose frequent use seems to answer to the 'situational need' of the poets. On this aspect, which is present also in her writings, Braidotti (2014: 16-17) writes:

I think that many of the things I write are cartographies, that is to say a sort of intellectual landscape gardening that gives me a horizon, a frame of reference within which I can take my bearing, move about, and set up my own theoretical tent. It is not by chance, therefore, that the image of the map, or of-map making, is so often present in my texts. The frequency of the spatial metaphor expresses the simultaneity of the nomadic status and of the need to draw maps, each text is like a camping site: it traces places where I have been, in the shifting landscape of my singularity.

Harrington asserts that the nomadic writers enjoy a complex relationship with writing, an act that allows them to 'locate,' but which, at the same time, can limit them, since they cannot speak but of their being 'dislocated.'

Writing becomes a vital need for the nomadic writers, a need so strong to ultimately turn out to be almost a 'place of being,' as testified by Brodsky and Lehoczky. Harrington asserts that

Consequently, the act of writing often emerges as a necessity for nomadic individuals as a means of fulfilling an inherent desire to situate oneself somewhere. Perpetually ill or at ease in anyone designated category, these authors conceive of writing as a necessary tool in opening up a space for exploring and negotiating the uncertain position they occupy (2013: 8).

#### **1.4. The Nomadic Writer**

In the émigré writers' literary path, a fundamental role is played by language, the necessary means that accompanies their innumerable journeys – a topic

investigated, among others, by the Italian-Canadian poet, scholar and émigré Pasquale Verdicchio.<sup>2</sup> In his many works, Verdicchio theorises his conception of ‘Nomadic Poetry.’ The idea of language as a ‘movement,’ which expresses effectively the emotive, cultural and linguistic exchanges between the poet and his/her readers, but also which speaks of the nomadic ‘movements’ of departures and arrivals, is found in the following comment, taken from the back-cover of the collection *Nomadic Trajectory*, written by Verdicchio:

There is always distance in language. Readers and writers move in this distance, between the innumerable points that define their positions. The poems of NOMADIC TRAJECTORY are but notations of absence and displacement. A nomad reads the landscape s/he travels, considering all the changes that may have taken place since the last passage. Language unveils its possibilities seductively, all that is needed is the first step toward it. Travelers in the world thus become travelers between worlds (1990).

Any displacement can be considered an ‘exile,’ as Magda Stroińska highlights in her essay “The role of language in the reconstruction of identity in exile:”

There is no one simple and universal scenario for *exile*. It may be understood as any kind of displacement, voluntary departure or compulsory expulsion from one’s native land, expatriation, or simply finding oneself outside the borders of one’s native country, not because one has moved abroad but because the borders were moved.

At the same time, the experience of exile is strictly individual, as “The broadly notion of exile applies to millions of people world-wide, and yet not two experiences of exile are similar enough to warrant the creation of a prototype of exile or of an expatriated individual” (Stroińska 2003: 95). If the exile was a

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<sup>2</sup> Pasquale Verdicchio was born in Naples in 1954 and moved with his family to Vancouver, and then to California, where he teaches Italian and Comparative Literature and Film at the University of California-San Diego. Valerio Viale has written; “Being an immigrant himself and, thereby, able to identify with surges of expatriates who never stop feeling somehow marginal to their host countries, Pasquale Verdicchio has penned over the years a wealth of books and publications exploring the Italian diaspora” (2017).

fact for Brodsky, it could be said that Lehóczy likewise experiences this feeling of ‘estrangement,’ which is implicit in her displacement, and tries to cope with it through recounting her many travels, mostly to her home country, in what seems a reply to Stroińska’s statement “Every exile faces the dilemma whether to adopt a new identity or whether to adapt to the new environment, trying to hold on to one’s old self” (2003: 97).

The nomadic writer is essentially a lonely traveller and this loneliness is reflected in his/her writings. Braidotti (1994: 16) writes,

Nomadic writing longs [...] for the desert: areas of silence, in between the official cacophonies, in a flirt with radical nonbelonging and outsideness. Colette, in *La Vagabonde*, caught it once and for all, “Personne ne m’attend, moi, sur une route qui ne mène ni à la gloire ni à la richesse, ni à l’amour.”<sup>3</sup>

The last assumption reminds me of Brodsky’s solitary tours in Venice, as well as of Lehóczy’s explorations of the city of Sheffield.

This said, it is worth to move now the focus on to translingual literature, well summarized in the following passage by Rita Wilson:

Marked by those “multiple deterritorializations of language” that Deleuze and Guattari find in “minor literatures” (1986: 19), translingual narratives transform literary and cultural discourse, not only by relocating it on cultural margins, and by foregrounding intercultural dialogue and translation, but also by drawing discrete literary traditions into contact (2011: 236-237).

Carmen Zamorano Llena, in her work “The Salvage from Postmodernism: Nomadic Subjectivity in Contemporary Women’s Poetry in the British Isles,” examines the cases of three contemporary Anglophone poets: Fleur Adcock, Eavan Boland, and Carol Rumens, whom she considers ‘nomadic.’ Nomadism is seen as a necessary condition to express the contemporary subjectivity, a concept she explains in these terms:

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<sup>3</sup> Braidotti quotes the novel of French writer Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette (1983: 26) *La Vagabonde*, originally published in 1920.



As Probyn notes, the nomad or the tourist are figures that have recently become more present as models of the Western construction of the postmodern subjectivity, in which the individuals constitute their sense of identity out of their interaction with the various locations they pass through in their wanderings. According to Lawrence Grossberg, in this “nomadic subjectivity,” “individuality functions as, and is articulated out of, a nomadic wandering through ever-changing positions and apparatuses.” (38) The mutability of these locales and locations or systems of “how to know about the world” also determines the instability of the individual sense of identity and the construction of a “nomadic subjectivity,” defined by Braidotti as the site where various axes of differentiation “intersect and interact with each other in the constitution of subjectivity (Zamorano Llena 2004: 12).

Zamorano Llena focuses on Carol Rumens’ poetry, whose nomadism she highlights in her essay. Furthermore, according to Zamorano Llena, Rumens has become “an epitome of Braidotti’s figuration of postmodern feminist subjectivity (2004: 19):”

Through her poetry, Rumens maps her own subjectivity, outlined by her experiences in her numerous temporary homes and by her reflections about the private and the public and their interconnectivity evoked by the locales she has passed through.

Zamorano Llena (2004: 15) so continues, recalling Braidotti’s figurative meaning of nomadism, further to its meaning of ‘physical travelling:’

Though the image of “nomadic subjects” is inspired by the experience of peoples or cultures that are literally nomadic, the nomadism in question here refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behavior. Not all nomads are world travelers; some of the greatest trips can take place without physically moving from one’s habitat. It is the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of traveling (1994: 5).

Zamorano Llena (2004: 25) concludes her paper by writing that Adcock, Boland and Rumens,

[H]ave become lifelong nomadic subjects that construct their own subjectivity through their revisitations of literary and geographical locales, public and private (hi)stories, myths and legends, nomadic wanderers for whom what is important is not to arrive, but as Tennyson states in “Ulysses,” a poem on the experience of probably one of the best-known forceful nomads of all times, “to strive, to seek and not to yield.”

In the same British literary panorama, the work of Lehoczky can be included, although any strictly national classification proves to be useless, since she still publishes poems in Hungarian.

In the act of travelling, the nomadic author is looking for – or escaping from – a home, as a response to his actual being a homeless, or better, as Braidotti (1994: 16) suggests: “As an intellectual style, nomadism consists not so much in being homeless, as in being capable of recreating your home everywhere.” I will try to show how Brodsky and Lehoczky offer their personal response to this search for a place to call ‘home.’

Living between two languages and two cultures could be a blessing or a burden, as Adib Khan demonstrates in his essays “Diasporic Homes.” Nevertheless, the act of writing is not “merely an indulgence in aesthetics or an expression of socio-political concern” but a necessary means which leads the authors to discover new aspects of their self:

The creative process itself leads to a search, discovery and an engagement with parts of the missing self, those elusive but crucial segments of one’s past which appear to have gone missing and cannot be verified by the empirical reality of the present, but which, nevertheless, live in memory. In the anxiety to discover selfhood as a constant, it is inevitable to find multiple and composite images of identity, thus creating confusion and disappointment about missing the focus on a single vision of selfhood and a lack of anchorage to a specific place and community. Thomas Turino is of the opinion that a human identity evolves as result of a variety of experiences and interaction with the environment over a person’s lifetime (Khan 2015: 9).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Khan is quoting Thomas Turino’s essay “Introduction: Identity and Arts in Diaspora Communities” (2004: 13).

I cannot but agree with Turino's opinion, deeming that the evolution of a 'nomad' individual is faster and deeper than that of a 'non-nomad.'

### **1.5. Bilingualism: The Role of English**

What is here enounced makes us reflect on a characteristic constantly present in the work of the two authors examined in this study: its dialogic nature, resulting from their two different cultural backgrounds. Bilingualism is the means that sparkles this dialogue, compelling Brodsky and Lehóczyk to interrogate themselves on their own identities, having to 'rethink' their artistic expression in a second language. On this aspect, Xuemei Xi (2007: 267), in her essay "Souls in Exile: Identities of Bilingual Writers," states that,

As a result of this migrant status, many bilingual writers write their first cultural stories in their second language. This can be a characteristic symptom of bilingual writers who attempt to mingle nostalgia of the old or lost home with the new world in which they are living; and at the same time attempt to grab the readers in the second culture with the alien or exotic stories of their first culture.

Poetry stands out as the elected literary means for this process, having to express the authors' innermost feelings. A recent article by Aneta Pavlenko (2016), "Poetry in a Second Language," examines in detail aspects regarding the further 'pedagogic' functions of translating/writing poetry in a second language. Let us read an extract of her essay.

The first advantage involves poetry's reliance on melodic, acoustic and metric patterns. These patterns differ across languages which is why we do not always enjoy foreign language verse. Translation and comparisons with existing translations raise awareness of these cross-linguistic differences, while listening to and rehearsing poems gives learners an opportunity to internalize the sounds and rhythms of the new language and memorize words together with stress.

The second benefit of close engagement with poetry is increased awareness of the function of syntactic and semantic structures. Learners asked to fill in the blanks in a poem soon realize that their options are greatly constrained by metric, semantic and syntactic patterns.

The third advantage of poetry involves memorability of poetic lines. Meter, rhythm, rhymes and other features that make traditional poetry aesthetically pleasing, if a tad predictable, have originally emerged as memory aids that allowed bards in the preliterate world to commit to memory large amounts of information. Meter and rhythm help organize the text and place constraints on word choice, while alliteration, assonance and rhymes function as memory cues in the search for the right word. These patterns are equally helpful to language learners interested in enriching their linguistic repertoires and mastering poetic lines that can take them beyond service encounters. [...] Last but not least, writing poetry has traditionally been a superb way of playing with, practicing, and appropriating a second language. Reading and writing second language poetry offers learners an incomparable opportunity to unleash their creativity, make new words their own, connect with the new language in an emotional and personally meaningful way, and create a new linguistic self.

Poetry as a tool, then, to master a second language: sharing Pavlenko's opinion, the critics agree that Lehóczy and Brodsky undoubtedly benefited from this.

The relationship between a transnational writer and his/her second language, namely English, is examined in this article "Transnational Writers and the Politics of the English Language" by Nyla Ali Khan, who in her studies extensively addresses themes pertaining to transnationalism. She asserts that the transnational writer appropriates the language of his adoptive country "to define the reality of a different culture." This new medium has a "syncretic character," which "erodes the concept and use of Standard English" (Khan 2017):

In its evolved form, English challenges the traditional old culture/modern civilization binary by establishing itself as an oppositional discourse that does not unquestioningly accept the dominance of the "norm." The deployment of this oppositional discourse enables the writer to incorporate untranslated words or events of local significance in the text, requiring the reader to delve into the intricacies of a hitherto unknown culture. Typically, the transformations effected by transnational writers involve rebirths and renamings in the realms of language of language and the imagination. As Salman Rushdie articulates, the "migrant"

becomes the “midwife” of language itself, “as that language is new delivered,” because by making incursions into an alien language, the migrant is required to traverse new territories and discover “new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human” (Imaginary Homelands 24).

Writers create a site on which local thought-patterns, structures, and rhythms are accompanied by the delineation of an alternative social reality. Their writings not only coin neologisms, but also incorporate indigenous languages and dialects that are signifiers of the local as opposed to the universal. The sustained opposition between two opposing discursive systems prevents the transnational text from conforming to a restrictive system of representation.

The unique nature of Brodsky and Lehóczy’s writings – in which neologisms are frequently found – are characterised by an eclecticism often unknown to monolingual writers. English is the language that allows and spreads these new creative opportunities. Brodsky and Lehóczy explore in their writings the possibilities – but at first also the limits – of writing in their second tongue, while their identities are inevitably transformed. Braidotti (1994: 15) suggests that, “Writing is, for the polyglot, a process of undoing the illusory stability of fixed identities, bursting open the bubble of ontological security that comes from familiarity with one linguistic site.”

Thus, bilingual or multilingual authors seem to enjoy an ‘enhanced’ creative power, a point stressed also by Magda Stroińska (2003: 97), who suggests that,

The ability to speak several languages, on the other hand, implies access to multiple identities and more than one way of self-presentation, suggesting that a multilingual and a multicultural individual has several *faces* and wears several hats. A more positive way of seeing this is to say that they have a richer repertoire of linguistic and cultural choices and could fine-tune their behaviour to a greater variety of cultural contexts.

Nevertheless, a side effect of this process – as I will point out in the last chapter of this study – is the inevitable loss of the mother tongue, especially if it is a less-spoken one. Fiona Doloughan (2016: 3) in her essay “English as a literature in translation” makes reference to Alastair Pennycook, who emphasizes the

transnational nature of English, by asserting that “English is a language always in translation.”

[G]lobalizing tendency that have permitted English to extend its reach, at the same time as increased possibilities for mobility and migration have brought diverse cultures into contact. Technological developments too have meant that it is not always necessary to move physically to another location to experience or partake of different languages or different worlds. This can be done remotely or at a distance. In addition, the fact that English is now used by more people for whom it is one of a number of languages rather than the sole language of communication allows for the possibility of a diversity of meanings as ‘English is always a language in translation, a language of translingual use’ (Pennycook 2008). This ‘global traffic of meaning’ (33) has the potential to open up communicative spaces, as languages operate alongside one another and come into contact, generating new meanings.

### **1.6. Travel Writing**

Eric Leed, in his book *The Mind of the Traveler. From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism* (1992), extensively discusses issues of travelling in the Western world, including heroic journeys, pilgrimages, scientific expeditions, and the influence of travel on identity and society. He affirms that,

The transformations of social being in travel suggest that there is no self without an other; and that, at bottom, identity is done with mirrors. This means that the transformations of the social individual that take place during the journey invariably result from a land of recognitions that moves, which suggests that identities are derived from identification acts (Leed 1991: 264).

We are all aware of the transformative effects that a travel has upon us: in the nomadic authors, these effects are amplified, and are explicitly used as a source for creativity. Amie Matthews (2014: 157) in her essay “Young Backpackers and the Rite of Passage of Travel: Examining the Transformative Effects of Liminality,” contained in the volume *Travel and Transformation*, emphasizes the ‘transformative power’ of travel, which she defines a “fecund space:”

Indeed journeys, touristic and otherwise, are firmly fixed in the cultural consciousness as avenues by which new experience and, by extension, new knowledge, can be sought and found. Correspondingly, as a number of scholars have pointed out (see, for example Bauman 1996, Elsrud 2001, Mac Cannel 1989), pilgrims, pioneers, explorers, sailors, tramps, hikers, exiles, nomads, tourists and wanderers litter our history, our cultural outputs and our imaginings as symbols of freedom, adventure, progress and discovery.

Travel literature offers therefore a varied repertoire, as found in the odeporic narrative by Joseph Brodsky, who has been compared by some critics to Joseph Conrad or Vladimir Nabokov, for sharing similar Slavic origins (Conrad was born in Poland, and Nabokov in Russia) and having moved to AN Anglophone country, to gain fame through to his prose in English. To look for similarities in them is not my purpose now, since the three authors have profoundly different expressive registers, although they all wrote travel literature in English.

For the scope of this study, I will limit my analysis to the literature mainly related to the city, which stands out as the privileged place of exploration of modern literary representations, since the urban site best reflects the changes a society undergoes.

### **1.7. Exploring the City. The *Flâneur*. Psychogeography**

In his *City of Fears, City of Hope*, Bauman (2003: 3) asserts:

Admittedly, cities have been sites of incessant and most rapid change throughout their history; and since it was in cities that the change destined to spill over the rest of society originated, the city-born change caught the living as a rule unawares and unprepared. [...] In the last three four decades ‘nearly all the world’s major (and minor) metropolitan regions have been experiencing dramatic changes.’

Patchwork of complex cultural and social realities, cities reflect positive and negative aspects of the contemporary world. However, their potential as a place

for intercultural dialogue and social cohesion is enormous, as Bauman in this passage points out (2003: 38):

The city is the dumping side for anxieties and apprehensions generated by globally induced uncertainty and insecurity; but the city is as well the training ground where the means to placate and disperse that uncertainty and insecurity can be experimented with, tried out and eventually learned and adopted.

Lehóczy accompanies her readers to explore the city, seen at first through her gaze of tourist, then of new inhabitant, who is anyway never ‘definitely’ settled. And through similar wanderings ‘à la dérive,’ Brodsky discovers the real and the metaphorical space of Venice – a place which epitomizes his personal and artistic change – which he visits mostly in solitude.

The urban environment is discovered in Lehóczy’s works through what is defined a ‘*flâneuristic*’ approach, inspired by the theories of Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord and the Situationists. *Flâneurism* has later developed into a theorised science – “psychogeography” – as summarised in the following passage by Merlin Coverley (2010: 9-10):

The origin of the term [psychogeography, A/N] [...] can be traced back to Paris in the 1950s and the Lettrist Group a forerunner of the Situationist International. Under the stewardship of Guy Debord, psychogeography became a tool in an attempt to transform urban life, first for aesthetic purposes but later for increasingly political ends. Debord’s oft-repeated ‘definition’ of psychogeography describes ‘The study of the specific effect of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.’ And in broad terms, psychogeography is, as the name suggests, the point at which psychology and geography collide, a means of exploring the behavioural impact of urban place.

In his seminal work *Psychogeography*, first published in 2006, Coverley explores the close relationship between the city and its inhabitants, initially through its literary aspects, then through walking the city. Detecting traces of



psychogeography brings Coverley to extend his analysis to British literature, by taking into exam Daniel Defoe and his “the Re-Imagining of London,” William Blake and his “Visionary Tradition,” Robert Louis Stevenson and the Urban Gothic, Arthur Machen and the “Art of Wondering,” then Alfred Watkins and the “Theory of Ley Lines.” He continues by analysing the birth and raise of the *flâneur*, in France, with Guy Debord and the Situationists, to conclude with some protagonists of today’s new forms of psychogeography, literary and non-literary: JG Ballard and the “Death of Affect,” Ian Sinclair and his “Rebranding of Psychogeography,” Peter Ackroyd and the “New Antiquarianism,” Stewart Home and the London Psychogeographical Association, Patrick Keiiler and the “return of Robinson.” All these authors offer new and interesting ideas about psychogeography.

Looking for other examples of *flâneurism* in English literature, some ‘unaware flaneurs’ can be found in the characters of Dickens’s novels, in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), or in Virginia Woolf’s *Street Haunting. A London Adventure* (1930). Moving to the other side of the ocean, I just cite here Paul Auster and his famous work, *The New York Trilogy* (1985), of which, *City of Glass* is particularly significant for this topic. In Italian literature, I am reminded of Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* (1974), a book that has undoubtedly inspired Ágnes Lehóczky’s prose poems.

Lehóczky embodies an unconventional, contemporary *flâneuse*, a mediated figure, we could say, ‘something of the quality of oral tradition and bizarre urban myth’ (Shield 94: 63), who discovers the city of Sheffield, through its recreated past and, furthermore, through the recollected memories of her native Budapest. Unconventional, inasmuch as she is a woman, as Kevin Milburn makes us notice, since the *flâneur* has traditionally been a man, due to social constraints, which in the past prevented women from “indulgent practices such as late night urban strolling” (2009: 5). Therefore, “When they [the women, A/N] were in cities it was for function rather than leisure” (Milburn 2009:6).

*Flâneurism* today still serves as “a way of reading urban texts, a methodology for uncovering the traces of social meaning embedded in the layered fabric of the city” and secondly, “[A]s a standpoint that helps to survive

the shock and discontinuity experienced in the modern city (Featherstone 1998: 910). Milburn (2009: 10-11) summarises this point, introducing the newest figure of the ‘cyber flâneur’:<sup>5</sup>

[T]he impulse for flânerie shows no sign of receding; we now just encounter it in new ways, as highlighted by those involved in studies of the cyber flâneur a figure who, it has been claimed, is free ‘in the mode of Baudelaire in 19th century Paris, to wander freely through the spaces of the cyber city listening in to other people’s conversation, perhaps choosing to participate, maybe opting simply to observe,’ an activity that begets the unsettling term ‘lurking’, that transports us to the shadows of 1850s Parisian arcades; and to being a part of, but forever apart from, the crowd.

In our ‘shrinking’ world, where global connectivity goes hand in hand with the increasing isolation of the individual, the last development of the *flâneur* may be found in the “modern technologies [which, A/N] allow people to travel virtually and be a ‘digital nomad’ from the comfort of their own home” (Harrington 2013: 7). We are all explorers then, ‘cyber-flaneurs’ of internet virtual cities: the real ones reproduced in three-dimensional maps, or the fictional ones, found, for instance, in science fiction videogames – a theme hinted at also in Lehóczy’s work.

### **1.8. The ‘Global Soul’**

Before concluding this chapter, I cannot avoid reporting a voice which stands out of the crowd of the scholars who praise the ‘multicultural person:’ that of Isabelle de Courtivron, who in her collection of essays (2003: 2) *Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity* examines the work of some ‘nomadic writers.’ She writes:

Despite the fashionable postmodern emphasis on displacement and dislocation; despite the celebration of diversity and “more-than-ones”; despite the intellectual persuasion that trying to find wholeness in our lives is a somewhat obsolete ideal, the anxiety about fragmentation and the search for existential coherence remain

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<sup>5</sup> The ‘cyber-flaneur’ calls to our mind Braidotti’s ‘cyborg’ character.

primordial human responses. The lifelong struggle to reconcile the different pieces of the identity puzzle (or at least to acknowledge that they cannot be reconciled) continues to be a painful and constantly renegotiated process.

De Courtivron therefore continues: “As their essays demonstrate, none eschews issues of identity, of existential anguish, of difficult choices, and of the tortured search for self and place. But none regrets the emotional and literary enrichment that being bilingual has brought them” (2003: 2).

Far from offering a purely aulic vision of our authors, I can then affirm that similar definitions as “bilingual writers,” “multicultural person,” “transnational author,” could be synthesized in Iyer’s effective – perhaps ‘romantic’ – definition of the “global soul.”

Brodsky and Lehóczy’s nature of ‘people of the world,’ with their understanding of the multiple cultural expressions, can be a source of inspiration for all their readers.

The multicultural person is intellectually and emotionally committed to the basic unity of all human beings while at the same time recognizing, legitimizing, accepting, and appreciating the differences that exist between people of different cultures. This new kind of person cannot be defined by the languages he or she speaks, the number of countries he or she has visited, nor by the number of personal international contacts that have been made. Nor is he or she defined by profession, place of residence, or cognitive sophistication. Instead, the multicultural person is recognized by a configuration of outlooks and world-view, by how the universe as a dynamically moving process is incorporated, by the way the interconnectedness of life is reflected in thought and action, and by the way this woman or man remains open to the imminence of experience (Adler 2013: 306).

What above said ideally introduces us to the work of Brodsky and Lehóczy, object of the chapters that follow, with a focus on cultural nomadism.

## CHAPTER TWO

### English as the Language of Joseph Brodsky's Nomadic Exile

#### 2.1. Introduction

Yet for precisely the same reason (whose main by-product is the linguistic barrier), he [the exiled writer, A/N] finds himself totally unable to play any meaningful role in his new society. The democracy into which he has arrived provides him with physical safety but renders him socially insignificant. And the lack of significance is what no writer, exile or not, can take. For it is the quest for significance that very often constitutes the rest of his career. To say the least, it is very often a literary career's. To say the least, it is very often a literary career's consequence. In the case of the exiled writer, it is almost invariably the case of his exile (Brodsky 1995: 24).

The fears expressed by Brodsky in this extract from "The Condition We Call Exile," a speech he held in Vienna in 1987 during a conference on exile, had in truth already been dissipated by the events that happened in the years that followed his forced departure from the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, we know that searching for a public acknowledgement is for the émigré writer a process never fully accomplished. A long path leads Brodsky to achieve his status of worldwide known cultural personality, a path made possible by the adoption of English.

In the sections that follow, I will trace the path of the fascinating journey that guides one of the most representative contemporary Russian author to leave his mother tongue and adopt English as his privileged literary vehicle. This transformation has been marked by significant stages, and one of them was undoubtedly the Nobel Prize for literature in 1987. On that occasion, in an interview Brodsky had answered, "I'm Jewish; a Russian poet, an English essayist – and, of course, an American citizen" – a statement he made after

fifteen years in the United States, as the result of a long-meditated process of defining his new identity, a process indissolubly tied to his new language.

A further, decisive impulse for a full adoption of the English language came on 10 May 1991: first of the non-American born writers, Brodsky was in fact appointed “Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress.”<sup>6</sup> He received the highest literary acknowledgement of the United States for “his open-ended interest of American life that immigrants have.” The motivation continued: “This is a reminder that so much of American creativity is from people not born in America” (Weiner 2000: 141). This last statement stresses the possibility for a non-native to become a cultural personality, significantly representative of his adoptive country. Julia Stakhnevich (2006: 27-8) in her essay “A Total Embrace of Being: A Bilingual Journey of Joseph Brodsky” summarises Brodsky’s process of bilingualism, ultimately defined as “translingualism:”

In terms of its connection to second language acquisition, literary bilingualism represents the highest level of linguistic achievement that adult learners can aspire to. It has gained recognition as legitimate literary output and as such undermines the dichotomy of native versus non-native language competency. Grounded in the positivistic tradition, this dichotomy labels second language discourse at the most second best, thus misrepresenting the complexity of language learning and ignoring bilingual sensibilities. The analysis of Brodsky's path toward translingualism provides evidence to assert that one does not have to be a "native speaker" of the language to become an expert writer in this language.

This is a perspective which “[C]alls for a more humanistic learner-oriented approach in second-language acquisition research” (Stakhnevich 2006: 28).

But let us take a step back, to follow this enthralling personal and artistic journey, which starts with the observation that from 1992 until his death in 1996, Brodsky had published almost exclusively in English. A remarkable change had then occurred, a transformation that made him abandon his ‘Iosif

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<sup>6</sup> The motivation, pronounced by the Librarian of Congress James Billington, is reported in Weiner’s *Creativity and Beyond: Culture, Values and Change*.

Brodskiy'<sup>7</sup> identity of Russian poet in exile, to become 'Joseph Brodsky,' the accomplished English writer.

Writing poetry directly in English is the last piece of a mosaic that the author began composing – at first perhaps unknowingly, then with inexhaustible commitment – since when he was a young boy in the Soviet Leningrad. It can well be asserted, therefore, that English proved for Brodsky to be not only the means that allowed his transformation, but, even more, the 'third space' he needed in his 'travelling exile,' when his new and acknowledged identity was forming.

## **2.2. A Life-long Path Towards English**

Brodsky's relationship with English had begun long before his emigration to the United States in 1972, after his banishment from the Soviet Union with a charge of social parasitism.

As the same Brodsky recounts in his autobiographical essay "Less Than One," the fascination for English can be traced back to his early years in Leningrad – or Petersburg, as he was firm to call it, to oppose the hated Soviet name the regime had imposed.

Brodsky was the only son of a Jewish family – his father was an officer and photographer in the Soviet Navy, and his mother worked as an interpreter – who left school at the age of fifteen. He later reported that his family had suffered marginalization due to its Jewishness. After trying with no success to enter the Soviet Navy, Brodsky held a variety of jobs, between which milling machine operator, physician at the morgue, and assistant to geological expeditions all around the Soviet Union, from 1956 to 1957 – this last circumstance can be considered to all effects the beginning of his travelling career.

It was namely this job instability, together with his refusal to comply with the Soviet Realism literary canons, which led to his accusation of parasitism, for which he was sent to his first exile in the Russian Far North. These

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<sup>7</sup> 'Iosif Brodskiy' is the transliteration of Brodsky's Russian name in Western characters; after becoming an American citizen in 1977, he officially adopted the English version, 'Joseph Brodsky.'

occasional works had offered him the financial support to dedicate himself to what he loved most: the study of languages. He self-taught Polish and English, working as a translator of both. In those years, Brodsky also began to write his first poems in Russian.

Brodsky's first encounter with English, at school, had not been encouraging: he studied English from the fifth grade through the eighth, but, as reported by George Kline<sup>8</sup> "[W]ith meagre results. The language was taught in a formal and theoretical way – like Latin or Sanskrit – by incompetent teachers using inadequate texts" (Brodsky 1973: 14). As many young people of his generation, Brodsky searched for glimpses of the West, whose traces he unexpectedly found in the American tunes played on the radio his father had brought home:

When I was twelve, my father suddenly produced to my great delight a shortwave radio set [...]. To this brown, shining-like-an-old-shoe Phillips set, I owe my first bits of English and an introduction to the Jazz Pantheon. When we were twelve the German names on our lips gradually began to be replaced by those of Luis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Clifford Brown, Sidney Bechet, Django Reinhardt and Charlie Parker (Brodsky 1995: 6-7).

The love for American jazz music would accompany Brodsky all his life.

Further opportunities to meet English and the Anglophone culture were offered by the Hollywood films confiscated by the Soviet troops during the occupation of Germany as 'spoils of war.'<sup>9</sup> The few that had passed the Soviet censorship,<sup>10</sup> were almost all subtitled, or poorly dubbed, in Russian, but nevertheless they provided an insight into Western reality, suggesting better

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<sup>8</sup> George Kline was one of Brodsky's first translators: his is the translation and the edition of the collection in English *Selected Poems*, published in New York in 1973.

<sup>9</sup> This fascinating piece of history is recounted by Elena Razgolova (2014: 164): "From 1947 until the mid-1950s, Soviet moviegoers for the first time encountered dozens of German, Austrian, Italian, American, and French films that were stolen from the so-called trophy fund during the occupation of Germany. These films, which were meant to provide funding for the then-moribund Soviet film industry, were dubbed (most German films were) or subtitled (most American films were) and shown without credits; initially, each copy began with the title "trophy films" but later even that title was omitted because many of the films shown were made by the Soviet Union's allies in the war."

<sup>10</sup> "A special Politburo resolution called for 'necessary editorial corrections' to be made in each film and anti-American introductory texts and commentaries were added" (Volkov 2008: 176).

possibilities of life, out of the constraints of the Soviet regime, as Brodsky (1995: 8) here recalls:

They [the films, A/N] held us in greater sway and thrall than all the subsequent output of the neorealists or the *nouvelle vague*. The *Tarzan* series alone, I daresay, did more for the de-Stalinization than all Khrushchev's speeches at the 20<sup>th</sup> party congress and after.

These films sounded for Brodsky and his generation as models of the Western lifestyle and individualism they avidly sought for. Nevertheless, as Elena Razgolova (2014: 164) resumes, in the young Brodsky the love for literature was soon to prevail:

Poet Joseph Brodsky remembered that his initial excitement over seeing Western lifestyles in trophy films abated after a few years, and he turned to the journal *Inostrannaya literatura* for more exalted literary examples of Western Individualism, an alternative to the Soviet collectivist ideology he found unpalatable.

It is enthralling to listen to Brodsky's description of his passion for Anglophone literature, in "Less Than One," a critical essay which offers a precious historical insight on the life of the young intellectuals in the Soviet Union of the sixties.

We were avid readers and we fell into a dependence on what we read. Books, perhaps because of their formal element of finality, held us in absolute power. Dickens was more real than Stalin or Beria. More than anything else, novels would affect our modes of behaviour and conversations, and 90 percent of our conversations were about novels. It tended to become a vicious circle, but we didn't want to break it. In its ethics, this generation was among the most bookish in the history of Russia, and thank God for that. A relationship could have been broken for good over a preference for Hemingway over Faulkner; the hierarchy in that pantheon was our real Central Committee (1986: 28).



In 1964, Brodsky was sentenced five years of forced labour for “social parasitism” and sent to the Far North, to the Arctic region of Arkhangelsk; thanks to the intercession of many cultural personalities, the sentence was later reduced to eighteen months.

His life in exile is narrated in the brilliant prose of the essay “To Please a Shadow,” and surprisingly for us, Brodsky defined those eighteen months as the “happiest time of my life,” since he was able to take advantage from such an extreme experience. The confines of the place – there was no heating or plumbing – were partly mitigated by having his own personal space, as Gessen (2011) reminds “an unthinkable luxury” for the Soviet Union’s standards of the time.

Brodsky dedicated himself to humble manual works, but also to writing – on the typewriter he had brought along – and to study, spending the nights to decipher his anthology of English and American poetry. With the help of his English-Russian dictionary, Kline explains, he operated in a curious way: “His technique was simple: he made literal translations of the first and last stanzas and then tried to ‘imagine’, what, poetically speaking, should come in between!” (Brodsky 1973: 14).

In the far north, an almost ‘supernatural’ event took place, which marked a further, significant step in Brodsky's dedication to English: he reports in fact of having had an ‘epiphany,’ when “[B]y pure chance the book fell open to Auden’s ‘In Memory of William Butler Yeats:’” Brodsky felt he had found what he was searching for. These were the lines by Auden which struck Brodsky: “Time that is intolerant, / Of the brave and innocent / And indifferent in a week to a beautiful physique, / Worships language and forgives, / Every one by whom it lives; / Pardons cowardice, conceit, / Lays its honours at their feet.”

The scholar Lev Loseff, in his *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life* (2011: 110-110) writes that, “The plain words of the English poet confirmed his belief in the dominance of language over individual consciousness and collective existence.” The superiority of language – language understood as a product of

the culture of a people – over the individual inspiration of the poet is a conviction that will always guide Brodsky in his writing.

As Brodsky often declared, his subsequent decision to write in English was taken to “find [himself] in closer proximity to the man whom [he] considered the greatest mind of the twentieth century: Wystan Hugh Auden” (1986: 357). The critics have deeply investigated what the figure of Auden could have represented for Brodsky. Natasha Kovacevic (2008: 58), for instance, stresses the fact that “Brodsky not only perfects his writing in English with the shadow of Auden reading over his shoulder, but also pictures himself explaining to that great metropolitan poet that Russia, too, has great literature.”

In a synecdochal interpretation, Auden for Brodsky embodies English contemporary literature, and this makes more comprehensible his role of ‘invisible interlocutor’ with whom Brodsky necessarily must measure himself, in his writing in English. In a more realistic vision, besides being Brodsky’s ideal ‘invisible reader,’ Auden was the first mentor of his international career.<sup>11</sup>

Further evidence of the close link Brodsky felt with the famous English poet is given by the elegy he wrote in English when Auden died in September 1973, “Elegy to W.H. Auden,” first published in *The New York Review of Books*, on 12 December 1974. “Poetry without you equals only us. / The words are retreating to the stage / of lexicons, of the muse. / The sky looks like an empty page / which you did not use.”<sup>12</sup> I could say that the circle closed with the poem that his friend Seamus Heaney wrote soon after Brodsky’s death in 1996, entitled “Audenesque.”

Exile proved for Brodsky a crucial experience for both his personal and his artistic education. “One side effect of such close reading was a good passive knowledge of English, but at the same time his object was not to learn another language; it was to learn another poetry” (Loseff 2011: 101).

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<sup>11</sup> Brodsky’s (1986: 357-358) later humorously affirmed, “My desire to write in English [...] was simply a desire to please a shadow. Of course, where he [Auden] was by then, linguistic barriers hardly mattered, but somehow I thought that he might like it better if I made myself clear to him in English.”

<sup>12</sup> The poem was later included in the volume *Collected Poems in English*, edited by Ann Kjellberg.

Although Brodsky was deeply set in his Russian literary context – his first works have clear influences from the Russian Acmeism and Symbolism of the “Silver Age” – after returning from the Russian Far North, Brodsky started drawing from authors of the English literary tradition, as Donne, Frost and Auden, thus abandoning his classical models to become more ‘experimental.’ As Stakhnevich (2006: 16) asserts,

The West interpreted though its literature, with the United States as its ultimate reincarnation, acquired a mythological status of Xanadu proportions. Thus, at this point in his biography English became Brodsky's virtual passport that granted him unrestricted opportunities to traverse linguistic borders and explore the unknown.

English “also evolved into a source of inspiration, enriching Brodsky’s creative repertoire as a Russian poet” (Stakhnevich 2006: 17). The aesthetic inspiration offered by English books becomes a sort of new means for Brodsky to ideally oppose the rules imposed by Socialist Realism; Brodsky reported in fact that in those years he continued to read poetry in English through the rare anthologies illegally brought to the URSS by foreign students.

In his essay “To Please a Shadow,” included in the volume *Less Than One*, Brodsky (1986: 366) writes that these volumes,

[F]elt so American and were indeed pocket-size. You could pull them out of your pocket in a streetcar or in a public garden, and even though the text would be only a half or a third comprehensible, they'd instantly obliterate the local reality.

On 5 June 1972, Brodsky was banished from his home country, as a result of a final ruling of “social parasitism.” He flew to Austria, where he met his friend, the American professor Carl Proffer, publisher in the United States of his first works in Russian. Together with Proffer, Brodsky went to the small village of Kirchstetten, near Vienna, where Auden used to spend his summers since 1958. Loseff (2011: 169) comments on their meeting with these words: “Here Brodsky caught his first glimpse of the poet whose words about language he had read eight years before in a hut in the Russian north, words that have turned

his life upside down.” Later Brodsky remembered his first meeting with Auden, and it is amusing to read how he was afraid of his poor spoken English.<sup>13</sup>

Shortly after their meeting, Brodsky was invited by Auden to the London Poetry International Festival, and this event triggered Brodsky’s international career. Some of his poems had already been printed in the West, as well as the text of his 1964 ‘mock trial,’ divulged by his friend Efim Etkind: Brodsky was already a *cause célèbre*. He was offered a position of lecturer at Ann Arbor University, Michigan, thanks to the intercession of Proffer. Later, Brodsky received an honorary Doctorate of Letters by Yale, and soon become an estimated professor and lecturer, who travelled extensively in the United States, South America and Europe, attracting nevertheless the critique of some, who saw a certain mercification of his position of ‘author in exile.’

Brodsky’s ‘travelling exile’ – a lifestyle which is the result of his changing identity – will be analysed successively, while in the next section I will explore the relationship Brodsky developed with his second language after his move to the United States.

### **2.3. Brodsky’s Transculturation**

The fact of living in an Anglophone country was undoubtedly the spur for Brodsky to write in English. Much more than a linguistic shift, Brodsky’s choice for English is the result of a complex cultural process, which started first as an interest in the foreign language and later passed through the painful experience of exile, to be finally transformed into an opportunity that bore abundant fruits to the author’s production.

When Brodsky arrived in the United States, his English was in "an embryonic state" and full of "grammatical eccentricities" (Volkov 1998: 135), but he soon realized that being confined into his mother tongue could have been a limit: his decision to improve his English was then also “a mode of participation in the English-speaking community” and “[A] yearning to claim his own space in the new world” (Stakhnevich 2006: 19).

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<sup>13</sup> “[M]y [Brodsky’s, A/N] English at the time would have been so inadequate that we could not have any kind of substantive conversation” (Volkov 1998: 138).

Brodsky chose then not to isolate himself in what Volkov (1998: 157) defines “the artificial milieu” of Russian fellow immigrants in the United States, and soon established relations of friendship with English-speaking scholars, as Robert Lowell, Anthony Hecht, Richard Wilbur, Derek Walcott, and many others. Besides, English was the necessary professional tool for his academic work. The need to belong to a group or, as humorously Brodsky defined the acquaintances he made in the United States, to a “tribe,” is described by Brodsky in his essay “Collector’s Item.” On this subject, Stakhnevich (2006: 23) comments with these words:

Similarly to others who acquired a second language in adulthood to the point of becoming one with “the tribe,” Brodsky managed to transgress the boundaries of his mother tongue, and in this way “to step out of the constraints into which one has been born” (Mukherjee 72). Yet, English was merely a part in this personal linguistic diorama (1991).

Brodsky’s transculturation manifested itself in the new literary form he soon engaged with, i.e. prose writing, communicated through his new means, English. The genre he chose was the essay, which Theodore Ziolkovski (1996: 295) defines the European intellectuals’ “genre par excellence” and “the common ground on which, at century’s end, the projects of three prominent European writers – a novelist, a poet [Brodsky, A/N], and a scholar-critic – converge.”<sup>14</sup>

Brodsky wrote his first essays in Russian, but soon switched to English, thus becoming a “regular contributor to the *New York Review of Books*, the *Partisan Review*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*” (Polukhina 1997: 239). Loseff (2011: 222) reports: “Brodsky often remarked that his initial decision to write exclusively in English for American journals was a purely practical one, there would be no need to spend time and effort on translation.”

In an interview given to Sven Birkerts in 1982, Brodsky confirms this newly discovered enthusiasm for prose writing: “I love it, in English. To me it’s a

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<sup>14</sup> Ziolkovski refers to Kundera, Brodsky, and Eco, and their choice was made because “[O]nly the essay can accommodate the furiously shifting kaleidoscope of modern life” (1996: 304).

challenge. [...] If asked to write prose in Russian, I wouldn't be so keen. But in English it's a tremendous satisfaction."

Brodsky paid great attention to the accuracy of his English lexicon, which in the years became richer and richer, and drew from both the elevated and the colloquial registers, mixing both the physical and the metaphysical planes. With his peculiar use of syntax, Brodsky made witty statements, many of which have become quoted aphorisms. Solomon Volkov defines Brodsky's English prose style "highly idiosyncratic, effective and memorable, of which he was rather proud" (1998: xii). Volkov adds a major consideration that leads to some considerations on the transformation Brodsky's prosody was undergoing: "Ironically, Brodsky was less confident – or maybe more demanding and self-critical – of his prose skills in Russian" (1998: xii).

Although Brodsky's choice for English was a combination of many factors – intellectual, social and eventually affective – in the essay on Auden we have previously mentioned, "To Please a Shadow," he explains how writing in English has given him an opportunity "to please a shadow," by which he means, furthermore, to be judged through the same linguistic and cultural filters that pertained to Auden.

[W]riting in English was the best way to get near him, to work on his terms, to be judged, if not by his code of conscience, then by whatever it is in the English language that made this code of conscience possible (Brodsky 1986: 357-358).

Brodsky's production in English is massive and can be summarized in two large collections of essays, *Less than One* (1986), the short, but intense, essay on Venice, *Watermark* (1992), and *On Grief and Reason* (1995). Brodsky wrote in total more than one hundred prose pieces between reviews, lectures, introductions and critical pieces, contributions to conferences, and letters. "[O]f thirty-eight essays, thirty-three were written in English, three were translations and two collaborations between translators and the author" (Stakhnevich 2006: 22).

In his writings, Brodsky touched many topics, from his 'privileged position' of intellectual coming from a foreign country that allowed him to have a

detached point of view on European and American social and cultural realities, which he could express through his dense and powerful prose:

Writing critically in English on literature, culture, history and politics helped Brodsky ground himself in the English-speaking discourse. It allowed him to share with his English-speaking audience a qualitatively new outlook on important topics that connected two cultural traditions. Through such discourse in English Brodsky applied agency to claim a legitimate membership in his new community of English-speaking literary scholars (Stakhnevich 2006: 21).

In his famous letter written to Brezhnev the morning of his departure from the Soviet Union, Brodsky had stated,

I belong to the Russian culture. I feel part of it, its component, and no change of place can influence the final consequence of this. A language is a much more ancient and inevitable thing than a state. I belong to the Russian language (McKelvey 1987).

Therefore, we notice an incongruity in the development of his latest work, which makes us reflect on the substantial changes his literary inspiration was undergoing. A distinction in his work was in fact firmly kept in the years that followed his emigration in the United States: poetry in Russian and prose in English. This is confirmed, for instance, in a letter to *The New York Times Magazine*, written in October 1972, a few months after his arrival in America, in which he affirms again his belonging to his mother tongue:

In order to write well in a language you have to hear it – in taverns, buses and groceries stores. I have not yet invented a way to fight it. But I hope that a man's language travels with him. And I hope that I will take the Russian language wherever I go (T).

Brodsky in these lines stresses the importance of the context in which the language is spoken, and the necessity for an author to draw from it: a belief that will guide him through his English poetry writing, as shown in this study.

For nearly two decades, Brodsky can be defined a bilingual writer, and his bilingualism becomes an inexhaustible source of artistic enrichment, as Stakhnevich (2006: 26) proposes:

Not surprisingly, Brodsky viewed literary bilingualism as a resource beneficial for his creativity, a self-chosen norm that opened up new creative horizons, making him more aware of the specificity of each linguistic system, its beauty and its limitations.

Before briefly analysing Brodsky's bilingualism and the final development of his work in the full adoption of English, it is worth spending a few words on the importance he assigned to language, in specific in its relation to exile.

I refer again to the short essay "The Condition We Call Exile," quoted at the beginning of this paper, which is considered the sum of Brodsky's idea on exile. His authorial inventiveness produces powerful statements, as "[T]o be an exiled writer is like being a dog or a man hurtled into outer space in a capsule (more like a dog, of course, than a man, because they will never retrieve you). And your capsule is your language" (1995: 108).

And further on: "For one in our profession the condition we call exile is first of all, a linguistic event: he is thrust, he retreats into his mother tongue. From being his, so to speak, sword, it turns into his shield, into his capsule" (1995: 108). These impressive assessments about language well express what many émigré writers experience, i.e. the ultimate comfort offered to them by their mother tongue, in an environment still perceived as alien.

As Brodsky often stated, it is language itself which inspires poetry, as if "one word leads to another." These concepts are extensively illustrated in the essays "Less than One" and "On Grief and Reason," in which poetry writing is associated to motion: for example, to the action of crossing the sea or flying in an airplane, as explored in Aaron Beaver's (2008: 417-18) interesting essay "Brodsky and Kirkegaard, Language and Time:"



[B]rodsky does not consider a poem to be simply an aesthetic object but rather a particularized existential movement, an event of language which demands active reader involvement. In his essays he speaks of literature as the “linguistic equivalent of thinking” and calls writing “literally an existential process; it uses thinking for its own ends, it consumes notions, themes and the like, not vice-versa.

For Brodsky, then, language equals inspiration, in an “anti-Freudian” way, as analysed also by John Maxwell Coezee, Brodsky’s close friend and Nobel Prize fellow, in his essay “Speaking for language” (1996).

The speech Brodsky held upon his nomination as “Poet Laureate” in 1991, entitled “An Immodest Proposal,” offered him the occasion to praise American poetry and the English language. He states:

American poetry is this country's greatest patrimony. It takes a stranger to see some things clearly. This is one of them, and I am that stranger. The quantity of verse that has been penned on these shores in the last century and a half dwarfs the similar enterprise of any literature, and for that matter, both our jazz and our cinema, rightly adored throughout the world (Brodsky 1991: 33).

Although he still defines himself “a stranger,” Brodsky has fully integrated into the American environment, as it is demonstrated also by using the first person plural adjective “our jazz and our cinema.”

On several occasions, Brodsky had declared his appreciation for English: here again he does not fail in asserting that “No other language accumulates so much of this [beauty, A/N] as does English. To be born into it or to arrive in it is the best boon that can befall a man” (Brodsky 1991: 34). During that lecture, Brodsky presented his “Immodest Proposal:” his plan to bring literature, in the form of poetry anthologies, to the American masses.<sup>15</sup>

An extraordinary and ambitious project, which is summarized in the following words of Heaney (1996):

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<sup>15</sup> I have investigated Brodsky’s project in my essay “Brodsky’s ‘An Immodest Proposal:’ Contents and Outcomes of an Extraordinary Project” (2016).

Why not print poetry in millions of copies, he asked, since a poem "offers you a sample of complete . . . human intelligence at work" and since that same poem also tells its readers, "Be like me"? Moreover, because poetry employs memory, "it is of use for the future, not to mention the present." It can also do something for ignorance and is "the only insurance available against the vulgarity of the human heart. Therefore, it should be available to everyone in this country and at a low cost."

Brodsky's proposal resulted in the birth of the "American Poetry and Literacy Project," which, with the help of a young university student, Andrew Carroll, between 1992 and 2002 distributed one million of free volumes of poetry in hospitals, schools, factories, prisons, airports, and on planes, trains, new cars, etc. In Brodsky's intention, there should have been books, the "classics" of American poetry, in all the places where people had to wait long hours, as Brodsky affirmed: "to kill time before time kills them" (Elam Roth 1997). Brodsky's project may also be seen as a way of rewarding his host country, which, from the day of his exile, granted him freedom and support, but further, the project demonstrates his recognized status as "cultural authority" in the American (and international) landscape.

The Australian writer Les Murray, interviewed by Valentina Polukhina (2008: 485), recalls in a humorous way Brodsky's predilection for English, and in particular for English poetry:

[I] recall his regret that the British missed their chance to colonize Russia in 1918, and that his writing in English could be seen as an attempt to repair this mistake. Of course English for him was not so much associated with colonization as with civilization; he was talking about the English of George Herbert, Marvell, Donne, and Shakespeare.

#### **2.4. Brodsky's Poems in English**

The two linguistic planes Brodsky kept in his writing for most of his life clearly show his accomplished identity of bilingual émigré, a topic extensively analysed by Stakhnevich (2006: 24), who asserts that,

[b]ilingualism and biculturalism became a norm, a source of inspiration, of inner strength and creativity. What started as a challenge became second nature that provided linguistic and spiritual sustenance vital for creativity. This morphing, or better, bilingual evolution did not happen overnight, but when it did, there was no going back. In one of the conversations with Volkov, Brodsky shared: “Were a miracle to occur and if I were to return to Russia permanently, I would be extremely nervous at not having the option of using more than one language” (186).

For Brodsky's own statement, then, we understand how the change he suffered was at this point irreversible. Furthermore, as the same Brodsky recounts, writing prose in English had represented the ultimate form to protest against his home country for having always refused his parents the authorization to visit him in the United States.

In the essay “In a Room and a Half,” Brodsky recounts his years in Leningrad, describing also his parents’ life in their ‘communal’ apartment, in the harshness of the Soviet society.<sup>16</sup> He chose to write in English also “to grant them a margin of freedom. To write about them in Russian would be only to further their captivity” (Brodsky 1986: 460). After the fall of Communism, we know that Brodsky was officially invited to return to Russia, but he always refused to.

The reasons underlying Brodsky’s writing in his second language are many, as I am trying to outline in this study, not last “a venue for emotional release,” as Stakhnevich maintains (2006: 26), and if his prose has been written for its major part in English, for what concerns poetry the issue is significantly different.

During the years, Brodsky’s prose and poetry become very close, until they happen to be, for Polukhina, “virtually indistinguishable” (1997: 224). Many of his prose pieces present this ‘hybrid form,’ while his poetry, far from classical canons, indulges less in descriptions, becoming ‘drier’ and ‘experimental.’ A similarity which can be found with Lehoczky’s prose poems.

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<sup>16</sup> Stakhnevich (2006: 21) reports that, “Galya Diment wrote, “[B]rodsky wanted to use his English in order to build a sanctuary for his parents, protecting them from the inhumanity of trivialisation and allowing himself to take at least some edge of his pain” (354).

This said, I return to Brodsky and his bilingualism. At that point of his life and career, Brodsky was in a thrilling and at the same time risky position, which could grant him the ‘vantage’ of a double view, to choose between "the absolute polar opposites" of the English-language and Russian-language cultures (Stakhnevich 2006:15). Indeed, he liked to refer to his bilingualism in the metaphorical terms of "sitting on top of a mountain and looking down both slopes" (Volkov 185).

For the first twenty years in the United States, Brodsky kept Russian as his privileged medium for poetry, with a few poems which make the exception, considered by the critics as experiments, like the aforementioned “Elegy: For W.H. Auden,” and the later “Elegy: For Robert Lowell,” which first appeared in *The New Yorker*, on 31 October 1977. These poems demonstrate the author’s growing confidence with English, as well as the necessity of recounting with new words his new life in America, his “extra reality” (Birkerts 1982: 98).

Several translators have turned Brodsky’s poems from Russian into English, and there are double versions of many of them. Feeling never satisfied by the versions proposed to him, Brodsky was known to make endless corrections to the translations of his verses, on which, nevertheless, he had always to have the last word. Ann Kjellberg (Brodsky 2000: xiv), editor of Brodsky’s *Collected Poems in English*, recounts Brodsky’s deep commitment in the translation process in this way:

Brodsky took an active hand in the translation of his own work into English. He believed strongly that a poem’s verse structure should be rendered in translation, and to this he applied the dictates of his own very particular ear. (In Russian he is recognized as one of the most original prosodic stylists of his time.) As he was both author and translator, he was able to reach for solutions that were unavailable to another translator.

In an interview with Sven Birkerts (1982: 73-74), of which I quote here an excerpt, Brodsky explained that he began self-translating to avoid the inevitable difficulties in communication with his translators and to maintain the highest

possible level of accuracy, for which he fully trusted only himself. Let us go through it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you get very sensitive about the way someone renders you into English?

BRODSKY

My main argument with translators is that I care for accuracy and they're very often inaccurate - which is perfectly understandable. It's awfully hard to get these people to render the accuracy as you would want them to. So rather than brooding about it, I thought perhaps I would try to do it myself.

Besides, I have the poem in the original, that's enough. I've done it and for better or worse it stays there. My Russian laurel - or lack of them - satisfy me enough. I'm not after a good seat on the American Parnassus. The thing that bothers me about many of those translations is that they are not very good English. It may have to do with the fact that my affair with the English language is fairly fresh, fairly new, and therefore perhaps I'm subject to some extra sensitivity. So what bothers me is not so much that the line of mine is bad - what bothers me is the bad line in English.

Some translators espouse certain poetics of their own. In many cases their understanding of modernism is extremely simple. Their idea, if I reduce it to the basics, is "staying loose." I, for one, would rather sound trite than slack or loose. I would prefer to sound like a cliché . . . an ordered cliché, rather than a clever slackness.

Besides the critique towards his translators, Brodsky stresses here that he does not aim at being recognized as a great English poet – he proclaims that he is satisfied by the reception of his poetry in Russian – but seems instead more concerned in searching for an unattainable “language of truth,” of which Walter Benjamin had spoken.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin in *The Task of the Translator* (1996: 256) writes: “The intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, manifest; that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational. For the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language informs his work. This language is that in which the independent sentences, works of literature, and critical judgments will never communicate-for they remain dependent on translation; but in it the languages themselves, supplemented and reconciled in their way of meaning, draw together. If there is such a thing as a language of truth, a tensionless and even silent depository of the ultimate secrets for which all thought strives, then this language of truth is -the true language. And this

On the relation between the two languages in the act of translation, Stakhnevich (2006: 19) writes that,

Brodsky acknowledged that the "biography" of similar structures might vary in different languages as "the same structure may mean, imply or allude to different things," thus necessitating approximations and modifications in translation (Burch and Chun 56).

These assumptions implicitly refer to the Sapir-Whorf theory, that will be taken into exam in Chapter Three.

The need to translate his poetry, originally conceived for the peculiarity of the Russian geographical and cultural landscape, urged Brodsky to align its form and contents to be more comprehensible for the American audience, thus beginning his personal reconsideration of his whole poetic work.

Reading Brodsky's verses written in these years, it is easy to notice that after a few years in the United States, the American landscape starts slowly to emerge from Brodsky's verses, and places like Cape Cod, New England, New York, California are found, as well as elements characteristic of American culture: jazz music, boogie-woogie, Coca-Cola. Stakhnevich (2006:11) describes this transformation:

Similarly to other translinguals, Brodsky went through self-translation and re-conceptualization of his past through the lenses of his new locality. He engaged in what Pavlenko called "translation therapy [...] to ensure continuity by transforming and reintegrating one's childhood into one's new past".

The author is 'diving' into his new world, of which he begins to appreciate the context and the benefits connected to its democracy, as he used to assert. This process of transformation nevertheless leads to inevitable losses, in terms of pauperisation of his Russian identity and linguistic creativity – a threat of which Brodsky is aware, as reminded by John Taylor (2001: 549):

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very language, in whose divination and description lies the only perfection for which a philosopher can hope, is concealed in concentrated fashion in translations.

As soon as Brodsky was deported from the Soviet Union, he became cognizant of the linguistic enfeeblement potentially threatening him. In a poem dated the year of his exile, and thus referring to the United States, he states: “here I’ll live out my days, losing gradually / hair, teeth, consonants, verbs, and suffixes.”

On the other side, a question arises on how proficient in English Brodsky was. After the first meeting with Auden, Brodsky’s English had certainly improved. Loseff’s words, in his *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life* (2011: 222) seem to confirm this:

After several years in America, Brodsky could speak fluently on any topic in both professional and everyday situations. [...] Nonetheless, he never became completely bilingual: he spoke with a noticeable accent, his usage and diction sometimes seemed slightly off, and his English-speaking friends regularly corrected his use of articles and verb forms in his written pieces.

In this condition, which could be defined of personal and artistic *impasse*, shown by the exhausting corrections Brodsky made to the translations of his poems, the nomination as Poet Laureate certainly proved a last turning point in his work. At that point of Brodsky’s artistic career, in 1991, Stakhnevich (2006: 22) quotes Mike Hammer and Christina Daub: “Brodsky was ready to publicly admit that in fact he wrote poetry in both languages, although only ‘a small percentage’ in English (Hammer and Daub 159).”

The poems written and published in Brodsky’s last years, or posthumously, are in English: the collection *So Forth* (1996), *Discovery* (1999) – a poem for children about America’s first discoverers – and *Nativity Poems* (2001). In *So Forth*, the poem “To My Daughter” is particularly significant, since it offers the clue for the interpretation of Brodsky’s last poetry, together with a glimpse on the author’s life. The poem was written in 1994, and it is dedicated to his little daughter Anna, born in 1993 from his marriage with the young Italian-French Maria Sozzani.

Further to the image of an ageing father, whose tender look on his daughter brings thoughts of nostalgia for a painful past, and fear of an imminent loss –

almost prophetically announced – in the poem there are elements of Brodsky’s inventive prosopopoeia, as “an inanimate object might be your father,” a characteristic encountered in also in Leńóczy’s work, in which material objects are the only ones capable of possessing the quality of immortality. For its many significative elements, of which, last but not least, the fact that it has been written in English, it is worth to quote here the whole text of “To My Daughter:”

Give me another life, and I’ll be singing  
in Café Rafaella. Or simply sitting  
there. Or standing there, as furniture in the corner,  
in case that life is a bit less generous than the former.  
Yet partly because no century from now on will ever manage  
without caffeine or jazz, I’ll sustain this damage,  
and through my cracks and pores, varnish and dust all over,  
observe you, in twenty years, in your full flower.  
On the whole, bear in mind that I’ll be around. Or rather,  
that an inanimate object might be your father,  
especially if the objects are older than you, or larger.  
So keep an eye on them always, for they no doubt will judge you.  
Love those things anyway, encounter or no encounter.  
Besides, you may still remember a silhouette, a contour,  
while I’ll lose even that, along with the other luggage.  
Hence, these somewhat wooden lines in our common language (Brodsky 2000:  
452).

In this poem, Brodsky makes a large use of enjambments, and contraposes two different linguistic registers: the colloquial and the high one, as peculiar in his prosody, especially in English, which has now become the language of his affections, mastered by the poet up to the point of expressing his poetic self, although with some limits. It is interesting to note how Brodsky employs the terms ‘baggage’ and ‘language,’ thus creating a ‘half-rhyme:’ language is the only baggage that the nomadic author carries with him, but it is also his burden.



William Wadsworth, Brodsky's university student and director of the Academy of American Poets, on this poem comments: "One of his loveliest poem of all is the poem to his daughter, but, note the ironic last line: 'Hence, these somewhat wooden lines in our common language'" (Polukhina 2008: 470). The last assumption, if on one hand highlights a side aspect of Brodsky's character, defined by Wadsworth "Joseph's flip side:" his "tendency to self-deprecation," on the other it suggests a critical look on the English language as used by him.

As a biographical note, I remind that Brodsky died less than three years later and was not able to see his little child grow.

## **2.5. Criticism of Brodsky's Poems in English**

It is worth now to take briefly into exam some opinions expressed by the critics about Brodsky's poetry in English. Regarding the first, the one he self-translated into English, as well as about the last, the one directly written in English, the critics' views slightly differ, though the majority shares similar positions.

I have chosen some extracts of reviews, which will be presented in reverse chronological order, and which show some scholars' opinions on Brodsky in English. Loseff highlights Brodsky's 'detached attitude,' towards his poetry in English, comparable, in a sense, to the "self-deprecation" previously hinted at by Wadsworth (2011: 221):

While his essays by and large received critical praise in the English-speaking world, his poetry met a mixed reaction. His own attitude was complicated as well. On the one hand, he more than once emphasized that the poetry he wrote in English was nothing serious, a sort of verbal game.

A recent critique, by Reginald Gibbons (2008: 44), appeared in the *American Poetry Review*, firmly slates Brodsky's poetic efforts in English:

Brodsky's poetry, especially the poems he himself wrote in or translated into English, can seem superficial, meandering, and linguistically very awkward, to

native speakers of English; [...] they can seem like poems written in English words by the rules of another language, Russian.

Benjamin Paloff (2007: 103), in the *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, makes a difference between the poems Brodsky translated/wrote himself and the ones translated in English by others – these latter seeming to him the best:

From his first introduction to an anglophone public, his poems have been rendered in exquisite English by diligent scholars and accomplished poets, among them George L. Kline, Anthony Hecht, and Richard Wilbur. These poems stand out for their faithful recasting of Brodsky's originals and their creative and insightful solutions to the problems and complexities his work inevitably presents. Translations executed by the poet himself are of uneven quality, and poems first composed in English typically lack the linguistic flair of his Russian. But if he had mixed success as an English poetic stylist, his prose, most of which he wrote in English, is superb.

The opinion expressed by Stakhnevich (2006: 22-23) is in line with what above stated, though she emphasizes further the emotional value that writing poetry in English could have had for Brodsky – according to her, the last step to complete his path towards a renewed personal and a professional identity:

Although it is likely that Brodsky will remain more celebrated for his poetic legacy in Russian, his acknowledgement of his poetic, perhaps somewhat unbalanced bilingualism, signified the inner change, that extra reality that he finally consented to create for himself, revealing the deep emotional connection that he developed with his adopted language.

The imparity in quality between Brodsky's English poetry and prose is, again, in favour of this last. In the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, the following extract of an essay written by the critic John Taylor (2001) is focused on Brodsky's main value as a Russian poet and describes the bewildered reaction of the

American audience to Brodsky's poems in English. Taylor's position is similar to Heaney's:

In any event, we must always remember that Brodsky remained a Russian poet (despite his increasing forays into English)... Americans are impressed by the disarming "surrealism" of Brodsky's startling similes. [I]t cannot be emphasized enough how much he learned from Mandelstam's densely textured, tightly crafted, symbolism, and, more generally, from the aesthetics of the Russian "Acmeist" movement. Brodsky famously read American slang dictionaries, hunting for eccentric images and possible rhymes. The results are sometimes words, or juxtapositions of words, that test the limits of poetic license. This is the vague criterion that has made some of us wrinkle our brows: when does the foreign poet, writing in English, trespass boundaries of legitimate linguistic inventiveness?

Michael Glover (1996: 119) considers the volume *So Forth* "more failure than success," while the same collection is regarded by Christian Graham (1996: 110) as,

[A]n astonishing collection from a writer able to mix the cerebral and the sensual, the political and the intimate, the elegiac and the comic. [...] Brodsky's death is a loss to literature; his final collection of poems is the best consolation we could ask for.

Seamus Heaney (1987) concludes this series of reviews, and similarly to Taylor highlights Brodsky's excessive audacity in venturing into his second language:

[I]n the case of Mr. Brodsky's poetry, which is written in Russian and which revealed him to great Russian readers as their great contemporary poet, the process of translation is more problematic and resistant [...], he is now the official translator of his own lines. So, in spite of his manifest love for English verse, which amounts almost to a possessiveness, the dynamo of Russian supplies the energy, the metrics of the original will not be gainsaid and the English ear comes up against a phonetic element that is both animated and skewed.

This quick overview gives an idea of the mixed reactions the critics had towards Brodsky's poems in English, but more than evaluating the form and content of Brodsky's poetry in his second language – a writing which sometimes may sound as 'naïf' – what must be evaluated is the relevance that this choice had in the development of his work. I refer again to Stakhnevich, who, on this topic, asserts that,

For Brodsky, the final step on the way to literary bilingualism was composing bilingual poetry. It is only when the author was ready to take the risk and admit that he wrote poetry in both languages, was the transformation circle completed. Brodsky's translanguaging was not subtractive and did not result in the abandonment of his native tongue; on the contrary, it enriched his writing in both languages and offered him a more balanced composite worldview, fusing two great cultural traditions.

With this last statement we are reminded that the value of Brodsky's work is further due to its great cultural heritage, which draws from Eastern and Western traditions.

In the section that follows, I will outline how Brodsky's 'travelling exile' has been made possible by the adoption of his second language, which ultimately served him not only as means of expression, but more, as a 'creative space' where he could express his new authorship, the product of his two cultural universes.

## **2.6. A Travelling Exile**

Brodsky was paradoxically granted the freedom to travel by the coercion of exile, at a time when free travelling abroad was not permitted in the Soviet Union.

Due to his Jewish origins and his life led in a constant travelling displacement, he has been associated by some critics to the legendary character of the Wandering Jew: among them is Brodsky's scholar David Bethea, who writes that, "Brodsky is also the quintessential Wandering Jew, having travelled

more often and to more places than any other Russian poet in history” (1994: 60).

Although Brodsky was a descendant of a prominent rabbinic family, it must be reported that his Jewishness played a marginal role in his literary career. Brodsky was born and raised during the time of the official Soviet State atheism, and he always declared to be an atheist, although the presence of God is underlying in many of his verses, more as a metaphysical reference than as an object of devotion – a topic investigated, for instance, in Benjamin Paloff’s essay “The God Function in Joseph Brodsky and Olga Sedakova” (2007: 718):

In this vein, we must agree with Andrei Ranchin's assertion that Brodsky rejects dialogue, since dialogue requires its participants to be incomplete and open to contact with one another. Rather, Brodsky aims to establish an all-encompassing totality within his finite oeuvre: "Opposing judgments in Brodsky are not dialogic, but antinomic, and they belong to a single (and, in his world, singular) consciousness -that of the author or 'lyric persona.' It is as though Brodsky's cosmos contains all being [бытие] within itself: poems not resembling one another; the earth, seen from Heaven, and the sky, seen from earth; and the poet himself..." (134).<sup>4</sup> The view of earth from Heaven, or vice versa, provides the poet with something to ponder, but expecting no answers, he tends to elide the questions. Even in his lyrics on religious themes, Brodsky's is a poetry of self-reflection, not interpenetration.

The presence of God mainly serves Brodsky to open a dialogue with himself, at various moments in his life, with the bitter awareness, however, that he will not receive any response. I have quoted this passage because its last part could function as a comment on Lehoczky’s lyrics addressing the sky.

What Brodsky recognized as ‘God’ was a form of ‘worship to language’ – a concept brought to its extremes, which he liked to repeat in the interviews he gave, as well as in his writings. As Valentina Polukhina reports, in an interview with Natalya Gorbanevskaya, he said, "If I were to begin to create some form of theology, I think it would be a theology of language. In this sense, the word is really something sacred for me" (1989: 9).

Brodsky's continuous displacements, while keeping at first Michigan and then New York as habitual residences – where he taught respectively at Ann Arbor University and Columbia University – seem to respond more to the needs of his mind, than to the contingency of receiving prestigious job offers in international academic institutions. Between others, we are reminded that Brodsky received teaching assignments at Yale, Cambridge and the Sorbonne.

Starting a new life in the small city of Ann Arbor in Michigan, and working as a university professor, Brodsky could slowly adapt to his new American reality, transforming his painful condition of exile as an opportunity to enlarge his individual and artistic experience. Besides, his position of Russian émigré offered a detached perspective from which he ‘dared’ to express his original opinions.

Brodsky considered exile an almost ‘privileged’ condition for the poet,<sup>18</sup> an ultimate ‘state of the mind’ he always sought for in his displaced life. For all these reasons, Brodsky’s travel writings offer a unique occasion to touch central topics as displacement and language, culture and transculturation, time and space. As Sanna Turoma (2010: 5) suggests:

The idea of geographical space emerged as a powerful creative impetus in Brodsky’s early poems inspired by geological expeditions, and in his later works it was imagined through an increasing awareness of imperial histories, while it also became explicitly associated with creativity and masculinity. Eventually, history and geography, time and space were the concepts through which Brodsky represented the division between East and West, the metropolitan and the third world, cultural signification and nonsignification. Apart from inserting his lyric subject and traveling author into European and non-European landscapes through his geographical imagination, Brodsky also situated them in the historical narrative of travel and colonisation. Brodsky’s travel poetry and prose written in emigration address the postwar moment when the irrevocable impact mass tourism had on travel and travel writing had become widely recognized by many Western travel writers and cultural critics.

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<sup>18</sup> See by Giovanni Buttafava, “Interview with Joseph Brodsky,” *L’Espresso* (6 December 1987: 156).

The places Brodsky visited are reflected in the wide geographical scope of his production, and they are seen through the eyes of an exile, who, while being able to scrutinize the social and cultural reality around him, is always seeking for a lost home country.

Feared and sought after at the same time, the ‘estrangement,’ which could translate the concept of ‘alienation,’ is a condition that Brodsky learns to control, not to feel isolated as an artist, but be ‘a man of the world,’ who is at home in many places, thanks to his recurring travels and a deep knowledge of the historical and cultural reality of the places he visits. It is a ‘state of the mind’ – and of the heart – which is found also in Leńóczy.

Regarding this double aspect in Brodsky, Loseff (2011: 21) writes:

While he appreciated the culture of America, the country he finally made his home (its films, literature, music; its civil society and rule of law) he felt equally comfortable in England, in northern Europe, or in Italy, where he also lived, worked and eventually found a family.

Brodsky’s choice of a physical displacement in foreign cities shows his capacity of successfully settling in any cultural *milieu*, and has rightly been defined as “rooted cosmopolitanism,” in a study which links Brodsky’s work to that of Heaney and Walcott – who were his close friends in life – by Jamie Olson (2008: 5), who asserts that,

[I] propose that we think of Heaney, Walcott and Brodsky as cosmopolitans – specifically, as rooted cosmopolitans – a phrase that retains a sense of the tension in their work between home and abroad. Happily, the word “cosmopolitan” manages to evade the troublesome modern concept of nations and nationalism, since its ancient Greek roots *kosmos* (“universe” or “world”) and *polites* (“citizen”) work together to describe an individual bound both to his native culture (his *polis*, or “city”) and to world culture. When speaking of poets who transcend geographical and linguistic boundaries and who seek to forge transcultural ties, we would do well to avoid thinking of their work in any specifically national context; unfortunately, terms like “internationalism” or even “transnationalism” retain in their very etymology the idea of nations – and thus national literatures – as fixed

political entities, wholly unlike the amalgamated, commingling, fluid cultures of real existence.

I think that what said above is very well suited to the work of the two authors examined, while the concept of the “rooted cosmopolitanism” will return in Chapter Three, focused on Leńóczy’s poetry and its relationship with the urban environment.

### **2.7. Venice: Brodsky’s Third Space**

Idealized by a young Brodsky as the homeland of great artists, Italy proved to be a privileged destination in Brodsky’s travelling since the beginning of his exile. For Brodsky, Italy had always represented a beautiful and culturally rich land, where he used to come to enjoy the company of his many friends, some of whom were his translators and editors. As a Russian ‘classicist,’ Brodsky felt indebted to the Italian culture, and asserted that Italy had always been “a revelation to the Russians,” referring to the cultural links between Italy and Russia dating back centuries, and that were severed during the Soviet regime.<sup>19</sup>

Brodsky’s affection for Italy is further testified by the volume he strongly fostered in his last years, a collection of his ‘Italian poems,’ “Poesie italiane,” which was published posthumously by Adelphi in 1996.

If Rome, Florence, and Venice offered Brodsky the hints to explore the main themes of his work – as classicism and empire, exile and displacement, poetry and language – Venice, that he defined “a work of art, the greatest masterpiece our species produced” (Brodsky 1992: 116), became his elected site, where he could feel the estrangement (a concept derived from the Russian literary term *ostranenie*) that he needed as an artist.<sup>20</sup> David Patterson (1993: 1) argues that,

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<sup>19</sup> I remind here that in his last years, Brodsky promoted the idea of creating a Russian academy in Rome to allow Russian writers and artists to live and study in Italy. The Academy, financed by The Joseph Brodsky Memorial Fellowship Fund – which was founded in the days after Brodsky’s death by a group of his friends – so far has enabled many emerging poets, mostly from Eastern countries, to stay and study in Rome for a period of three months. See “The Joseph Brodsky Memorial Fellowship Fund” website: <http://www.josephbrodsky.org/about.html>.

<sup>20</sup> A central concept in Russian Formalism’s attempt to describe and define what constitutes *literaturnost* (literariness). A neologism, it implies two kinds of actions: ‘making strange,’ and ‘pushing aside.’ Consistent with this double meaning, the concept refers to the techniques writers use to transform ordinary language into poetic language, which for the Russian



“Operating in a state of exile, the poet of exile finds that the completion of the poem precedes the condition it addresses. Thus, the poet of exile is continually struggling in a time that is too late and a place that is elsewhere.”

In this, Brodsky follows the teaching of one of the Russian poets he admired most, Marina Tsvetaeva, who thought that:

Every poet is essentially an *émigré*, even in Russia. *Émigré* from the Kingdom of heaven and from the earthly paradise of nature. Upon the poet – upon all who belong to art, but most especially upon the poet – there’s a particular mark of discomfort, by which you’ll know him even in his own home. An *émigré* from immortality in time, a non returner to his own heaven (1992: 93).

Since his exile, Venice appears in Brodsky’s poetry and proves a constant presence. His “Venetian” poems, a long sequence composed between 1973 and 1995: “Lagoon” (1973), “San Pietro” (1977), “Venetian Stanzas I” (1982), “Venetian Stanzas II” (1982), “In Italy” (1985), “Homage to Girolamo Marcello” (1988), “Venice: Lido” (1989), “In Front of Casa Marcello” (1995), seem to prepare the ground for Brodsky’s masterpiece in prose, entirely dedicated to Venice: *Watermark*.

I start by taking into exam the poem “In Italy,” (Brodsky 2000: 340), written in 1983, first of the poems in Russian Brodsky himself translated/rewrote in English; it shows many autobiographical elements that refer to *topos* of Petersburg, seen as the “Northern Venice,” from the very incipit of the poem:

I, too, once lived in a city where cornices used to court  
clouds with statues, and where a local *penseur*, with his shrill “Pervert!”  
Pervert!” and the trembling goatee, was mopping  
avenues; and an infinite quay was rendering life myopic.

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Formalists is language which induces a heightened state of perception” (Oxford Reference website). The term, coined by the Russian critic Shklovsky, described the defamiliarization that happens especially in poetic literature. At the time, literature was viewed more like a reflection of reality: Shklovsky and the other Formalists proposed that literature had to take reality out of its context and made simple and ordinary things seem strange. Shklovsky, as a leading thinker of the Russian Formalists, called this “ostranenie”. I will return to this concept further in this study.

These days evening sun still blinds the tenement's domino.  
But those who have loved me more than themselves are no  
longer alive. The bloodhounds, having lost their quarry,  
with vengeance devour the left overs – herein the very

strong resemblance to memory, to the fate of all things. The sun  
sets. Faraway voices, exclamation like “Scum!

Leave me alone!” In a foreign tongue, but it stands to reason.

And the world's best lagoon with its golden pigeon

coop gleams sharply enough to make the pupil run.

At the point where one can't be loved any longer, one,

resentful of swimming against the current and too perceptive

of its strength, hides himself in perspective.<sup>21</sup>

The poem has a symmetrical structure – four stanzas of four lines each, with the same rhyming scheme *aabb* – which reinforces the parallelism between the two cities: Petersburg (today St Petersburg) and Venice. Petersburg represents the past ‘there,’ as opposed to Venice, the present ‘here.’ The temporal opposition is further reinforced by the reference to Brodsky's parents' death, which explains the closing image of the poem: the past is dead and to the poet, tired of fighting, nothing remains, but hiding in a Venetian ‘perspective,’ his eyes fixed on the distant Petersburg. In his multicultural existence, Brodsky contextualizes Venice and St. Petersburg through a game of mirrors that indissolubly binds the two cities.

Brodsky grew up in a city dominated by architecture, first neoclassical, then, at the time of the Soviet Union, Constructivist and Stalinist. In his works, he demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the terms that refer to architecture – such as symmetry, reflections, perspectives, points of contact and escape – which he seems to employ in the similar work of ‘building’ his compositions.

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<sup>21</sup> For the English version of Brodsky's poems, I have referred to the volume edited by Ann Kjellberg: Joseph Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English*, published in 2000.

It is a literary device that resembles Leńóczy's 'building blocks' – a technique ultimately drawn from Heidegger's theories.

Following an ideal path towards the prose of *Watermark*, the text that epitomizes Brodsky's personal and artistic transformation through his recurrent travels to Venice, I will briefly take into exam a second poem, "Homage to Girolamo Marcello," published in 1991. It is composed in unrhymed lines that are reminiscent of the memoirist prose of *Watermark*, written in the same years; it at this time that Brodsky's poetry and prose begin to come close.

Once in winter I, too, sailed in  
here from Egypt, believing that I'd be greeted  
on the crowded quay by my wife in resplendent furs  
and a tiny veiled hat. Yet I was greeted  
not by her but by two small, decrepit  
Pekinese with gold teeth. [...]  
The quay was infinite and completely  
vacant (Brodsky 2000: 397).

The title refers to a Venetian descendant of the illustrious doges' family, and it could be interpreted as a possible homage to Brodsky's own biography – his father was a Navy officer – but also as how the author sees himself as a modern 'doge.' The Marcello family will be once more referred to in Brodsky's last Venetian poem, "In Front of Casa Marcello," which will be examined in the next pages, thus creating a sort of 'personal legend' that confirms the significance of Venice for Brodsky.

In "Homage to Girolamo Marcello," Brodsky presents his lyric self as an ageing author who returns to Venice in complete solitude: an isolation which is further conveyed by the closing image of the poem: "What seems to have survived / is but water and me, since water also / has no past." This assumption of having no past is in contrast with the beginning of the poem – Brodsky had recounted a previous visit to Venice – and this assertion conveys in the reader the sensation of a meaningless passing of time, a pessimistic vision of life that is reflected also in Leńóczy's verses.

In Brodsky's works, water progressively acquires more significance: here it stands as a metaphor for the author's life and its multiple aspects, while in the previous poems it symbolised the passing of time. Critics agree to affirm that this poem marks the evolution of Brodsky: from a Russian poet in exile to a fully accomplished author in English. This thesis is sustained, amongst others, by Sanna Turoma, (2010: 215) who suggests that,

'Homage to Girolamo Marcello', and *Watermark* even more so, exhibits the translation of the Ovidian exilic poet into what Bhabha calls the Lucretian postmodern subjectivity, which is freed from, though nostalgically longs for, the essence of the self.

The time when *Fondamenta degli incurabili* was written was a time of major political changes in the international panorama: the Communist party in the URSS and in its satellite countries was losing control – a condition that caused the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and then of the Soviet Union, in 1991. For Brodsky as well, this was a period of great personal changes: while teaching at the Sorbonne in Paris, he met a young Italian-French student, Maria Sozzani, whom he married in 1990. For this reason, too, Brodsky's link with Italy was further strengthened.

The essay, in English, as most of Brodsky's prose after 1972, has been written in 1989 upon invitation of the *Consorzio Venezia Nuova* (Venice Water Authority). It has been translated into Italian by Gilberto Forti and published in an out-of-commerce edition. A revised edition in Italian was published by Adelphi in 1991, while the first English version of the volume was published in 1992, with the title *Watermark: An Essay on Venice*, and then later simply as *Watermark*, in 1993.<sup>22</sup>

The title *Fondamenta degli incurabili*, refers to the former *Ospedale degli Incurabili* (Hospital for the plague victims), and thus evokes memories of past sufferings and isolation that can be connected to the author's condition of being an exile. A clue to the essay is provided in the same text: Brodsky recounts he

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<sup>22</sup> All the passages quoted in my study refer to the 1992 edition.

took inspiration from a French novel he read in 1966, *Provincial Entertainments*, written by Henri de Régnier, and set in a wintry Venice, which consisted of very short chapters.

*Watermark* is primarily a passionate appeal for the preservation of Venice, whose ancient splendour – compared by Brodsky to his own and his country’s history – is opposed to a declining present. Venice has always enticed European and American intellectuals, to which Brodsky eventually belonged, but more than being a cultural pole, in the essay the city is explored in the personal meaning it has for the author.

This “emotional guidebook” (Donadio 2010: 1) of Venice accompanies the reader through the city’s hidden corners, described in a dense prose, full of Brodsky’s brilliant observations. There is no plot, and the narration unfolds through unbound episodes, to communicate the sensation of discovering the city in a dream-like haze: as the same author, the reader can only ‘perceive’ the city, since it is not possible to grasp its essence completely.

The double meaning of the title tells us at first of surfaces and transparencies, of filigrees and Venetian laces – and in this connotation, we find a correspondence with Lehóczy’s parchment skin – but ‘watermark,’ more than its literal meaning of ‘filigree,’ also suggests that the city is ‘marked by water,’ which has left indelible traces on its architecture.

Additionally, the fluid element on which Venice is built represents the city unclear nature, its uncertainty between earth and water. The ‘watermark’ (or ‘waterline’) traces on houses and canals the line which divides the liquid and the solid, the material and the immaterial. In her essay focused on the Venetian architectonic elements as they appear in Brodsky’s work, Teresa Stoppani (2009: 109) asserts that, “In *Watermark*, Joseph Brodsky narrates his haptic experiences of a Venice made of surfaces and memoirs, materials and smells.”

If a surface is a space permeable to view and it is scanned through microrelations of cellular proximity, its boundaries dissolve. The city of the image, of shallow space (and waters) and superficiality, becomes a penetrable body that holds no secret. Scale and materiality dissolve the distinctions of interior and exterior, particles coat and reveal, in ongoing cycles of sedimentation and destruction. This

is the nature of the fragile city and of the lagoon at large: the liquid nature of the Venetian environment is replicated, endlessly and microscopically, in its walls, bricks, fabrics, and stones. Dust here exposes and transforms, erodes and builds up - materials, images, and identities alike (Stoppani 2009: 110).

The words above could well serve as a comment on Lehóczy's writing, regarding her scanning the surfaces to discover forgotten or imagined realities – even primordial ones – in alternating cycles of building and destroying. It is a narrative equally played on both the physical and the metaphysical planes, where the eye of the author scrutinises the Venetian building facades, to interweave reality and imagination.

*Watermark* is composed by one hundred thirty-five pages, divided into fifty chapters (compared to 'islands') each referring to a specific episode of Brodsky's recurrent visits to Venice, started, as per Brodsky's words, when "Many moons ago the dollar was 870 lire and I was thirty-two" (1992: 3).

Brodsky returned to Venice for seventeen years – with a few exceptions due to health reasons – during Christmastime, to 'scan' the city's face and present his original vision of it, recollected in fragmentary chapters-episodes. In 1972, Brodsky celebrated in Venice his first Christmas in exile, and his last, in December 1995, before his sudden death in New York, in January 1996.

Brodsky (1992: 43) explains his yearly returns to Venice in these terms:

I simply think that water is the image of time, and every New Year's Eve, in somewhat pagan fashion, I try to find myself near water, preferably near a sea or an ocean, to watch the emergence of a new helping, a new cupful of time from it.

The prose of *Watermark* is elegant, rich in alliterations, assonances, repetitions of key words – as 'city,' 'water,' 'time' – as well as references to Brodsky's own poetry (with direct quotations, paraphrases, and parallelisms),<sup>23</sup> thus making it close to poetry, an aspect explored by Valentina Polukhina (1997:

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<sup>23</sup> References to other Brodsky's poems are found, as to "Nature Morte," "Lagoon," "San Pietro," "Venetian Stanzas I," "Venetian Stanzas II," "Roman Elegies," "Kellomäki," and "The New Jules Verne."

22) in her essay “The Prose of Joseph Brodsky: A Continuation of Poetry by Other Means,” who states that “[F]or Brodsky, in his last years, poetry and prose were, seemingly, virtually indistinguishable.”

The narrative is interspersed by many Italian words, as *acqua alta*, *pensione*, *stazione*, *nebbia*, *campi*, *bersaglieri*, *chinotto*, *panino*, ‘*Capito?*’ which demonstrate Brodsky’s love for the Italian language – even though he always humbly denied it – and his personal way of widening the audience to which the essay is addressed.<sup>24</sup> Besides, the words in Italian add a touch of ‘local colour’ to the writing.

In the first autobiographical passage of the essay, we find the description of a ‘new’ Brodsky: a ‘dandy’ and a ‘flaneur’ represented as the character of the ‘gentlemen traveller,’ popular in literature:

In the unlikely event that someone’s eye followed my white London Fog and dark brown Borsalino, they should have cut a familiar silhouette. The night itself, to be sure, would have had no difficulty absorbing it” (Brodsky 1992: 4).

The picture of Brodsky wearing the Borsalino hat reminds me of the unforgettable frames of the film *Casablanca*, in which the protagonist, Humphrey Bogart, wears a similar one.

Turoma (2010: 5) in this way comments on Brodsky’s lyric-self depiction as a lonely, travelling ‘gentlemen’ writer:

The “traveler” (*puteshestvennik*),<sup>25</sup> which emerges as a complex autobiographical trope in Brodsky’s post-1972 travel texts, communicates the author’s nostalgia for the mythic gentlemen traveler and for the lost opportunities of authentic travel, adventure, and exploration in the postcolonial era; it signifies his nostalgic attitude for the aesthetic and existential isolation of modernist subjectivity.

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<sup>24</sup> This topic has been investigated by Michele Russo in his study *Iosif Brodskij: Saggi di letture intertestuali* (2015).

<sup>25</sup> “Travel Literature in Slavophone Countries” is the theme of a conference organized by Ca’ Foscari University in Venice, which I attended, in June 2016, and where I presented my paper “Brodsky’s Travelling Exile Pays Homage to Venice.”

Returning to the prose of *Watermark*, we see the author's portrait dissolving into the darkness of the forthcoming night, while the narrative switches from a realistic into a metaphysical plane, a peculiarity also of Leńóczy's poetry.

The assimilation of Brodsky with Venice is such that his description can only proceed in parallel with that of the city:

[I] felt I'd stepped into my own self-portrait in the cold air... The backdrop was all in dark silhouettes of church cupolas and rooftops: a bridge arching over a body of water's black curve, both ends of which were clipped off by infinity. At night, infinity in foreign realms arrives with the last lamppost, and here it was twenty meters away. It was very quiet (Brodsky 1992: 7).

The following passage is one of the most quoted of the essay and shows the metaphysical nature of Brodsky's narrative: "The boat's slow progress through the night was like the passage of a coherent thought through the subconscious" (Brodsky 1992: 39).

In Venice, the Russian-American author undergoes a further transformation, becoming the Baudelairian character of the *flâneur*, who wanders around the city with the aim of getting lost in the uniqueness of Venice, whose labyrinthine nature offers the ideal place for it. The sense of sight in Venice is extraordinarily enhanced, and to underline this Brodsky creates an exaggerated, almost grotesque, image of a body that becomes an enormous eye:

The eye in this city acquires an autonomy similar to that of a tear. The only difference is that it doesn't sever itself from the body but subordinates it totally. After a while – on the third or fourth day here – the body starts to regard itself as merely the eye's carrier, as a kind of submarine to its now dilating, now squinting periscope (Brodsky 1992: 44-45).

Brodsky creates a paradoxical picture, imbued of his peculiar and sometimes bitter humour, which reminds me of some images created by Leńóczy. Unusual pictures which serve also to catch the reader's attention.



Venice, a labyrinth of passages and canals, belongs neither to land nor water and possesses an elusiveness which unavoidably leads the writer to metaphysical reflections:

I always adhered to the idea that God is time, or at least that His spirit is. Perhaps this idea was even of my own manufacture, but now I don't remember. In any case, I always thought that if the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the water, the water was bound to reflect it (Brodsky 1992: 42).

The effective poetic image of God reflected on water suggests the importance of the water element for Brodsky, and *Watermark* offers him an opportunity to exalt this 'iconic' element with its connected imagery, explored by the author in its multiple nuances.<sup>26</sup>

On the map this city looks like two grilled fish sharing a plate, or perhaps like two nearly overlapping lobster claws (Pasternak compared it to a swollen croissant); but it has no north, south, east, or west; the only direction it has is sideways. It surrounds you like frozen seaweeds, and the more you dart and dash about trying to get you bearings, the more you get lost (Brodsky 1992: 45).

Born in a city on the Baltic Sea, and the son of a Navy officer, Brodsky was always fascinated by marine elements. In many of his works, water symbolises freedom, an association which comes from his own biography. It is recounted, for instance, that as a boy he used to hide in the hold of the ships that went to Finland to taste the freedom he was deprived of in his home country. From the American shores of Massachusetts, the exiled Brodsky returns to himself as a young man when, from a pier in Petersburg, he imagined free and far-away countries.

In the excerpt that follows, new references are offered for water, a crucial element in the development of this man, as well as all men's history.

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<sup>26</sup> I have investigated this topic in my MA dissertation in Russian Language and Literature "Immagini d'acqua nella poetica dell'esule Iosif Brodskij," cited in the bibliography.

For water, too, is choral in more ways than one. It is the same water that carried the Crusaders, the merchants, St. Mark's relics, Turks, every kind of cargo, military, or pleasure vessel; above all, it reflected everybody who ever lived, not to mention stayed, in this city, everybody who ever strolled or waded its streets in the way you do now. Small wonder that it looks muddy green in the daytime and pitch black at night, rivaling the firmament. A miracle that, rubbed the right and the wrong way for over a millennium, it doesn't have holes in it, that it is still H<sub>2</sub>O, though you would never drink it; that it still rises (Brodsky 1992: 96-97).

In the lines above, it is possible to detect some elements that can be also encountered in Leńóczy's poetry, as the Venetian lagoon waters in which the visitor mirrors himself as a modern Narcissus. Brodsky puts an accent on water versatile nature – an aspect which is also present in Leńóczy – and then quotes its scientific name, but later lowers the narrative to a nearly colloquial tone.

Brodsky accompanies his readers through the city, to hear the music of great composers, admire the masterpiece of famous artists, and recite the verses of his favourite poets, in a grand celebration of art and life:

It really does look like musical sheets, frayed at the edges, constantly played, coming to you in tidal scores, in bars of canals with innumerable obbligati of bridges, mullioned windows, or curved crownings of Coducci cathedrals, not to mention the violin necks of gondolas" (Brodsky 1992: 97).

One peculiar aspect of Venice in winter – the only season Brodsky, 'a Northerner,' visits it – is its fog, which serves him as a key literary device in defining his 'fading' identity.

The fog is thick, blinding, and immobile... In short, a time for self-oblivion, induced by a city that has ceased to be seen. Unwittingly, you take your cue from it, especially if, like it, you've got no company. Having failed to be born here, you at least can take some pride in sharing its invisibility (Brodsky 1992: 59-60).

On Brodsky's winter visits to Venice, described as a sort of a treasure hunt 'à la *dérive*' through labyrinths of memories and new discoveries, in trying to

define new aspects of the author's personality, Monica Manolescu (2013: 16) writes:

Brodsky's yearly journeys to Venice in wintertime provide him with an uncanny feeling of having simultaneously reached a foreign, remote province and his own birthplace – but not the Venice consecrated by numberless literary texts and art works. Brodsky's Venice embraces self and other, the faraway and the nearby [...] This ambivalence of the urban experience (finding oneself is losing oneself, disorientation as a condition of creativity) is at the heart of Walter Benjamin's interpretation of modernity's sense of place. In the writings that crystallize the figure of the flâneur and in his autobiographical texts, Benjamin insists on the profound implications of the act of losing one's bearings, which becomes the premise of a whole "art of straying."

The critics recently seem to agree in underling the importance of Venice as a 'third space,' literally and figuratively, after the Soviet Union and the United States, which find a correspondence respectively in Brodsky 'young Russian poet' and in Brodsky 'honoured American intellectual.'<sup>27</sup>

A 'third space' which could be related to the concept of the "Third Space Theory" of Homi Bhabha and Edward Soja. The theory, developed by Soja, draws from Foucault's idea of "heterotopia" and Lefebvre's theories presented in *The Production of Space*,<sup>28</sup> and posits that,

[E]verything comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the

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<sup>27</sup> On this topic, further reference can be found in Sanna Turoma's (2010) *Brodsky's Abroad: Empire, Tourism, Nostalgia*; in Monica Manolescu's, "Joseph Brodsky's *Watermark*: From Leningrad to Venice via New York;" in an essay in Italian by Michele Russo's (2015) *Iosif Brodskij: Saggi di letture intertestuali*.

<sup>28</sup> Henri Lefebvre (1991: 26) asserts that, "[Social] space is a [social] product [...] the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action [...] in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power." For him every society produces its own space, and any social existence' aspiring to be a real one, but not producing its own space, would be an abstraction incapable of escaping from ideological or cultural constraints.

transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history. [...] I define Thirdspace as an-Other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the rebalanced trialectics of spatiality–historicality–sociality (Soja 1996: 57).

Venice becomes then the site of a new lyric-self creation, a space in-between, where Brodsky's original identity is transformed into a more fluid subjectivity, and this 'new author' is now able to make his voice heard by an international audience.

On this point, Manolescu (2013: 15) writes:

Venice represents a station midway in the author's transatlantic itinerary and a powerful catalyst of discourses on migration, both political and aesthetical in nature. Located somewhere between the lost homeland and the land of exile, the Italian city allows Brodsky to contemplate his origins and exilic transformations from afar, with the enriched perception warranted by Venice as a revisited literary and artistic topos.

In an interview with Solomon Volkov (1998: 198) Brodsky had indeed affirmed the importance of Venice as a place necessary for him to reconcile with life:

You know, a person views himself as a hero out of some novels or movie in which he is always in the frame. My crazy idea is that Venice should be in the background. If some idea of order exists, then Venice is the most natural, well thought of approximation of it.

More than a backdrop for the lyric-self transformation, Venice is then the necessary means to realize it, the last ground on which to make peace with Brodsky's own destiny – and a city which encompasses East and West.

Following this line, I think that Brodsky's recurrent visits to Venice can be read as failed attempts to return to his home city, where he left his little son

Andrei.<sup>29</sup> On this topic, I recall the poems “Odysseus to Telemachus” (1972) and “Ithaca” (1995), where the myth of the hero with his partings and returns is corroborated by Brodsky’s personal reference to the relationship with his son, forcedly broken by the exile.

I will now take into exam Brodsky’s last poem on Venice, “In front of Casa Marcello” (1995). The description of the author’s fading physical and creative energy, and his felt forthcoming end, can be contextualized in a wider cultural scene of similar ‘deaths in Venice,’ as represented in literature, cinema and drama. The hint to Mann’s *novella*, and its reference to the plague of Venice in 1629-31, is not casual, if we remember the Italian title of *Watermark*, “Fondamenta degli Incurabili,” the hospital for the plague victims.

The sunset, a metaphor for the ageing poet, is situated at the very beginning of the lyric:

The sun’s setting, and the corner bar bangs its shutters.  
Lampost flare up, as though an actress,  
paints her eyelid dark violet, looking both rum and scary.  
And the headache is parachuting squarely  
behind enemy wrinkles [...]  
The booming bells of the slant bell tower  
rooted in the ultramarine sky over  
this town are like fruits keen on falling rather  
than hitting the ground. If there is another  
life, someone picks them up there. Well, pretty  
soon we’ll find out (Brodsky 2000: 435-436).

The poem sounds as a dry, meditative soliloquy, in which the author reflects in his distinctive, ironic way, on the contraposed concepts of life and death; the paradox contained in human life is reinforced by the description Brodsky

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<sup>29</sup> From the relation with the young artist Marina Basmaniova, Brodsky had a son, who was born in Leningrad in 1967. Soon after, Brodsky and Basmaniova’s broke their relationship and Andrei was registered under Basmaniova’s surname, because Brodsky did not want that he suffered from political repercussions. The Soviet authorities prevented the boy to visit his father after the exile, and their meeting happened in New York only after the fall of Communism.

makes, with the matching images of a sunset and a bar that closes, and the reference to an actor's mask to suggest that a theatrical piece is soon to be performed, when finally the actor-speaker-poet gains the stage, in order to leave it soon, thus bidding his farewell.

The known fragility of its building foundations corroborates the impression of Venice as a great theatrical stage, where its facades can be compared to a masquerade. Life is here represented as a farcical representation, and faith can provide no solace, symbolised in the "bells of the slant bell tower [...] like fruits keen on falling," and the dubitative "If there is another life."

"In Front of Casa Marcello" is considered by the critics Brodsky's poetic testament since he prophetically foresees his coming end. As typical of him, he expresses it with two contraposed style registers: Venice becomes then the perfect epitome of the ambiguity of existence, expressed in the poem through the two contrasting, but complementary, images of life and death.

Brodsky died of a heart attack in New York on 28 January 1996, at the age of fifty-five. After a first entombment in New York, it was decided to bury him in Venice, as his wife Maria Sozzani wanted to. Brodsky's scholar and friend Lev Loseff thus recalls: "In the end, his friends in Europe managed to reach an agreement with the city of Venice. Brodsky would be buried in the old cemetery of San Michele" (2011: 265).

Indeed, Brodsky had expressed a wish to be buried in Venice, as the great Russian composer Stravinsky, in a humorous epistle he wrote to Andrei Sergeev in 1974,

Though the insensate body  
doesn't care where it decays,  
deprived of native clay  
it doesn't mind rotting  
in a silly Lombard valley.  
It's still the native continent,  
the native worms.

Stravinsky rests in peace in San Michele (Loseff 2011: 303).<sup>30</sup>

Venice allowed Brodsky to accept his exilic fate, representing the place where his creativity transformed and could express itself in a new way, also through the medium of English.

The discrediting process Brodsky underwent in the Soviet Union, and the subsequent exile in the United States, contributed to create the “biography of a myth,” as the poet Anna Akhmatova had foreseen to a young Brodsky, at the time of his trial in 1964. The burial in Venice further reinforces this myth, linking inseparably Brodsky and Venice, which becomes a new literary *topos*, also in the Russian creative mind, since with his last homage to Venice, Brodsky provoked a cultural response in his fellow citizens.

It is interesting to notice that Brodsky’s Venice has become a Russian tourist attraction: the places where he used to go have become sites of cultural pilgrimage, as well as his tomb in the Venetian cemetery on San Michele Island. As per a Romantic *cliché*, Venice, suspended between reality and imagination, acts as the perfect scenario for the poet’s withdrawal from the international scene.

I leave to Brodsky’s own words the conclusion of this chapter: his powerful and inventive prose once again offers new hints for reflection, and challenges what seems the foregone future of Venice.

The city of Venice, which he loved in a touching, unconditioned way, is the muse that inspired some of his most beautiful works, amongst which, beyond doubt, *Watermark* stands.

Let me reiterate: water equals time and provides beauty with its double. Part water, we serve beauty in the same fashion. By rubbing water, this city improves time's looks, beautifies the future. That's what the role of this city in the universe is (Brodsky 1992: 134).

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<sup>30</sup> The poem is reported in Loseff’s *Joseph Brodsky: A Literary Life*; it was originally published in A. Sergeev, *Omnibus*, Moscow 1997.

## 2.8. Conclusions

In this chapter, I have tried to outline the complex and enthralling relationship that bound one of the most prominent Russian poets to his acquired language. A fascination for English – and Anglophone literature – that has fostered a long evolutionary process, which made Brodsky become a translingual writer. In her remarkable analysis on translingualism, Julia Stakhnevich (2006: 11-12) supports a similar concept:

Authors who have learned their second language in adulthood and produce literary works in their adopted language, represent a small but significant group of language learners who have not only successfully crossed invisible sociolinguistic borders but have chosen their second language as a means of creative self-expression. [...] For these individuals, language learning is not about memorization or successful imitation. It is rather a complex evolutionary process that impacts their sense of self and their relationship with the world, or, in other words, their identities.

We have seen that, in Brodsky, the English language eventually reached the point of absorbing his Russian mother tongue, for the ultimate and most intimate author's expression: poetry. For this last, unforeseen development many have been the reasons, as I have tried to demonstrate. Undoubtedly linked to Brodsky's emigration to an Anglophone country, his choice for English further testifies his cultural crossing of borders, as well as the necessity to find a position in the new literary context, to be recognised as an expert language user in his adopted language. Natasha Rulyova (2003: 117), in her essay "Exile language and metamorphosis," asserts that,

[W]hile translating *himself* into a newly acquired language; the poet is being transformed by it at the same time. His self is being metamorphosed together with his texts being re-born in a different language, which leads to re-inventing his *self*.

It is a never-ending, "non-static, evolutionary, and multidimensional process that provides additional opportunities for creative self-expression"



(Stakhnevich 2006: 27), which undoubtedly enriches the author's personal and artistic experience. Through the self-chosen medium of English for his literary work, Brodsky shows his progressive transculturation: from Iosif, Russian poet in exile, into Joseph, the American and fully accomplished writer.

Furthermore, writing in English and Russian led Brodsky to realize that the process of writing shares common features in different languages which do not entirely depend on the linguistic structures. More, these two planes could link his two creative sides, the Eastern and the Western ones. On this, in his essay "In a Room and a Half" (1986: 478) Brodsky had written:

The reality I face bears no relation and no correspondence to the room and a half [...] As alternatives go, I can't think of anything more drastic than where I am at [...]. The only points in common are my own frame and a typewriter. Of a different make and with a different typeface.

While the environment around him often changed, Brodsky could find home in the act of writing, which created a 'protective limbo' in his nomadic existence, of which the English language was the spur. I will return on this point in Chapter Three.

Brodsky's work, the result of his life-long commitment to culture, draws on past and present Eastern and Western traditions, hence showing his profound knowledge and understanding of other cultures. Eva Hoffman affirms that,

[T]o have a deep experience of two cultures is to know that no culture is absolute - it is to discover that even the most interstitial and seemingly natural aspects of our identities and social reality are constructed rather than given and that they could be arranged, shaped, articulated in quite another way (1999: 51).

Going beyond nationalities and languages, Brodsky kept rationality of reasoning as an imperative for his writing.

In translingualism he found the necessary degree of detachment from both of his languages and cultures. Recognizing the relativity of linguistic choices, cultural

traditions and identities, Brodsky put rationality at the core of his creative sensitivity. As Brodsky explained in an interview with Volkov, "Essentially, what is important is not which language a person speaks but what he says" (157) (Stakhnevich 2006: 24-25).

Indeed, Brodsky's main commitment in life was literature and, on many occasions, he asserted its high value not only for individual formation, but also as a social tool to oppose any kind of totalitarianism. Therefore, his heartfelt appeal to present and future generations sounds as a powerful encouragement to avert the most dangerous disease to humans – the lack of freedom, in all its forms.

In a manner of speaking, we all work for a dictionary. Because literature *is* a dictionary, a compendium of meanings for this or that human lot, for this or that experience. It is a dictionary of the language in which life speaks to man. Its function is to save the next man, a new arrival, from falling into an old trap, or to help him realize, should he fall into that trap anyway, that he has been hit into a tautology. This way he will be less impressed – and, in a way, more free (Brodsky 1995: 108).

## CHAPTER THREE

### Crossing Languages and Defining Identities: The Palimpsestic World of Ágnes Lehóczky

#### 3.1. Introduction

Is it necessary not to be ‘myself’, still less to be ‘ourselves’.

The city gives one the feeling of being at home.

We must take the feeling of being at home into exile.

We must be rooted in the absence of a place (Weil 2002: 89).<sup>31</sup>

The above words by Simone Weil – a famous excerpt taken from her *Gravity and Grace* – can well synthesize Joseph Brodsky’s exile, who finds his first refuge, after the expulsion from the Soviet Union, in American cities, and his definite in one that epitomizes them all – New York. Nevertheless, Brodsky felt the need to return to Venice every year, to find the estrangement he sought for all his life, in a place that reminded him of his native St. Petersburg.

In a contemporary transposition, Weil’s words could equally match the circumstances of personal displacement and subsequent ‘re-placement’ in an English urban context which emerges from the verses of the young poet and essayist Ágnes Lehóczky, Hungarian by birth and English by adoption. Lehóczky, from whom comes a further, recent contribution to the theme of cultural nomadism in literature, has drawn my attention since she deals with the themes of displacement, language and identity that are the focus of my studies.

Lehóczky makes her poetic voice heard in two languages, Hungarian and English, and her work – not yet published in Italian<sup>32</sup> – is not easily localizable within the borders of a national literature, though it could be associated to the

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<sup>31</sup> First published in French in 1947, with the title *La pesanteur at la grâce*, then in English as *Gravity and Grace*. I referred to is the 2002 version, translated by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr.

<sup>32</sup> Lehóczky’s work has been translated into French by Jean Portante (born in Luxembourg from Italian parents, now living in Paris), who explores in his writings topics related to identity, memory and language.

literary movement of the ‘British Poetry Revival,’ the name given to a group of poets which emerged in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, and whose work continues even to the present day.

Regarding the ‘British Poetry Revival,’ Robert Sheppard (2005: 35) quotes Ken Edwards, who offers the vision he had on the movement in the Seventies:

... ‘the British Poetry Revival’: an exciting growth and flowering that encompasses an immense variety of forms and procedures and that has gone largely unheeded by the British literary establishment... and it may be that one day (probably when we are all long gone, or our work lapsed into repetition and genre...) some bright critic, as usual too late, will discover this to have been a kind of golden age.

The ‘British Poetry Revival’ has been inspired by modernist principles, as a reaction to a more conservative approach to poetry: indeed, it has been claimed to “usurp the central position in British poetry previously occupied by Dylan Thomas and, before that, W. H. Auden,” as John Wain (1957: 359) wrote. The demarcation line between ‘mainstream’ and ‘experimental’ poets has become less definite during the past twenty years, as Peter Barry (2000: 11) declares:

Until the late 1980s contemporary British poetry was usually mapped as a stark oppositional polarity, with a conservative (that is, anti-modernist) mainstream, which is implacably opposed to the excluded, embattled and experimental margins. But recent writers seem to agree that there has been a loosening up of this fundamental division.

To the group, belong poets as Gilbert Adair, Cris Cheek, Adrian Clarke, Clive Fencott, Peter Finch, Allen Fisher, Ulli Freer, Bill Griffiths, Tony Lopez, Frances Presley, Denise Riley, Elaine Randell, Gavin Selerie, Robert Sheppard, Iain Sinclair, Maggie O’Sullivan, and Lawrence Upton.<sup>33</sup>

As said, one salient characteristic of Lehoczky’s work is the difficulty in its categorization, although her narrative can be generally defined as ‘post-

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<sup>33</sup> See Robert Sheppard *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents, 1950-2000* (2005).

avanguardist,' a classification that she likes,<sup>34</sup> but which is put into question by the critic Peter Riley, as I will report. The poet and editor Zoë Skoulding (2013: 109) argues that “[W]ithin her adopted culture her work is more difficult to place, and her obsession with place and placing within the context of the city becomes a means of eliding straightforward national or aesthetic identifications.” A vocation to a ‘transnationality’ also acknowledgeable in Joseph Brodsky’s work.

Nevertheless, ‘framing’ a poet’s work is difficult and often meaningless – a conclusion drawn also by Samuel Rogers (2014: 325) in his recent work. He affirms that,

If British poetry in the twentieth century can be shown to be structured around conflicting notions of located identity, then clearly this suggests the possibility of future enquiry on these terms, not only into the plurality of British poetry, but also of British culture and selfhood. Perhaps most pressingly, my findings in this research indicate how, when one talks of there being multiple identities among British poets, this should not merely be a sense that the types of race, ethnicity, gender, class, or nationality represented by poets has expanded (which seemed to be the argument of the 1993 *New Poetry*, for instance – and of many anthologies since); rather, one might focus on the way in which different ways of identifying – different forms of written selfhood and, in particular, different models of located identity – are fundamentally embedded within poetic texts.

In Lehóczy’s work, connections can be found with the contemporary poet Geraldine Monks, concerning some topics related to the urban environment discovered through its historical layers, as underlined in Skoulding’s volume *Contemporary Women’s Poetry and Urban Space: Experimental Cities*.

In an interview, Lehóczy describes the intense relationship she enjoys with the city, a source of inspiration for much of her work:

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<sup>34</sup> I found further reference on Post-vanguard poetry in Peter Philpott’s article “The post avant-garde in shocking detail” (2010). He affirms: “The term post-avant is used by a number of poets and critics (mainly US-based) to label trends in (mainly US-based) contemporary poetry. Thus one can talk of post-avant poets, poetry and poetics. [...]. These poets don't form a movement, let alone a school, but something more like a set of tendencies.”

The city, for me, is the texture of a very deeply rooted and never erasable or forgettable canvas of patterns of memory and the architecture of identity, of the self. Who knows? The cities, any cities, especially, capitals, are potential homecomings, for people like me, even if for an hour, a day or two. The city, I guess is the reflection of my poetic “temperament,” psyche, disposition, a way of living (Fowler 2010).

For Brodsky, as we have seen, the personal and artistic change is epitomized in the city of Venice, while for Lehóczy the process of the continuous redrafting of her own identity is to be found in her travels between the two biographical *topoi* represented by Sheffield, her current residence, and Budapest, her home city.

Solitary travellers, the two authors seem to seek for anonymity in the city: a place from which to begin their literary and existential journeys towards a renewed subjectivity. Katharine Harrington (2013: 3) defines the nomadic writers’ life with these words:

In our globalizing era where uniformity is increasingly apparent, a nomadic existence may appear to be a way to escape the gaze and the surveillance of the other and achieve an individualism which is becoming more difficult to attain.

The choice to work beyond their national boundaries is the expression of the authors’ longing for an artistic freedom which probably could not have been achieved if they remained in their native countries.

Trying not to force any comparison, I can assert that, at any rate, Brodsky and Lehóczy share some biographical and artistic features: first, both authors come from Central-Eastern countries which, at the time of the Soviet Union, joined the Eastern bloc. Although belonging to different generations, they share some communist – and, for Lehóczy, post-communist – cultural grounds.

A further aspect they share is that Brodsky and Lehóczy’s native idioms belong to language-families other than English, which have left way to their bilingualism, adopting English in adult life. This was, for both, dictated by contingent circumstances – their move to an Anglophone country – although

the reasons underlying it have been essentially different: if Brodsky was forced to flee from a totalitarian regime, Lehoczky took advantage of the opportunity offered to many people of her generation to study and work abroad, in a Europe free from national barriers.<sup>35</sup>

Both authors started publishing poetry in their mother tongues and prose in English, with the peculiarity of English having become the privileged medium for their latest poetry writing. Yet, we can say that they possessed a prior knowledge of their chosen second language – a language they acquired in their native countries – which helped them in inventing a new life and a working career. This last circumstance strongly raises issues of belonging and identity, forcing them painfully, but almost inevitably, to surrender their mother tongue to their second language.

Ariel Dorfman, in his essay "The Wandering Bigamists of Language," contained in Isabelle de Courtivron's volume *Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity* (2003: 33), well describes this painful condition of bilingual, "[W]hat I finally arrived at was not the victory of one tongue over the other one but rather a cohabitation, my two languages reaching a truce in order to help the body they were lodged in to survive."

The same concept is recounted in the writing of Li Xuemei (2007: 271), who writes:

After long and disturbing periods of struggle in life, along with confusions about identities, bilingual writers, namely the souls in exile, are usually able to find a balanced self through writing and reflection. With the reconciliation of the two languages, they can expect fresh discoveries of the self.

Brodsky's physical absence from his mother country was in part compensated by his well-known, regular visits to Venice, while Lehoczky returns to Budapest several times a year. This allows us to define them as 'transnationals,' recalling what Natasha Garrett (2011: 18) – herself a 'transnational' – asserts,

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<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, as a biographical note, Lehoczky reports that her father's family suffered from prosecution from the Hungarian Communist regime and that her decision to move abroad has been dictated also by her desire to continue her studies far from any influence coming from the previous political regime.

“[I]t is important to emphasize the ‘regular and sustained’ cross national contact that differentiates transnationalism from other types of migration patterns.”

Therefore, with their lives spent in constant travelling, Brodsky and Lehóczy well represent the modern prototypes of the migrant, ‘transnational’ intellectuals, who always question themselves on identity and belonging, absorbing the culture of the countries they visit, keeping in the meanwhile a constant ‘detached’ view.

The famous assessments Brodsky made about language and exile – bearing in mind his adherence to Shklovsky’s principle of *ostranenie* (estrangement) – resound in Lehóczy’s statement on the nomad writer:

Being outside a language, being in the role of a linguistic ‘nomad’, however, allows you to distance yourself in this ‘approaching’. Being linguistically peripheral, standing in a liminal psycholinguistic place, on a threshold, frees and challenges you at the same time. As if you were somehow haunting another language, speaking through the voice of someone who is always already ‘not’, so to speak (Ryback 2013).

In Lehóczy’s words, the echo of the thought of one of her influential authors, Paul Celan (2005: 160) can be heard, who claims that “Art makes for distance from the I. Art required that we travel a certain space in a certain direction, on a certain road.”<sup>36</sup>

Both Lehóczy and Brodsky share an analogous attentiveness to language – language that according to Brodsky is the first source of inspiration for the poet. On her side, Lehóczy (Fowler 2010) asserts: “I think the poet does the work and language does the ‘freedom’ bit, so to say.” As Lehóczy explains, this belief is taken from the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who, in his volume *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971: 144), states the centrality of language and the importance for the poets to be guided by it in their writing process: “Man acts as though he were the shaper and the master of language, while in fact language remains the master of language.” He further affirms:

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<sup>36</sup> The text was originally presented in 1960 as a speech to the German Academy for Language and Poetry; this excerpt is taken from Paul Celan: Selections, edited by Pierre Joris, in 2005.



For, strictly, it is language that speaks. Man first speaks when, and only when, he responds to language by listening to its appeal. [...] But the responding in which man authentically listens to the appeal of language is that which speaks in the element of poetry. The more poetic a poet is – the freer (the more open and ready for the unforeseen) his saying – the greater the purity with which he submits what he says to an ever more painstaking listening, and the further what he says is from the mere propositional statement that is dealt with solely in regard to its correctness or incorrectness (Heidegger 1971: 214).

The influence of Heidegger's thought on Brodsky is known, and it has been studied, for instance, by David Rudrum in his volume *Literature as Philosophy: A Guide to Contemporary Debates*, which mainly takes into exam Brodsky's famous statements found in his English essays *Less than One* and *On Grief and Reason*. Rudrum (2006: 165) writes:

Such pronouncements by Brodsky as 'poetry, being the highest form of locution'; 'it's language that utilizes the human being not the other way around'; '[language] is... the voice of the inanimate matter, and... poetry ... its ripple effect' echo in impetus and content Heidegger's reflection on language and poetry.

The study so continues:

Thematically the following links can be established between Brodsky's and Heidegger's texts: the voice of inanimate matter registered by poetry in terms of a ripple effect (Brodsky) is analogous to the speaking of language qua gestation of things and its concomitant resounding in poetry (Heidegger); poetry as the highest form of locution (Brodsky) parallels poetry as the purely spoken (Heidegger); language utilization of the poet (Brodsky) echoes language need for humans (Heidegger) (Rudrum 2006: 165).

This helps to add a further ring to the chain which links our two authors.

Brodsky and Leńóczyk seem to share an analogous inspirational muse who encourages an extremely conceptual writing – sometimes even saturated of

cultural notions – that shows their deep knowledge of many historical and literary aspects of their host countries. Their works are woven with an intertextuality that makes their fabrics unique, perhaps the result of a certain Eastern aesthetics.

Furthermore, it can be asserted that it is their view from ‘outside’ that developed their fine ‘insight.’ At the same time, it must be acknowledged that this rich narrative results in a writing that calls for a constant attention from its reader, who is required to understand many passages in the poems only after having undertaken a personal research.

Brodsky’s poetry makes large use of enjambments: although he was faithful to traditional prosody, over the years his work becomes more experimental, marked by dry wit and ironic detachment, to express conceits often involved. His prose, as previously analysed, seems to become close to poetry, particularly in his last years. About Lehóczky, the choice of the prose poem is undisputed from the very beginning.

This simple research that aims at discovering affinities between the two authors can continue in parallel, by quoting Lehóczky’s words that express her apprehension for the lack of foreign literature publishing – a concern which nevertheless ends with a positive note:

Living in a country where only 1-5 % of published books is literature (not poetry, just literature) translated from different languages is sometimes disheartening. However, I think there is a growing need for other than “English” literature and the need for translations (and even within academia for the alternative translation theories) is increasing. I am hopeful (Fowler 2010).

An analysis also confirmed by Fiona Doloughan (2016: 4) in her recent study *English as a Literature in Translation*, who asserts that,

[L]iterature in English is increasingly being produced by bilingual and multilingual, rather than monolingual, writers. These consequences include issues of readership as well as authorship, insofar as it may be the case that

bilingual readers of say Spanish and English read bilingual texts differently to monolingual readers of those same texts.

What affirmed opens a discussion on the topic of the new directions taken by English literature today, but this is not the intent of this work.

What emerges from the concepts above highlighted is Lehoczky's worried attention to this cultural phenomenon, which reminds us also of Brodsky's warning about the scarce audience for poetry in the United States of the nineties. A concern that led to the formulation of his 'Immodest Proposal' project, presented in the previous chapter. The fear of the 'social' consequences of the lack of culture, in a country whose cultural interests have been replaced by long hours spent in front of the screen, urges for action, as Brodsky said, "[b]efore literacy is replaced with videocy" (Brodsky 1991: 32), where the neologism "videocy" brings to mind the term 'idiocy.'

Brodsky's appeal is in its turn close to what Lehoczky highlighted in the Hungarian poet Ágnes Nemes Nagy's (2011: 16) work, regarding the lack of vocabulary which could lead a person to a violent reaction for the inability to recognize and verbalize feelings:

Language and psyche objects "built into" tropes appear to function as incarnation of nameless contents of the self. It is an "epistemological campaign," Nemes Nagy writes, a campaign we must conduct "in the domain of our own unnamed emotions in order to enlarge our awareness."

This same topic is extensively discussed by Eva Hoffman in her memoir *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, in her case referred to the lack of mastery of her second language as a migrant individual. Hoffman's autobiography focuses on the difficulties involved in learning a new language during her adolescence, feeling an overcoming sense of social and cultural displacement that she tries to defeat in the new environment.

Linguistic dispossession is a sufficient motive for violence, for it is close to the dispossession of one's self. Blind rage, helpless rage is rage that has no

words - rage that overwhelms one with darkness. And if one is perpetually without words, if one exists in the entropy of inarticulateness, that condition itself is bound to be an enraging frustration (1991: 124).

Leaving aside these collateral, but nevertheless of utmost importance, 'social' effects, hinted at by our authors, I will focus now on the exclusive relationship Brodsky and Lehóczyky enjoyed with the English language, which appears as a longed for 'destination,' after the great commitment required to master it to the point of expressing the lyric-self. In it, the nomad writer finally – but maybe not definitely – seems to find his/her home.

Skoulding, in her seminal volume *Contemporary Women's Poetry and Urban Space: Experimental Cities*, published in 2013 – which has proven to be a major source in interpreting the first part of Lehóczyky's work – reiterates the notion of language as a 'capsule' (and we cannot but remember Brodsky's powerful image of the 'exile in a capsule'). Bringing the analysis further on, Skoulding (2013: 121) matches the notions of language with the urban context, which for Lehóczyky becomes familiar through her new language and thanks to her intense philological, cultural, and historical research.

For Lehóczyky, by contrast, language itself, the already defamiliarized second language of her poems, is the site of action and dwelling, a lived, multidimensional space. Rather than aiming to disorientate a routine and physically situated awareness of the city, her poems enact a process of siting, an orientation from a perspective that is already unsettled since it originates in another language and another city.

On the topic of displacement, Stroińska underlines the two antinomic attitudes towards exile, by stating that,

Many metaphors have been used to describe the experience of being displaced: some see exile as crossing over to a new territory, one which could be the Promised Land but which could also become an inferno, or at least limbo. Some see it as death, other as rebirth (2003: 98).

In my opinion, for Brodsky and Lehoczky their hybrid English becomes a sort of portable, temporary home: a protective limbo in which to find refuge in their not easy, nomadic life. By saying this, I am reminded of Guattari and Deleuze's (1986: 380) famous statement: "The life of the nomad is in the intermezzo."

And language in its poetic form perfectly offers the possibility to create this "third space," as the same Lehoczky (Fowler 2010) explains:

Places, in a sense, are "dwelling places" for memory in language and hence, as I have discovered, language has an amazing power, even if only in a momentary and ephemeral sense. It has the potential to link places of the mind and erect them as new ones, never existed ones, "locations" of a "third reality," nearly tangible, visible, and external in the texture of language. This also means that poetry has the power to "fill in" absences, lacks, hiatuses personal memory is not equipped to accomplish. I suggest language offers the promise of being able to erect a new world, a third world from a world that is lost and a world that is present, its paradox deriving from the inaccuracy of memory itself. In the realm of the poem this newly-created "psycho-geographic" reality is credible, convincing and believable; a "dreamscape" which allows the reader to have a sense of experience of "recognition" of it, as if one has already been "here" before, thus lending memory the promise of interpretability.

This third space is created through a new language and a new space and is cultivated by a strong dedication to the authors' linguistic enhancement.

This third space represented by prose-poetry in English is the subtle red thread that binds these two authors, which has led me to this new research, with the surprise of discovering, as the path unwounded, some more affinities in their works.

### **3.2. Ágnes Lehoczky's Short Biography**

Although some biographical aspects have already emerged in the previous sections, I present here a summarized biography, which will show the attainments Ágnes Lehoczky is gaining in the British literary environment.

Born in Budapest in 1976, Lehóczky completed her Master in English and Hungarian Literature at Pázmány Péter University of Hungary in Budapest in 2001. She then moved to the United Kingdom to attend a Master course in Creative Writing and Poetry at the University of East Anglia, where she later attained a PhD in Critical and Creative Writing. Lehóczky's PhD supervisors at the University of East Anglia have been the professors and poets Denise Riley and George Szirtes, together with Dr Jeremy Noel-Tod. Since September 2010, she has been teaching creative writing on the Master course at the University of Sheffield.

Her first two short poetry collections were written in Hungarian, *ikszedik stáció* (Station X, 2000), and *Medalion* (Medallion, 2002), and were published by the Hungarian Universitas, while her first collection in English was issued by Egg Box Publishing in 2008 and is entitled *Budapest to Babel*.

Moving between poetry writing, literary criticism and translation, Lehóczky contributed with her translations to the anthology *New Order Hungarian Poets of the Post 1989 Generation*, edited by the Hungarian poet George Szirtes, published by Arc in 2010. Her collection of essays on the poetry of Ágnes Nemes Nagy, *Poetry, the Geometry of Living Substance*, was printed in 2011 by Cambridge Scholars Publishing and launched by George Szirtes.

In 2010, Lehóczky wrote a libretto, commissioned by the Writers' Centre Norwich, which was performed by *The Voice Project at Norwich Cathedral* as part of Norfolk & Norwich Festival 2011. The poem "Prelude - On a Crowded Catacomb of a Ceiling," in it contained, opens Lehóczky's second collection in English, *Rememberer*.

*Rememberer* was sustained by the Arthur Welton Poetry Award and was published by Eggbox in 2011. In the same year, Lehóczky wrote a sequence of prose poems *Parasite of Town*, with a psycho-geographic vision of Sheffield, a project sponsored by the European Union for Citybooks Sheffield. The sequence appears also in the third collection, *Carillonneur*.

As part of Sheffield's Festival of the Mind, Lehóczky co-edited *The Sheffield Anthology: Poems from the City Imagined*, by Smith/Doorstop in

2012. Her third collection, *Carillonneur*, was published by Shearsman Books in 2014.

To keep a bond with her mother tongue, Lehóczky published in Budapest her last collection: *Palimpszeszt: New & Selected Poems in Hungarian*, in 2015.

*Poems from the Swimming Pool*, a chapbook with some of her early works about swimming pools, was published by Constitutional Information in 2015, while her pamphlet, *Pool Epitaphs and Other Love Letters*, was published by Boiler House Press in 2017. The new book *Swimming Pool* was released by Shearsman Books in November 2017.

The quality of Lehóczky's writing has been appreciated in many literary contexts, both in the United Kingdom and in Hungary. She received the Arthur Welton Poetry Award, the Daniil Pashkoff Prize in poetry in 2010, by International Writers, and the Jane Martin Prize for Poetry at Girton College, Cambridge, in 2011; in Budapest, she received the Bertha Bulcsu Award, in 2012.

Lehóczky represented Hungary at the international poetry festival, Poetry Parnassus, at the Southbank Centre in London in 2012 and her work is included in two important anthologies published by Bloodaxe Books, *The World Record: International Voices from Southbank Centre's Poetry Parnassus*, edited by Neil Astley and Anna Selby in 2012, and *Dear World & Everyone in It: New Poetry in the UK*, edited by Nathan Hamilton in 2013.

Lehóczky's work was analysed by the critic Zoë Skoulding in her volume *Contemporary Women's Poetry and Urban Spaces: Experimental Cities*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2013.

Lehóczky's active presence in the British cultural panorama is further testified by her being the poetry editor of the review *Route 57's* and one of Blackbox Manifold's contributing advisors; she runs and organises the Sheffield Poetry Series within the Centre of Poetry and Poetics with Professor Adam Piette, of Sheffield University.

My study has as its object to analyse Lehóczy's three collections in English, examined in their semantic and in their syntactic relationships, focusing the research on the central themes of identity, belonging and language.

### 3.3. Language and Displacement

Lehóczy affirms that her move to the United Kingdom to complete her academic studies – namely her PhD in Critical and Creative Writing – was the spur to compose her first collection in English, *Budapest to Babel*.<sup>37</sup>

Accepting the challenge of writing in her second language, the poet Lehóczy – herself a translator – decides not to pass through the translation process to express her lyric voice. In the interview given in 2010 to Samuel Fowler, Lehóczy further clarifies this point, introducing one of her recurring literary image, in this case applied to language: that of the palimpsest.

The image of the palimpsest – either real or metaphorical – persists in Lehóczy's works in many forms, for instance related to medieval parchments, or to the 'architectonic' structures made by separate multiple layers, which really or hypothetically lay under a surface. The palimpsest may as well act as a metaphor for the separate coexistence of her two languages, as explained in the following excerpt taken from her 2010 interview.

Living in England and in an English-speaking environment means right now writing comes in my second language. [...] However, I think it is also true that my writing (in English) is always and already bilingual in a sense. The two languages, like a palimpsest, are simultaneously present in the work in which language becomes (if it hadn't already been before) a linguistic hybrid, even if predominantly and seemingly deciphered as English. Caroline Bergvall talks about this concept a lot.<sup>38</sup> Also, interestingly, spending my summer in Hungary, I felt the sudden, almost aching desire to produce work in my mother tongue again.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> In the interview, Lehóczy explains: "I have had the chance to continue to develop my voice in English in the last four years since I have been studying for a PhD in Creative and Critical writing which partly means one is required to write a collection of poems. This has given me the chance and the time to develop the tone, cadence and voice of the so-called prose poems" (Fowler 2010).

<sup>38</sup> See the essay by Caroline Bergvall "Cats in the Throat: A Bilingual Bestiary."

<sup>39</sup> Lehóczy's last collection in Hungarian was published in 2015.



The themes that emerge from what above reported can offer space for debate about the influence of language on thought. This topic animated the discussion of psycholinguists over the last few decades, a debate which mainly focused around the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which I will briefly examine in the following pages, keeping in mind that what is of interest here is the acknowledgement of the emergence of the English language into the authors' creative world.

A corresponding experience of an inner conflict between the mother tongue and the second language, and the successive, decisive role played by the context in determining the language of expression, can be found in Eva Hoffman's writing. She tells of her memories of émigré from Poland to Canada who struggles between her two languages, as she explains in the following excerpt:

If I am indeed to write something entirely for myself, in what language do I write? Several times, I open the diary and close it again. I can't decide. Writing in Polish at this point would be a little like resorting to Latin or ancient Greek – an eccentric thing to do in a diary, in which you're supposed to set down your most immediate experiences and unpremeditated in the most unmediated language. Polish is becoming a dead language, the language of the untranslatable past. But writing for nobody's eyes in English? That's like doing a school exercise, or performing in front of yourself, a slightly perverse act of self-voyeurism. Because I have to choose something, I finally chose English. If I'm to write about the present, even if it's not the language of the self (Hoffman 1991: 121).

If for Brodsky the assimilation of English has gone so far as to become the main language for the lyric self-expression, for Leńóczy this process is still ongoing, and the answers will be revealed in her future works.

What emerges from the title of the first collection, *Budapest to Babel* – which sounds like the destination on a train ticket of one of her many journeys – is the initial vision Leńóczy has of her parting from her hometown towards a place linguistically unknown and chaotic, albeit prolific: Babel, to which the United Kingdom may be associated, due to its cultural and linguistic mix.

Babel, the metaphoric city where many languages are spoken, epitomizes the process of a constant erasing of languages, which, in an almost anarchic and never-ending process, produces new idioms. More than a point of arrival, Babel is the point of departure of Lehoczy's discourse on the foundations of language and its inexhaustible generative power.

Furthermore, Lehoczy's title evokes Derrida's *Des tours de Babel* (1985), which, in its turn, refers to Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator." While distancing himself from Benjamin's views on translation, Derrida believes in the plurality of meaning, which can be considered a sign of his disbelief in the existence of the 'pure language' as Benjamin intended. This is due to the idea that there is not a univocal meaning neither in the starting language; by writing and translating, therefore, we can never go back to reach a 'pure language,' since the translated text is a completely new text.<sup>40</sup>

As underlined in the recent studies of Pierre Joris and Jean Portante (2011), any language contains a multiplicity of languages which justifies in part its erasures in favour of the creation of new ones. In this regard, Skoulding quotes the neologism "*effaçonnement*" coined by the contemporary poet Jean Portante which includes the French words '*effacer*' ('erase') and '*façon*' ('manner'), to signify a language that, though erased, "breathes inside another" (Skoulding 2012: 112).

Between many languages, which is, then, 'the language'? This apparent 'Babelic' chaos is for Lehoczy nonetheless productive. In the long interview given in 2010 – which I have already referred to, and which, together with a second one given to Audrey Ryback in 2013, has proved essential to interpret many points of her work – Lehoczy explains her vision of the creative power of language, which literally 'builds' poetry, word by word and sentence by sentences, and, ultimately, sequences (of poems) after sequences:

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<sup>40</sup> Another difference between the points made by the two scholars is their approach to the relationship between the original and the translation. While for Benjamin the translated text provides the 'afterlife' of the original and assists the original text for its survival, for Derrida the idea of 'original' is quite different, since "no element of language, then, let alone an entire sentence or text, is even fully 'original.'"

I am not only taking the term in a deconstructive sense, therefore not only am I focusing on the “chaotic” aspect of language (that is, on its general notion of indecipherability, or on its constant deferral of meaning which results in a general concept of lack of understanding of either each other or the symbols of the outside world) but in a constructive sense too. That is, I attempt to understand this Babelic concept as the most fundamental “building” material with which the language of the poem is provided. I am taking the term in a linguistic sense (Fowler 2010).

Skoulding’s (2013: 115) analysis on this topic further confirms what above declared by Lehoczky:

[T]he English in which she writes is palimpsestic in obliterating her mother tongue, at least figuratively, and if only during the process of writing. The poems cannot step outside English in order to describe it, although they are marked by attempts to do so. It is an English that is, therefore, constantly producing the effects of ‘metalanguage’ described by Derrida<sup>41</sup>, and these are often fused with the ideas of city space, which frequently becomes a metaphor for language in her poems.

The hypostatic presence of Hungarian influences the content and the form of Lehoczky’s English texts, although it is difficult to distinguish where these inflections precisely are. I refer again to Skoulding (2013: 114-115), who confirms this difficulty in detecting the Hungarian influence in Lehoczky’s verses:

One of the intriguing aspect of Lehoczky’s work is that although an English-speaking reader might guess that the structure of the language is inflected in places by Hungarian, and that the erased language has left its traces on the English, without any knowledge of Hungarian the exact nature of these traces cannot be identified. Although there are specific references to some Hungarian words, these

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<sup>41</sup> A metalanguage is a systematized way of talking about concepts like meaning and grammar beyond the constraints of a traditional (first-order) language; in a metalanguage, symbols replace words and phrases. Insofar as a metalanguage is required for an explanation of first-order language, another may be required, so metalanguages may actually replace first-order languages.

hints at stronger underlying relationships than can easily be perceived. The poems suggest a language beyond English without moving outside it.

In the 2010 interview, which was given on the verge of her second publication in English, Lehóczy confirms this hidden presence of her mother tongue in her writings:

I am a continuation of the Hungarian tradition, yes, but in a peculiar way which is that I am incorporating my own literary tradition into a new language, into my second language. [...] And the very fact that I am not writing in my mother tongue is affecting my writing. In a paradoxical way again, since I often think, although I am writing in English, I am still writing in Hungarian in a way that I am, I must be, still “thinking” in certain cognitive/psychological/cultural/(non)linguistic patterns. I often think these original patterns of my mother tongue must be permeating into the patterns of my second language. This is why, I think, that my poetry is often said to “sound” strange and “different.”

This last assertion unavoidably brings me back to the critique levelled against Joseph Brodsky’s poetry in English.

What Lehóczy refers to in the interview implicitly calls into question the famous linguistic theory of relativity, also known as ‘Sapir-Whorf hypothesis’ or ‘Whorfianism.’ The theory draws from the thought of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Prussian philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt, who first affirmed that language is the expression of the spirit of a nation – all this leading later to the extremist ideology of ethnic nationalism.

The notion was later embraced and developed by the American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. They produced the results of their observations on how linguistic differences could have consequences on human cognition and behaviour. The theory followed in two versions: one ‘more deterministic,’ for which language and linguistic categories determine thought and cognitive categories, and one ‘less deterministic,’ which states that linguistic categories and language use only ‘influence’ thought and perception of the world.

The theory of linguistic determinism is now generally rejected in favour of a less determinative approach, which says that language at most could influence some area of cognition. As linguist Steven Pinker (2007) notes,<sup>42</sup>

The cognitive revolution in psychology, which made the study of pure thought possible [...] appeared to kill the [Sapir-Whorf hypothesis] in the 1990s... But recently it has been resurrected, and 'neo-Whorfianism' is now an active research topic in psycholinguistics.

I will limit the discussion – a debate inspired by Lehóczky’s discourse – to these simple remarks that certainly offer further fields of research on this topic, by asserting that if detecting the linguistic traces becomes difficult for a non-native Hungarian, acknowledging the cultural – as a certain ‘Central-European’ sensibility – and the stylistic ones is easier.

For Lehóczky, the Hungarian legacy is unquestionably embodied in the work of Ágnes Nemes Nagy, which has been the subject of her doctoral dissertation. Namely, Lehóczky has been inspired by Nemes Nagy’s book *Earth’s Souvenirs* (1986), and she expresses her admiration for the poet in these terms: “[S]he is particularly and personally significant. I do think she was ahead of her time, in terms of her (prose) poetry as well as her incredibly modern (nearly post-modern) ideas on poetics” (Fowler 2010).

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<sup>42</sup> On this topic, in *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window to Human Nature*, we read further: “Going beyond thought experiments, some of the most convincing research demonstrating some degree of linguistic determinism is being conducted under the direction of Stephen C. Levinson at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, The Netherlands. Levinson and his collaborators distinguish between languages that describe spatial relations in terms of the body (like English 'right/left', 'front/back') and those that orient to fixed points in the environment (like 'north/south/east/west' in some aboriginal Australian languages). In a language of the second type one would refer, for example, to 'your north shoulder' or 'the bottle at the west end of the table'; in narrating a past event, one would have to remember how the actions related to the compass points. Thus, in order to speak this type of language, you always have to know where you are with respect to the compass points, whether you are speaking or not. And Levinson's group have shown, in extensive cross-linguistic and cross-cultural studies, that this is, in fact, the case. Much more research needs to be done, but it is not likely that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis will be supported in the strong form quoted above. For one, language is only one factor that influences cognition and behaviour. For another, if the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis were really true, second language learning and translation would be far harder than they are. However, because language is so pervasive - and because we must always make cognitive decisions while speaking - weaker versions of the hypothesis will continue to attract scientific attention.”

Lehóczky's prosodic style has been affected by Nemes Nagy's: like her precursor, Lehóczky in fact believes that writing is 'a building process,' a notion borrowed from Heidegger's assessments, which I will briefly take into exam further in this paper.<sup>43</sup> Lehóczky declares:

Writing poetry, in my view, is a building process. As I have learnt from Ágnes Nemes Nagy, it is erecting, constructing the geometry, the architecture of "living substance." I think this means that since the texture, the semantic strata of the external world, the palimpsestic nature of meaning of what we see, are nearly inexhaustible, the language of the poem should or does replicate this complexity. This complex "geology" of the external are woven or "sculpted" by sentences, images, patterns, variations, repetitions of associations in the poem [...] (Fowler 2010).

Keeping in mind all the above, we observe that Lehóczky employs her sentences as 'building blocks,' to create a narrative in which the pace is given by the breath instead of the line: this is seen in particular in her first works, whose form is closer to poetry. Punctuation disappears to be virtually created by the pauses the reader needs to make in reading: as it is known, prose poems appear as prose, but reads as poetry.

Nikki Santilli (1997: 77) affirms that, "In Britain, despite an occasional hyphenated attempt to identify the 'so called prose-poem,' the genre is treated with an almost conspiratorial silence." This stated, in her analysis Santilli (1997: 82) highlights that the genre of the prose poem is particularly suitable to describe the urban environment:

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<sup>43</sup> In her essay on Nemes Nagy, *Poetry, the Geometry of the Living Substance*, Lehóczky (2011:30) writes about the "Heideggerian three-fold formula according to which poetry is building, and building is one's living in the world and 'poetry is what really lets us dwell, is a kind of building.' These objects become tropes coded with ontological energy in the poem which is built from the fabric of 'objectivised life, and thus the poem obtains a degree of worldliness. Nemes Nagy frequently mentions the phrase 'architectonic,' a term she borrows from Goethe; she depicts a structure, an architecture, a frame work, a building process that is a silent poetic device, a worldless device she feels so drawn to. It is the architecture of the living material, she claims, which should concentrate in the texture of the poem. [...] this architectonic frameworking is in my view an existential process, [...] is a Rilkean/Heideggerian 'building' resulting from intense phenomenological observation of the living substance."

The city provides an appropriate theme because it offers a semiotic landscape in which the prose poem can ponder its own place within the public literary domain. Accepting an urban scenario which comprises interior and exterior places allows the creation of a new area which supports prose inside the poetic arena. The binary system also creates a definition of the privileged text (the individual prose poem) against the surrounding space of its context (that which remains publicly accessible and exterior to it). In substituting itself for the absent work which comprises the sum of contexts, the prose poem claims metonymic association to it.

Relying on the post-modernist technique of the fragmented narrative, Lehóczy affirms that she has approached this style after realising that it creates a rhythm which is closer to how her mind “works in English.”

Although in the hybrid genre of prose poem the boundary between poetry and prose is indefinable, Lehóczy shows no hesitation in considering herself a poet: “I think my work is poetry, prose poetry, and I always considered myself a poet not a prose writer and when people define my poems as prose I get slightly bored” (Ryback 2013). This assumption had been previously confirmed in the 2010 interview to Samuel Fowler for the *3:AM Magazine*, in which she talked about the authors who have inspired her style: poets of different periods, between whom undoubtedly the French Situationists and the Hungarian poet Ágnes Nemes Nagy stand out, not forgetting nonetheless authors in prose.

In the following excerpt from that interview, Lehóczy explains this topic in detail:

*3:AM*: The history of the prose poem is certainly rich, do you feel a kinship with the way this poetic style has lent itself to certain kinds of poets – I’m thinking of the lineage of Baudelaire, Lautreamont, Ponge, Bobrowski, Michaux etc...?

L: Yes, all of these to an extent, or perhaps bits from each, since the arc stretching from the so called early Situationist Lautreamont to the more “mythical” Bobrowski is wide and spacious. Yet I must admit I predominantly come from and rely on a Hungarian literary tradition and my first influence was Ágnes Nemes Nagy’s late prose poetry. Later, consciously, I started to dig further in the field of prose-poetry, however, the field is vast and to be honest, although the kinship is

there, in many ways the prose style I have cultivated by now is the product of a much less self-conscious and rather arbitrary process/progress. Interestingly enough, though, Beckett's (and Borges') late prose texts had a crucial impact on my work, as well. I have come across a lot of old and new names in the last few years, again, such a mixture of prose and poetry, such as, among many others, Williams, Calvino, O'Hara, Sebald, Iain Sinclair, Bishop, W.S. Graham, Brian Catling, Denise Riley, Peter Gizzi, Cole Swensen, and again, the list is open and endless, a mixture of poetry (and not strictly prose-poetry) and prose, and I must add, bits of philosophy for my amateurish intellect. And then of course, there is the influence of my own contemporaries: the poets of my age who I am surrounded by or am associated within one way or another in Norwich and London. I'd read anything happily as long as it "moves" some parts of my psyche, self or just heart in me regardless of the genre.

In this interview, Lehóczy confirms that a great influence is exercised by her mentor, the poet and critic Denise Riley, who, regarding the relation between poetry and prose, writes: "Poetry in its composing is an inrush of other's voices, and in this respect, it is no more than a licensed intensification of the very same property in prose" (2000: 65-66).

As it has previously been examined in Chapter Two, an easy parallelism concerning this aspect can be made with the work of Joseph Brodsky, whose last prose, viz. *Watermark*, investigated in particular by Valentina Polukhina, has been ultimately compared to poetry.

The pieces in prose that Lehóczy writes are poems linked in sequences, where the narrative is free of a plot, but where an always-present intertextuality – between Lehóczy's own poems as well as between other sources – invites a conversational dialogue between two or more texts. Lehóczy seems to enjoy playing on this line, though this forced intertextuality, fragmentariness, and temporal distortion create a nonlinear narrative, which sometimes can destabilize the reader.

On the other hand, it must be remembered that fragmentation is a relevant feature of contemporary literature: various elements, concerning plot, characters, themes, imagery and factual indications are disjointed and dispersed



throughout the entire work, while the text is interspersed with lacunae and everyday language – all features present in Leńóczyky's work.

Being the prose poem a genre without frame, it becomes then necessary to insert it in a 'frame of sequences,' as Santilli (1997: 86) argues: "A principal consequence of the consideration of space in the development of an aesthetic for the prose poem is that the genre adheres to a visual arrangement which means that it can only be adequately examined as a collection."

The unbroken form of Leńóczyky's prose poems may at first call to mind the narrative mode of the stream of consciousness, where each word calls for the next one – in a domino effect – either by its meaning or phonetic sound. Leńóczyky declares, "I tend to believe in 'worn-out' ideas by which each word, despite being in one's control, opens to newer and newer semantic contents in the mind" (Fowler 2010). A comparable notion can be found in the work of Denise Riley (2000: 66) who writes that,

Words crowd in uninvited, regardless of sense, flocking not through the brain but through the year, like the Byzantine iconography of Christ's conception. This is well established. Jacobson writes mildly, 'paronomasia, a semantic confrontation of phonemically similar words introspective of any etymological connection, plays a considerable role in the life of language.

Leńóczyky's prose poems may also call into mind the form of the modernist interior monologue, in the lack of some or all punctuation and in some associative leaps in thought, which is characteristic of an intimistic narrative. But at a closer analysis, more than the expression of uncontrolled thoughts, the poems seem to be the result of a meticulous reasoning on philology, linguistics, history, geology, and so on and so forth. An example of this can be found in the poem "The Death of Metal Goliaths" in the collection *Carillonneur*:

The simultaneous subsurface and over current of meanings. The heart's concave and convex shapes. The quagmire of sayings. Excavate [...] The once so static surfaces imploding under your foot, peat, sphagnum moss, histosol, limestone,

black millstone grit, the springy soil, the lucky weather, blanket bog, the network of heather's thousand miniature roots (Lehóczy 2014: 58).

It is as if Lehóczy would locate her poetry in a world that is scientifically ordained, where material things retain a predominant place. This model is primarily taken from Nemes Nagy, as Lehóczy (2011: 7) writes:

Nevertheless, not only do objects supply an existential map, but they are more than what they are in the simple mere presence of their own being, purely because the objective world, which according to Nemes Nagy, is sufficient unto itself, may concentrate itself in them. This created animate world rooted in the poet's rigorous reading of the objective environment is, I find, "housed" in the use of trope in the form of "embodied abstractions."

Secondarily, this reminds of Heidegger, and reference to this aspect is found in the comment made by Alfred Hofstadter in the summarising introduction to Heidegger's (1971: xvii) volume *Poetry, Language, Thought*:

As over against the modern concept of the thing which sees it primarily in its relation to human understanding as an object of representation and in its relation to human will as matter or product of a process of production or self-imposition – a concept, then, not of the thing in its own thingness, but of the thing, that is, as gathering and staying a world of its own special way. Hence he [Heidegger, A/N] is able to use "thing" as a verb and, by this new coining and re-coining of the ancient world and its meaning, to think recallingly and responsively the being of the thing as man as authentically lived with things from the beginning. Call this primitivism, if you will; it can also be called a recalling to origins, a reversion to the primeval.

Talking about her poetry, Lehóczy highlights the fact that the suggestions in her poems are supported by rational, almost empirical reasonings.

I think one of the most fundamental elements of my poetry is the notion of "weaving" a seemingly endless string of associations which demands the reader

therefore to “unravel” this on-going sequence in the mind. However, on one hand, this chain of imagery, this string or sequence of associations, I believe, must be, to some extent, logical, recognisable, “heuristic” in a sense; therefore, you may say it is controlled, rabid, or better to say, consciously “architected,” so that the chain, or sequence itself actually can be disentangled, and simply, interpreted, and thus become “familiar” in one way or another. [W]ords are semantically semi-independent signs, they must be given a certain amount of freedom to flow in the direction they want to. Imagery, as the embodiment of one’s associations therefore, must be let free too (Fowler 2010).

What she calls ‘weaving’ is also the source of her poems, which are presented in sequences: the product of the same poetic inspiration, connected by logical speculations. It is indeed this rational aspect of Leńóczy’s versification that has made the critic Peter Riley (2014) put into question her postmodernism. He says:

At one point in the middle of *Carillonneur* I found myself asking, “Is this in fact postmodernism?” Am I, that is to say, at last face to face with what I always said doesn’t exist? It was the refusal of depth, of historical resonance or indeed anything whatsoever underlying the words, which prompted this question. I decided not to worry about it. But I don’t think it is postmodernism. The text relies too much, in its detail, on a realistic authenticity which, to my faulty understanding, postmodernists think they can dispense with by retreating into a literary echolalia.

At a first examination, the form of Leńóczy’s poems can further be connected to the dramatic monologue – which leads us to Robert Browning’s poetry – since the discourse constantly involves a third person, an unspecified ‘you,’ who takes form only through the words of the first-person narrator, but at a closer analysis, more than a dramatic monologue, the versification appears to be an intense soliloquy, which nevertheless requires the presence of an addressee. This indefinability of the second person pronoun may in fact call into question the same reader, although this ‘you’ could likely be interpreted as the expression of the lyric-self in a projection.

This understanding can be confirmed by a sequence of poems that appears in *Budapest to Babel* under the Hungarian name *Nárcisz*, ‘Narciso’ or ‘Narcisse’ in English, the Greek mythological character, who was in love with his own image reflected on the waters of a pool, and, unwilling to leave it, died of starvation. From this perspective, the Hungarian name strengthens this hypothesis of the identification of the ‘you’ with the poet’s new lyric self, which finds a new expression in English, involving in a dialogue with his ‘old’ self, and vice-versa.

In Hoffman’s (1991: 121) work, which I have referred to previously, we may find a related aspect of this ‘double self,’ ‘the Siamese’ you, as the consequence of an analogous process of self-transformation through the new language, and the necessity of addressing to it as a new ‘I-you.’

I learn English through writing, and, in turn, writing gives me a written self. Refracted through the double distance of English and writing, this self – my English self – becomes oddly objective; more than anything, it perceives. It exists more easily in the abstract sphere of thoughts and observations than in the world. For a while, this impersonal self, this cultural negative capability,<sup>44</sup> becomes the truest thing about me. When I write, I have a real existence that is proper to the activity of writing – an existence that takes place midway between me and the sphere of artifice, art, pure language. This language is beginning to invent another me. However, I discover something odd. It seems that when I write (or, for that matter, think) in English, I am unable to use the word “I”. I do not go as far as the schizophrenic “she” – but I am driven, as by a compulsion, to the double, the Siamese-twin “you.”

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<sup>44</sup> This definition refers to the poet John Keats, who drew it on Coleridge’s formulations. In the Oxford Reference we read: ‘Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason—.’ Keats regarded Shakespeare as the prime example of negative capability, attributing to him the ability to identify completely with his characters, and to write about them with empathy and understanding; he contrasts this with the partisan approach of Milton and the ‘Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime’ (Letter to Woodhouse, 27 Oct. 1818) of Wordsworth.

Asked about the identity of her poetic ‘you,’ Leńóczy states that it is not necessary to identify it in a real character, since it could likewise represent a multiplicity of them. She affirms:

I am often asked about who my pronouns (especially my “you-s”) refer to in my work. Some read a little too much into my “you-s” or “I-s” and therefore restrict themselves to wondering if there were a specific person I am writing to or about. Yet, I am taking the “you” and the “I” as well in this heteroglossic sense, in this whispering gallery-babelic sense, as hybrid utterance, where voices of the “I”, the “you,” the “we” are blended into a complex, palimpsestic strata of a polyphonic ‘I’, in which sense language becomes not “mine,” but the language(s)/words of others (Fowler 2010).

The critical analysis made by Skoulding (2013: 118) on this aspect further refers to Derrida’s metalanguage:

The use of the second person creates an individually situated perspective that nevertheless addresses itself, just as for Derrida the monolingual utterance addresses itself to another and bears the trace of that other otherness within itself.

Postmodernist literature, influenced also by the works of de Saussure, claims that language is semantically self-contained and self-referential: the meaning of a word is not a fixed entity, as an idea in the mind, but rather it is a sum of meanings opposed to the meanings of other words, in a never-ending referential process. Therefore, words are never fully ‘present’ to the speaker or hearer but are continually ‘deferred.’ All this leads to a discussion about the loss of the authorial expression, in its ‘old,’ univocal narrating voice, in favour of the impersonality demanded by the modernist and post-modernist practice. This subject has been touched by Peter Riley (2016) in this detailed analysis on Denise Riley’s writings, which in my opinion can prove equally helpful in interpreting some aspects of Leńóczy’s work.

Lyric is understood here as a problem, solved or unsolved, concerning the representation of the self, initially, I think, regarding the processing of the authorial voice in the demands of poetical structuring, the surrender of the author's full presence into the tension between the subjective and the impersonal, between what the author determines and what "arrives" out of the historical substance of poetry. Both of these can be seen as products of the lyric condition. The incorporation into the text of quotation or quasi-quotation (from poetry, popular song, prose or wherever) in the formation and confirmation of the poetical tenor also raises questions of the self's authority in the poem, be it a decision or a surrender, a purposeful and meaningful act to incorporate sense from elsewhere or whether it just happens with or without the author's necessarily noticing it.

The first-person's artistic expression is in fact a central theme for the English poet Denise Riley (2000: 57-58) who, in her volume *The World of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony*, makes a long digression about it – and we notice that she curiously connotes her lyric 'I' with the female gender:

The very grammar of the language of self-reference seems to demand, indeed to guarantee, an authenticity closely tied to originality. Yet simultaneously it cancels the possibility. Any *I* seems to speak for and from herself; her utterance comes from her own mouth in the first person pronoun which is hers, if only for just so long as she pronounces it. Yet as a human speaker, she knows that it's also everyone's, and that this grammatical offer of uniqueness is untrue, always snatched away. The *I* which speaks out from only one place is simultaneously everyone's everywhere; it's the linguistic marker of rarity but is always also aggressively democratic. To appropriate Hegel here: 'When I say *I*, I mean myself at this singular, quite determinate person. But when I say *I* I do not in fact express anything particular about myself. Anyone else is also *I*, and although in calling myself *I*, I certainly mean me, this single person. But when I say *I*, I do not express anything particular about myself. Anyone else is also *I* and although in calling myself *I*, I certainly mean me, this single person, what I say is still something completely universal'. My *I* never does exist, except (and critically) as a momentary spasmodic site of space-time individuation, and its mocking promise of linguistic originality must be, and always is, thwarted in order for language to exist in its proper communality.

Playing with the ambiguity of interpretation, Lehóczky (2008: 67) offers nonetheless her reader a further cue to identify this enigmatic ‘you’ – if this is the intent – in a poem that follows, contained in the cycle “Nárcisz’s writing tablets: “Just one tea? Not two tea? asked the / Dutchman at Schiphol. No, just one tea, not / two, and if I may pay by pounds, please?”

To comment further the content of excerpt above, I could say that in the conversation which takes place at Schiphol, the airport in Amsterdam, besides the uncertainty of the people convened in the scene – I left the original “tea” instead of “teas” – it is depicted the condition of the nomad poet/traveller in a globalized world: a Dutch setting, a Hungarian customer who asks to pay in English currency.

Lehóczky enjoys playing with this ‘you’ also thanks to the multiple opportunities offered her by the English grammar: ‘you’ can be a generic, an impersonal, and an indefinite pronoun, as opposed to its use as the second person pronoun. On the ‘I’ who becomes a ‘you’ Paul Celan (2005: 420) declares:

What is addressed takes shape only in the space of this conversation, gathers around the I addressing and naming it. But what’s addressed and is now become a Thou through naming, as it were, also brings along its otherness into this present.

This constant bounce between the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘you,’ like a restless camera moves the focus of the narration to offer multiple perspectives, from a very close to a most distant one – a literary technique which is devised to get the reader out of a predictable reading path.

A forerunner of this unknown observer, either in first or second person, may be found in Nemes Nagy's narrating voice, as examined by the same Lehóczky (2011: 6):

In its inexhaustibility, time plays an important role, where past, present and future are entangled, leaving these dialogic prose poems in perpetual process, a *mise en abyme*. From this perspective the world is seen from a peripheral angle, from the angle of the solitary and yet polyphonic voice of the non-knower, which observes

the world from the marginal perspective of what Blanchot calls a “distanced seeing.”

Maurice Blanchot (1982: 32), here directly called into question by Lehóczky, writes, in his *The Space of Literature (L'Espace Littéraire)*: “Seeing presupposes distance, decisiveness that separates, the power to stay out of contact and in contact avoid confusion. Seeing means that this separation has nevertheless become an encounter.” Drawing from Nemes Nagy – and implicitly from Blanchot – Lehóczky employs this ‘distant’ vision necessary to give voice to multiple lyric-selves, and the form of the prose poem appears to be the most consistent for this purpose, as she explains in the following passage:

This texture of heteroglossia, (many “languages,” many voices, the languages of others, etc) I think, is one of the chief characteristics of my poetry’s material; and for me, the frame of prose-poems provides a suitable and dynamic environment (Fowler 2010).

The notion of *heteroglossia* (in Greek *hetero* means ‘different’ and *glōssa* ‘language’), mentioned here by Lehóczky, translates the Russian term *разноречие* (*raznorechie*), coined by the Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin (1992: 279-280, 282, 292)<sup>45</sup> and it is used to describe the coexistence of linguistic varieties within a single language:<sup>46</sup>

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction. Forming itself in an atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation with any living dialogue. The orientation towards an answer is open, blatant and concrete. [...] Therefore his orientation toward the listener is an

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<sup>45</sup> Bakhtin illustrates this assessment in his essay “Слово в романе” (*Slovo v romane*), published in 1934, and later in in English as “Discourse in the Novel.”

<sup>46</sup> From “On Dialogism and Heteroglossia: the other(s)' word,” in Mikhail Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*.



orientation toward a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world the listener; it introduces totally new elements into his discourse; it is in this way, after all, that various different points of view, conceptual horizons, systems for providing expressive accents, various social "languages" come to interact with one another. [...] And finally, at any given moment, languages of various epochs and periods of socio-ideological life cohabit with one another... Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form... Therefore languages do not exclude each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways.

Bakhtin affirms that this heterogeneity could be seen in the different types of speech, all combined in a same piece of literature – i.e. in the voices of the main characters, of the narrators, and of the same author. He defines *heteroglossia* as "another's speech in another's language, the expression of the authorial intentions but in a refracted way."

In a situation of *heteroglossia*, the dominant perspective, or one's own perspective, is itself defamiliarized and made visible from the perspectives of the others. Then, we could say that *heteroglossia* breaks foregone conceptions of a univocal relationship to language, showing the gap between the words and their actual meanings. As previously mentioned, this idea has been developed by Derrida, and elaborated into his theory of deconstruction, which suggests the impossibility of a fixed interpretation of a text.

The last excerpt quoted from Bakhtin, which refers to the heterogeneity of any language due to its philological richness, seems to have been literally adopted by Leńóczy as her *modus operandi*, to become an 'ontological' key of interpretation for her writings.

Likewise linked to the notion of *heteroglossia*, is the notion of 'polyphony,' often employed by Leńóczy in her poems. The definition (derived from the Greek *polyphōnia*, 'variety of tones,' composed by *poly* 'many' and *phōnē* 'sound;' in Russian it is *полифония*) was coined by Bakhtin, borrowing from

music terminology, to describe a narrative which includes different points of view and many voices. For Bakhtin the primary example of polyphony was Fyodor Dostoyevsky's prose, in which the plot of the novel is developed by the differing views of the different characters.

Lehóczy shows a peculiar attitude for this model of polyphonic narrative, led through the creation of multiple lyric selves. Displaying a “genuinely unique and vivid arsenal of poetic pictures” (Fowler 2010), she constructs her poetry through sentences which are often short, full of sequences of nouns, frequently without conjunctions – so employing the ‘asyndeton construction’ – with few adjectives, and often without verbs. It all results in a ‘dense’ text, which reminds me of Brodsky’s epigrammatic style, full of inventive and provocative statements.

Indulging for a while on Brodsky and his work, it is known the almost obsessive attention he paid to the form of his poems – a crucial aspect according to modernist and post-modernist canons – commented in the following excerpt by Brodsky’s scholar Irena Grudzińska-Gross (2009: 225-226). She writes:

He had a holistic vision of a poem. He did not accept a division into form and content – they were always inseparably intertwined for him. His works were formally complicated, rhymed, rhythmical, full of enjambments, dense with meaning that was often provoked by the rhymes.

What mentioned above in my opinion can well apply to Lehóczy’s work, whose ‘dry’ narrative, rich in vocabulary and cultural allusions, requires from the reader a constant effort of attention, while the variety of specialized vocabulary shows a meticulous care for details. It goes without saying that, as for Brodsky, it all demonstrates Lehóczy’s full mastery of her second language.

In the section that follows, I will examine the central themes of displacement and the subsequent ‘re-settlement,’ as they emerge from Lehóczy’s first three collections of poetry.

### 3.4. Displacement/re-placement

The physical displacement that took place when Leńóczy left her native land to settle in the United Kingdom is initially depicted as problematic, as we read in the first sequence of her collection *Budapest to Babel* (Leńóczy 2008: 1), “poem 1:” “[I] chose the wrong country you say [...]” And further, in “babel 1” (Leńóczy 2008: 7): “this supper’s geography is malformed now look what you sprinkled on the top avalanches to the bottom icebergs fissured they say our foundation breaks down to its ingredients when a plate ruptures.”

It is a non-adaptation to the environment that reaches even the depths of the Earth. This feeling of physical estrangement lessens in part in the successive poem “The Shouting Girl,”

This may be, you wonder, this may be the place for  
you at last. This island is your final chance to encompass  
or your dislodged failures, core disorientations. This,  
as it seems, is another cape of the mainland, another  
odd dream, overlapping the one drawn on maps (Leńóczy 2008: 73).

From the very beginning, we can assert that the poems contained in this collection show the antinomic sensations of accommodation and disorientation, symbolized by the overlapping of English and Hungarian landscapes.

Returning to the poem we were previously examining, “babel 1,” we notice how the addressing to the land-based movements of the Earth moves the perspective from a domestic interior to the greatest natural phenomena, which seem to dwarf human beings and their small matters. This fast transition from the ‘highest systems’ to ‘humble’ aspects of everyday life shows the contrasts of life and it is typical of Leńóczy style. The distancing from everyday life to reach a higher vision can be traced back to Shklovsky’s principle of *ostranenie*, so dear also to Brodsky.

With respect to this, Leńóczy affirms that she was further influenced by Derrida’s thought, and even more directly by the notions expressed by the

Situationist Movement. But let us proceed with order. Shklovsky<sup>47</sup> declares that,

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged (1965: 16). [...] In studying poetic speech in its phonetic and lexical structure as well as in its characteristic distribution of words and in the characteristic thought structures compounded from the words, we find everywhere the artistic trademark – that is, we find material obviously created to remove the automatism of perception; the author's purpose is to create the vision which results from that deautomatized perception. A work is created "artistically" so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception. [...] This technique is meant to be especially useful in distinguishing poetry from prose, for, as Aristotle said, "poetic language must appear strange and wonderful" (1965: 19).

Thus, defamiliarization serves to force individuals to recognize another language, that of art. Defamiliarization is also obtained through the inclusion of foreign vocabulary within the text. Shklovsky's defamiliarization can be compared to Jacques Derrida's notion of *différance*.<sup>48</sup>

In his theory of deconstruction, Derrida uses the term "difference," which cannot be explained by the "metaphysics of presence," to describe the origin of presence and absence. *Différance* is a term indefinable: in French, the verb 'deferrer' means both 'to defer' and 'to differ.' Thus, difference may refer not only to the state or quality of being deferred, but to the state or quality of being different. *Différance* may be the condition for what is deferred, and for what is different.

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<sup>47</sup> The essay was originally published in Russian in 1917. The version I quote here is taken from the 1965 edition of Shklovsky's four essays, *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, translated by Lee Lemon and Marion Reis.

<sup>48</sup> Derrida explains that difference is the condition for the opposition of presence and absence. Difference is also the "hinge" between speech and writing, and between inner meaning and outer representation. As soon as there is meaning, there is difference.

Lehóczy agrees with this approach of presenting objects and situations as unfamiliar to her, and she effectively conveys in her readers this sensation of alienation. In this, she complies with the dictates of the French Situationist movement, the “Situationist International” (*Internationale Situationniste*), whose manifesto “Report on the Construction of Situations,” dated 1957, defined the construction of situations as “the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality.” This Avant-guard movement, made of intellectuals and artists influenced by Dada, Surrealism and Lettrism, was born in Paris in 1957 and continued till 1972. Guy Debord emerged as its most important theorist figure.

But let us return to the textual analysis of Lehóczy’s works, not before having indulged to capture some biographical cues among her verses. We can assume that Lehóczy’s choice to remain in the United Kingdom was not premediated, and the first effect of this was a brusque uprooting from her mother tongue:

England has made me swap from one language to another in terms of writing. This is a drastic leap for a poet, I think, or at least sounds drastic. Then of course one’s cultural environment has got an immense influence on one’s writing (Ryback 2013).

This last assumption brings us back to Brodsky’s assessment about language and confirms also for Lehóczy the importance played by the context in determining the idiom of expression.

To manifest the feeling of estrangement, Lehóczy employs in her poetry different devices. Primarily, the estrangement is obtained through the typographical arrangement of her poems, whose texts are organized on the page according to a careful design, disguised by the author to reinforce the content conveyed. They may vary, for example, from a justified text to a centred one, which may take the shape of an hourglass.

Secondly, disorientation is communicated using free punctuation, in the wake of modernist and post-modernist versification. In some poems, in fact, punctuation lacks completely – capital letters are missing, for instance, even for

the first personal pronoun – while in others the syntax follows more conventional patterns. Page after page, this unpredictability dazes the unaccustomed reader, who waits for some sort of ‘normalisation,’ which seems to come, in a more definite form, only with the third collection *Carillonneur*. As Skoulding (2013: 110) points out:

[R]eading is slowed and broken [...] consists of an absorption in textures of language that make it difficult to stand back and comprehend the whole. The effect of a whole page of unbroken text is to create a sense of lostness. [...] As the text cannot be easily scanned before reading, the kind of reading demanded is like the pedestrian movement of Michel de Certeau’s blind walker in the city: one must follow the line without being able to see where it is going.

This last assumption leads us to the theme of psychogeography, an approach Lehóczy takes to ‘physically’ explore the environment, while searching ‘theoretically’ the boundaries between language and physical experience. Given all these circumstances, the first cycle, the “babel cycle,” opens the collection *Budapest to Babel*.

The equilibrium between two languages is a challenging goal for a bilingual writer, and in *Budapest to Babel* Lehóczy (2008: 9) effectively expresses the tension in these terms: “[O]n an infinite ridge we walk; and it is easier to balance / on a highway to and fro suspended in the air than on / invisible tightropes drawn between tongues.”

Speaking in the new language seems to be only a confused stammering, like “the frail wooden vessel once let go against the gust / verbalised over and over, stupefied utterance / in vortex, meaning chafed, paddles drowned” (Lehóczy 2008: 9). The cadenced rhythm created by disjointed strings of phrases seems perfectly to mirror the fragmentation of life. The excerpts that follow bear related impressions: “babel 4” (Lehóczy 2008: 10), starts without any capital letter, and reads as follows:

this moment of waking  
far-off consonants

out swooned dreams  
to find fitting vowels  
with language it is hard enough  
[...] and landladies' language drowns  
the carpet that saturates  
I dry up with a vowel

In “babel 5” (Lehóczy 2008: 12) this concept is reiterated: “[T]his cargo of geography in socks and shoes would prolong the enigma of the incident raising inarticulate questions.” We read in these verses about the difficulty in finding words, in naming things, and expressing emotions, which becomes almost aphasia in the new language.<sup>49</sup>

Stroińska examines this condition, relating it to the speaker's level of education: her assumption reflects in fact what demonstrated by linguistic research, as I report briefly in note 49 here below.

There are various levels of language loss, from the inability to communicate at all to the inability to communicate at the same level of sophistication in the same language. Only few immigrants ever feel that they have reached the same proficiency in the new language as they had in their native tongue. Sometimes a high level of education seems to make assimilation more difficult or even prevent exile, as the gap between one's self projection in the two languages seems impossible to bridge (Stroińska and Cecchetto 2003: 100).

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<sup>49</sup> Willing to pursue a little further this fascinating analysis on ‘bilingual aphasia,’ in *Bilinguality and Bilingualism* by Hamers and Blanc (2000: 140), we read: “Aphasia is a language disorder, associated in most cases with a localised lesion in the left hemisphere (when associated with the right hemisphere it is referred to as crossed aphasia). Symptoms are numerous and vary according to the type of aphasia; for example, an aphasic may be capable of reading a word but incapable of identifying its referent. [...] By differential aphasia or selective impairment/recovery is understood the fact that both languages are not affected in the same way in a polyglot aphasic and/or that recovery does not follow the same pattern. Bilingual aphasia is a specific form of aphasia which affects one or more languages of a bilingual (or multilingual) individual. The main factors influencing the outcomes of bilingual aphasia are the number of languages spoken and the order in which they are learned—both influenced by the pattern of daily use and expertise in each language before the onset of aphasia. The type and severity of the aphasia, as well as the patient's levels of education and literacy also influence the functional outcomes of bilingual aphasia.”

In this difficult condition “to find fitting vowels” in the new language, made of “far off-consonants,” in a “landladies’ language that drowns,” again, one of Lehoczky’s peculiarities can be observed: the co-occurrence in the same poem of terms belonging to different linguistic registers, exemplified here by the substantives “socks and shoes” of common use, and verbs like “saturates” and “prolong,” which belong to a higher register – a juxtaposition characteristic of modernist and postmodernist literature.

Lehoczky (2008: 27) further reflects about the grammatical forms of English, a language which initially seems inexplicable to her.

Notice that the being verb isn’t is a tease, a conundrum in English and simply does not make sense? In the other tongue we have two separate words – *van, nincs* – two unattached bodies while ... [...] No, certainly isn’t isn’t a word.

Lehoczky’s poetry, profound but at the same time rich in pragmatism, reflects the variety of verbal communication and is characterized by a heterogeneity which surprises the reader – a further expedient to hold the attention. This trait, unavoidably, calls to my mind Joseph Brodsky’s powerful and inventive rhetorical style.

To continue the analysis of the poems, with a focus on the topics of displacement and language, we read of the new language which almost crumbles and falls onto the ground of a domestic interior, while we are introduced to the biblical name of Balal (which literally means ‘to mix,’ ‘to confuse’) that appears in all the poems of the following sequence. In “babel 5” Lehoczky (2008: 11) writes:

[B]alal drifted into meditation about the bamboozling phenomenon of unrolled material spraying sand out like lost syllables or like magma hardly audible sprinkling on the palms and the veins engraved in the palms [...] balal pulled the socks back on with the million crumbs like rambunctious morphemes in the warm vacuum of the mouth while picking out bits of heather from the fissures of the sole shaking sand dunes out of socks until the last gram the last iota retired in a crack of the timber floorboards.



The abundance of alliterations (“socks,” “shoes,” “soles shaking sand dunes of socks”) and the repetition of chunks of phrases (“the last gram the last iota”) gives rhythm of the versification, while the harsh sounds (“crumbs like rambunctious morphemes” and “crack of the timber floorboards”) reinforce the distress depicted in the situation. Lastly, the use of parataxis conveys in the reader a sensation of expectation of a climactic turning point that – we will discover at the end of the poem – never occurs.

In the following lines, the impossibility of using proper names makes the lyric-self even resort to drawing hieroglyphs to represent a plant, whose name in English seems to be unknown:

“Babel 6”: we don’t know the name of the plant  
we want to know the name of the plant  
[I] would dip my finger into  
to draw my hieroglyphs on your forehead  
but there is no credit in the phonemes that pour of my mouth  
[o]k I find diphthongs embarrassing to say the way you do [...]  
but look at these unusually shaped fruits I dare you to eat them  
roll them in your sinuses and spit the pips drawing accents  
on a vowel bearing *öszibarack* [peach, A/N] or *málna* [raspberry, A/N]; say it  
little by little (Lehóczky 2008: 13).

This situation, initially depicted as the incapacity of finding the name of the plant, calls to my mind Braidotti’s writing:

The complex muscular and mental apparati that join forces in the production of language combine in the polyglot to produce strange sounds, phonetic connections, vocal combinations, and rhythmical junctions. A sort of polymorphous perversity accompanies a polyglot’s capacity to slip in between the languages, stealing acoustic traces here, diphthong sounds there, in a constant and childlike game of persiflage. The shifts are untranslatable, but not less telling. The best gift to give anyone, but especially a polyglot, is a new word, a word s/he does not know yet (1994: 13).

The image of “spitting the pips drawing accents” brings us to Gayatri Spivak’s statement on bilingual writers, quoted by Skoulding (2013: 112) “One must clear one’s throat [...] clear a space, step away, spit out the mother tongue” yet here the presence of the mother tongue is firmly ensured by Hungarian. Skoulding (2013: 117) affirms that “the use of Hungarian words within the English text brings materiality into the poem, intensifying the effect of what Derrida names the ‘mirage’ of metalanguage.” This topic is also addressed by Lehóczky in the 2013 interview:

I think each poet’s approach to language is and must be unique, whether they are monolingual or multi-lingual. According to Derrida, we don’t own language at all, we don’t own our mother tongue, a kind of statement which I experience on a daily basis myself (Ryback 2013).

Words in Hungarian demarcate the poet’s origins, but also represent the certainties of the past, and accompany stealthily the versification, to come in rescue when the new language is inadequate – i.e. supplying the name of the fruits.

In “babel 13,” English is still insufficient: “that translucent green / beetle in the white bath / does not make sense / not in this language” (Lehóczky 2008: 20). The native language seems therefore to offer stronger foundations, epitomised by the family roots on which to ground:

[W]e should feel lucky she says that we had parents like her as our words are strongly built towers and we mean what we say and I notice the stutters too [...] ... and I watch the oxidised station go by slowly dozing to the sound of the fine talk in the cradle of soft sentenced... through the window I spot two storks over the lake, two forgotten orthographic signs I could no longer read written in the reeds wing open... (Lehóczky 2008: 23-24)

The context is described with sweet sounds and soft, nostalgic tones which remind me of a nursery rhyme: “by slowly dozing to the sound of the fine talk in the cradle of soft sentenced.” The lyrical representation of the storks whose

shapes stand in the horizon and seem to create graphic signs, in an alphabet that the poet no longer knows, is extremely suggestive, and hints at migration with the image of the migratory birds.

The notion of an alphabet that has become ‘undecipherable’ reappears further on, in “babel 8,” with the almost ‘exotic’ returning image of the hieroglyphs, which the reader is left alone to interpret.

[M]ystic messages beginning with the primal sound they say decoded by the wind with faded colours drifted into the shades of summer hieroglyphs painted on the homespun fabric over the oval pond an elliptical vowel fluidity uttered [...] on an unknown alphabet [...] taking a breath long awaited seeking the blue sky camouflaged as a square shaped dry blank page (Lehóczky 2008: 15).

The referential connections of the hieroglyphs are likely to be found in a long sequence of poems by Nemes Nagy concerning the Egyptian god-king Akhenaton: “with whom the poet had developed a kind of empathetic fascination, though in many ways he serves as cover for other material, such as memories of the shortlived 1956 revolution against the Stalinist regime” (Szirtes 2004).

The Hungarian language again is associated with a motherly figure, and in this transposition, the mother tongue is indeed not able to express itself anymore, as in “babel 12 mother monologue:”

you suppose you have got nothing to say  
dazed with numb pupils into the raucous  
screen and I wonder what happened  
to your sentences the ones you would have  
silently syllable-d... the ones you were ready to  
let go unborn yet curled up in the dried out  
abyss of your mouth shrivelled rudiments  
aborted self-definitions oh mother...  
you say *nothing* shaking your beautiful head  
[...] while I search on for your mislaid words  
[...] and spot them among metallic shavings

un-welded utterances of waste... muted...  
under turning lathes he left behind to  
oxidize (Lehóczy 2008: 19).

Lehóczy describes the painful void of her mother tongue with these words: “[O]n odd days the “absence” of my own mother tongue can hit me really badly” (Fowler 2010).

But then, in the awareness of the difficulty of speaking in a new language, there is the further realization that neither our native tongue belongs completely to us, as Lehóczy declares: “[I] remember the book that warned me long ago that we do not own our mother tongue” (2008: 22). Lehóczy is here referring to Derrida’s writings on metalanguage.” And, in line with this, Lehóczy writes of “Things that are unnameable in any language, like train smell” (2008: 22).

In her poems, Lehóczy seems to show the tension to go beyond the limits of language, an effort increased by the tenacious presence of her second language. This condition of ‘double bilingualism’ – the chosen Hungarian presence in her English writing, and Hungarian as the language in which she continues to write (albeit at a slower pace) – has become connatural to her, and even sought for, as a sort of ambition for a multifaceted literary expression.

Skoulding’s assessment about the physical and metaphysical space occupied by language in Lehóczy’s poetry calls into question the theme of psychogeography, which will be the object of discussion in the next section.

And so often in these poems, language itself becomes an explicit focus as its ‘barriers’ and limitations are tested. Language is sited in social spaces but it also becomes a site that is itself contested, caught between two different tongues and their complex relationships with physical experience (Skoulding 2013: 114)

### **3.5. Psychogeography**

The sequence of poems that follows introduces one of Lehóczy’s main *foci*, strictly connected to the theme of language, i.e. the exploration of new sites through what could be defined a ‘psychogeographical approach.’ Again, the theoretical support is offered by the Situationist movement, briefly examined

in Chapter One. Let us go again through it. The term “psycho geography” was first recognized by Guy Debord in 1955, who wrote:

The word psychogeography, suggested by an illiterate Kabyle as a general term for the phenomena a few of us were investigating around the summer of 1953, is not too inappropriate. It does not contradict the materialist perspective of the conditioning of life and thought by objective nature. Geography, for example, deals with the determinant action of general natural forces, such as soil composition or climatic conditions, on the economic structures of a society, and thus on the corresponding conception that such a society can have of the world. Psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals. The charmingly vague adjective psychogeographical can be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery (2006: 8).<sup>50</sup>

In addition to the Situationists, Lehóczy takes inspiration from Martin Heidegger. Let us examine now briefly this point.

“Any inhabited place is formed also by its language:” this assumption is drawn from Heidegger, and is expressed in his *Poetry, Language, Thought*, whose conceptions inspired Lehóczy in her process of discovering new places through language. In fact, Lehóczy (Fowler 2010) explicitly claims that, “Writing in a new language is very much like discovering a new city.” And in her poetry, she seems to present both her achievements in a parallel path, as underlined by Skoulding (2013: 109), who even goes further, in asserting that the urban space offers the ideal ground for this realisation:

The built space of almost any city is a palimpsest in terms of temporal layers of architecture, as one period of architectural construction gives ways to another. Given that cities are increasingly defined by mobile populations, their inhabitants may often live within a palimpsestic relations between one language and another.

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<sup>50</sup> Guy Debord, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography.” *Les Lèvres Nues*, 6 (1955), translated by Ken Knabb in *Situationist International Anthology* (2006).

In Lehóczy's poems, places are more identifiable than people, in a strive for depersonalisation which may refer to the postmodern *diktat* of the abandonment of the lyrical self.

Peter Riley (2016) on this point writes: "One of the orthodoxies floating round academic and journalistic criticism of poetry now is that this thing "lyric" is some terrible throw-back which carries outmoded cultural and even political attitudes with it, in the form of a morally reprehensible self-centering with bad public implications." The hiding of the lyric self is admitted by the same Denise Riley, who writes: "But in the case of poetry, it's often seemed a relief not to possess that old desideratum, 'a voice', and not to resemble oneself. In Foucault's incantation: 'I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same'" (2000: 62).

The accent on places refers to the principles enunciated by the Situationists: Benjamin and de Certeau. Of these latter, de Certeau has undoubtedly exerted great influence on Lehóczy's work. In his almost 'utopian' essay – which became one of the key texts in the study of everyday life – *L'invention du quotidien. Vol. 1, Arts de faire'* (1980), here quoted in its English translation by Steven Rendal, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), de Certeau formulates the theory of everyday life, which is distinguished from other practices of daily existence because it is repetitive and unconscious. De Certeau tries to outline the ways individuals involuntarily 'navigate' everything, from city streets to literary texts.

In one famous chapter of the essay, Chapter VII, "Walking in the City," de Certeau presents the theory of an ideal city, as opposed to the conventional theories of the urban planners. He believes that the correct point of view must depart from a vision below, and thus imagines the city seen by the walker, in open contrast with the perspective that one can have from a tall skyscraper, i.e. the World Trade Center in Manhattan, New York – the location from where he starts his discussion – offers a view from above that, according to him, is the

only one usually considered in urban planning. In this excerpt, de Certeau (1984: 93-94) discusses all these concepts:

Perspective vision and prospective vision constitute the twofold projection of an opaque past and an uncertain future on to a surface that can be dealt with. They inaugurate (in the sixteenth century?) the transformation of the urban *fact* into the *concept* of a city. Long before the concept itself gives rise to a particular figure of history, it assumes that this fact can be dealt with as a unity determined by an urbanistic *ratio*. Linking the city to the concept never makes them identical, but it plays on their progressive symbiosis: to plan a city is both to *think the very plurality* of the real and to make that way of thinking the plural *effective*; it is to know how to articulate it and be able to do it.

Therefore, the walkers can detect minor aspects of the environment: they call into question the apparent order given by architects, wandering like in a displaced existence, or in a dream – to take one analogy made by de Certeau.

As he emphasizes, walking around the city turns out to have its own logic, or – as he defines it – its own ‘rhetoric.’ The ‘rhetoric of walking’ is then compared to the walking of passers-by, in their turns (*tours*) and detours that can be further compared to ‘turns of phrase’ or ‘stylistic figures.’ This literary act of ‘turning’ phrases finds an equivalent in the ‘art’ of composing a path (*tourner en parcours*); as for language, this art implies and combines styles and uses.

In this, we cannot but notice some salient features of Lehoczky’s work, as far as content and form are concerned. The direct approach of man to urban space is realised through the act of walking, carefully avoiding any transport means. De Certeau (1984: 93) writes:

The ordinary practitioners of the city live “down below,” below the threshold at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, *Wandersmänners*, whose bodies follow the thick and thins of an urban “text” they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other’s arms. The paths that corresponds in this intertwining,

unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility. It is as though the practices organising a bustling city were characterised by their blindness. The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alteration of spaces: in relation to representation, it remains daily and indefinitely other. Escaping the imaginary totalization produced by the eye, the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible.

De Certeau introduces his idea of the “every day,” the practice of routine actions, which he re-evaluates as they delineate themselves “against the visible.” A crucial notion is found in the lines that follow: “space is a practiced place,” defined and modified by human presence.

Merleau-Ponty<sup>51</sup> distinguished a “geometrical space” (“a homogeneous and isotropic spatiality,” analogous to our “place”) from another “spatiality” which he called an “anthropological space.” This distinction depended on a distinct problematic, which sought to distinguish from “geometrical” univocity the experience of an “outside” given in the form of space, and for which “space is existential” and “existence is spatial.” This experience is a relation to the world; in dreams and in perceptions, and because it probably precedes their differentiation, it expresses “the same essential structure of our being as being situated in relationship to a milieu” – being situated by a desire, indissociable from a “direction of existence” and implanted in the space of a landscape. From this point of view “there are as many spaces as there are distinct spatial experiences.” The perspective is determined by a “phenomenology” of existing in the world. In short, *space is a practiced place*. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e. a place constituted by a system of signs (De Certeau 1984: 117-118).

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<sup>51</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976. 324-344.



Keeping in mind all this, we get involved in the adventurous chase set by Lehóczy through the city meanderings and its outskirts, described in poems that seem to follow de Certeau's teachings to the letter, where "space is a practiced place."

In the urban environment, mostly desolated and void of human presence, Lehóczy indulges in describing locations in a 'technical' way, often drawing from specialized vocabularies – i.e. of geology, architecture, physics, etc. – as if this 'scientific' support could offer more credibility to her writing, a sort of ground for stability.

Natural landscapes forged by millennia of geological eras, as well as urban landscapes, with their historical sites and buildings, seem to be the only fixed presences on Earth. This notion of nature and its grand phenomena that overwhelm human time and circumstance – unclear if friend or enemy – is borrowed again from Nemes Nagy, as Lehóczy (2011b: xiii) writes in her essay on the Hungarian poet:

The Earth for her [Nemes Nagy, A/N] is mountains, geysers, woods, lakes and the wind, with the odd, spectral figure, more statue than human, moving among them. But it is the powers and objects of nature rather than nature herself that she wants to inhabit. It is phenomenon that fascinates her rather than schema.

Reading Lehóczy's poetry, we are immersed in a vision of a human life which renews, but which at the same rapidly disappears, in a circle without any apparent meaning, where history plays the main role. Furthermore, it can be said that this subtle, post-modern sense of melancholy and loss in a sterile world could further be attributed to a certain Central-Eastern European mood of which Brodsky's work is likewise permeated.

The illusion of stability, given to the reader by being able to locate places, is only temporary, since nothing is – or not only is – what it seems. The thin surface of the external appearance of places, objects, and even human beings, hides a multi-layered 'under-reality,' like a medieval parchment. Lehóczy analyses in depth these strata, which open unforeseen scenarios that show how the present is indissolubly related to the past.

To recognize some locations offers now and then a ‘relief’ to the reader and allows to grasp the idea that the author is conveying. This topic is addressed also by the poet and critic Peter Riley (2014), in his review on Lehóczky’s work. He writes:

But there is so much recurrence that many points of the text are recognised and can be felt as temporary homes in the restless weaving of the text. The state of constant paradox admits of a humour which is maintained most of the time at a gentle pitch: every transition is at least slightly humorous, as incompatible verbal epithets are made to sing duets.

It is easy to notice in the poems that European cities are more identifiable, while country locations are somehow more indefinite.

The cities of Budapest and Sheffield stand as the designated points of arrival and departure of Lehóczky’s writing: two extremes of her psychogeographical research. In between, we find real and metaphorical sites, dear to the author, but not always immediately recognizable by the reader, who is required to carry a personal research to fully understand the geographical, historical, and even geological notes included in the narrative. On the locations of her writings, Lehóczky asserts:

The idea of the city is always present in my work, although, since I have lived in Norwich for a long while, the country-side too appears in the poems occasionally, both landscapes and cities of Hungary, UK and other cities or landscapes of Europe (Fowler 2010).

Cities are often approached from their peripheries, and then a marginal neighbourhood area of Budapest, where a railway station becomes the point of the author’s endless departures and arrivals, establishes the liminal barrier from where language changes, as in “babel 14”: *notes between Budapest and Babel*:

Kelenföld: a word with a marginal etymology, a land to cross? Perhaps, each meter or inch we make, a conquest of a land to construct barriers of a language but let's call it that for the security born from naming (Lehóczky 2008: 20-21).

The importance of the act of naming, which establishes the existence of a place or a person – or at least the possibility of this existence – is referred to also in a successive poem “Post Scriptum on Snow and Cactus,” in the collection *Carillonneur*.

Unnameable street is scaffolded securely on the world atlas. No such fissure between the thought and the said. [...]

The convex and the concave form of being *here&there*. An old snow plough.

You could always withdraw yourself from the map and once more, in a whiteout, become. You might go so far as to call it the sovereignty of saying, an unwanted one, but one, nonetheless (Lehóczky 2014: 63)

This last sentence once more stresses the importance of language, when ‘saying’ comes to be the only certainty in a life that seeks for reference points. In her essay on Nemes Nagy, Lehóczky (2011: 30) explores the theoretical meaning of an apparently simple act as ‘naming,’ and writes:

Nemes Nagy's theory recalls the Heideggerian concept: according to this, by naming an object, we refurnish it with “coordination”, that is to say the poet may turn the world into an object too, and when he or she does so, the poem itself is transformed into an object.

Train stations are for Lehóczky iconic sites, due also to their function of ‘transformation tropes,’ symbolizing a space of transit in the poet's nomadic existence. Braidotti (1994: 18-19) on this topic writes:

[I] do have special affection for the places of transit that go with traveling: stations and airport lounges, trams, shuttle buses, and check-in areas. In between zones where all ties are suspended and time stretched to a sort of continuous present. Oases of nonbelonging, spaces of detachment. No-(wo)man's lands.

We return to the poem we were examining. Skoulding (2013: 113-114) comments on the difficulty expressed by the poet of fixing a language which could describe a life in transit between two countries:

Weaving in and out of descriptions of Budapest and train journeys, the poem makes naming a self-conscious and insecure process. This is partly because on the anglophone perspective on another culture, for example the station stall is selling ‘frankfurter sausages’ and other specialities I cannot name in this language,<sup>52</sup> but this in turn accentuates the degree to which the embodied experience has only a tenuous and arbitrary connection with the words that describe it.

In the sequence that follows, the “Isn’t cycle,” despite the negation in the title, we notice that punctuation starts to appear, as to signify that new fixed points have started to emerge also in the life of the poet.

The title represents the acknowledgement of the need and the impossibility of being in two places – and two languages – simultaneously. This concept reminds me of the theory of the “double absence” theorized by Abdelmalek Sayad, in his *The Suffering of the Immigrant* (2004) who suggests that migrants experience a double absence: their absence from their place of origin and a lack of a recognized position within their host society. This drawback regards also the second generation of migrants, who, while being born in the country of migration, at the same time belong to other spaces which are connected to their past. Therefore, their life puts into question the relationship between origins, territory and citizenship.

The first poem of part 2i “isn’t cycle,” is “Cargo (for Ágnes Nemes Nagy),” which Lehóczky dedicates to her inspiring poet, from whom she develops the idea of the prose poems, i.e. the “wagons.”

To encircle the mind of the metropolis you must hop / from roof to roof <sup>53</sup> you must arch the distance between / tiled roofs with a seven league motion / bonding the

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<sup>52</sup> “Frankfurter sausages” refers to another poem by Lehóczky, “babel 14” (2008: 21).

<sup>53</sup> These imaginary jumps on the roofs of the city remind me of the recent practice of parkour, a discipline which uses movement that developed from military training, with the aim to get from one point to another in a complex environment – usually the urban one - without

paper with the hand and measure the hiatus between each cargo wagon with the breath you take after each word running along a rail line that passes between open end of an odyssey, [...] in motion along another journey of another fugitive sentence [...] you must indeed stand in the inner or outer draught of abandoned compartments to understand what has just escaped [...] encompassing the geography of the capital arcading its cryptogrammic meaning long told and left at platforms in haste. [...]

take a step a station closer towards the core of the foreign city you were seeking under here you must stay in approximation stamp with your feet on this square meter empty of bulldozers or cranes and a hundred and eighty degree turn in the sand towards the geometry of the hills and meadows and head backwards? homewards? outwards? towards two tractors ploughing your view in the cloud of white gulls who flew inland picking their lack under the arc of crop sprayers chained like a circular sentence slowly rolling / round and round the diameter of the earth (Lehóczky 2008: 33-35).

In the excerpt above some fundamental themes of Lehóczky's work are present and I will try to analyse them with order.

The train wagons exemplify the chunks of phrases of a language which starts lacking consistency, while the 'blocks' give the measure of the pauses in speaking. The Hungarian language which fades away as the train leaves the platforms in haste is a successful poetic image that effectively communicates the sense of a fugitive mother tongue. As often in her poetry, Lehóczky makes large use of anaphora, repeating one or more words, segments of phrases, and sentences – also in subsequent phrases – to create symmetry effects and give pace to the discourse.

These lines recount of the lyric-self's perpetual dilemma between whether to look homewards – then towards the hills of Budapest – or outwards, towards a future abroad.

Regarding this poem, Skoulding (2013: 116) thus comments:

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equipment and in the fastest and most efficient way possible. It has been associated to psychogeography, since it sees the environment in a new way, imagining the potential for navigating it in many ways; it often rises concerns for the physical risks involved and, sometimes, the lack of respect for the spaces used.

[C]argo keeps language and location suspended in its journey around ‘the mind of the metropolis.’ [...] In its refusal to choose either side, or any fixed position, the poem ends with ‘a circular sentence slowly rolling round and round the diameter of the earth.’

In Lehóczy’s verses some modernist and post-modernist principles can be detected, like the open unresolved ending of the poem, which leaves the narrative in suspense, as well as the weakening of the first-person narrator, obtained thanks to the combination of a noun with its antonym, which reinforces the idea that no single-focused vision is possible since reality offers many perspectives.

The perception of the external space is carried out through multiple senses, which are enhanced in an unfamiliar context. The peculiar texture of a place is represented also by its language, and the urban environment is an extremely dense one. Skoulding (2013: 116) stresses that “The relationship between words and the world is fundamental to poetry’s engagement with the city;” since this “performative relationship between language and urban space,” produces significant results, further confirmed by much of the research today related to language and the city.

This topic, for instance, is at the focus of the recent volume by Sherry Simon *Cities in Translation: Intersections of Language and Memory*, published in 2012. Simon takes into exam the case of four cities where the experience of bilingualism is historically rooted in the communities that inhabit them: Calcutta, Trieste, Barcelona and Madrid. In her book, the metaphorical connections between space, language and history are seen as real ‘translations’ in themselves, taking place in the daily life of the city, through construction and usage, naming and itineraries, reading and writing. Simon sees the need for an awareness of a heterogeneity of the urban space, a plurality not always sufficiently represented in public spaces, but which should lead towards new forms ‘dialectically’ produced.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Additionally, we notice that Simon refers to Babel: the book ends with a connection of the initial figure of Hermes to that of the Tower of Babel. By looking at Bruegel’s painting of the Biblical theme, Simon states that “[the] diversity of cities is fragile and provisional, strained by

It is to report, nevertheless, that the psychogeographic element of Lehoczky's work – as well as the same theory of psychogeography – is put into question by Peter Riley (2014), who provocatively writes:

Neither do I think she is a psychogeographer, nor that anybody is. We don't need a new science to tell us that people live and move in and between places, and that there is a kind of dialogue and mutual moulding goes on between the place and its denizen. Most of the psychogeography I've seen has been too concerned to diminish the individual and decisive creative force by attributing most of its characteristics to its place on the map.

Rejecting the modernist principles of individual freedom which expressed itself also in free wanderings, the above statements generically call into question one of the literary concepts consolidated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its later elaborations. In my opinion, Lehoczky's approach can well be attributed to psychogeography theories, although in its newest form. It becomes therefore useful to recall now the literary character of the *flâneur*, precursor of the modern 'psychogeographic' wanderer, briefly touched in Chapter One, before moving to its latest developments.

The figure of the casual strider of the modern city, who observes and reports his impressions while walking astride, was first explored in the writings of Charles Baudelaire. The aesthete and dandy *flâneur* of Baudelaire wandered the streets and the arcades of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Paris, observing the multiple forms of life in the urban environment. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Walter Benjamin returned to the model of the *flâneur* in his seminal work, *The Arcades Project*. This massive, but uncomplete, study used Baudelaire's *flâneur* as a starting point for an exploration of the impact of modern city upon the human psyche.<sup>55</sup>

Lehoczky's new psychogeography could find its conceptualization in the term "mythogeography," coined by Paul Smith. In his essay "The

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the pull between pluralism and the constraints of what Doris Sommer calls 'monoculture'" (156).

<sup>55</sup> For further information on today's groups that practice psychogeography to explore the urban environment in an unconventional way, see <http://psychogeographicreview.com/baudelaire-benjamin-and-the-th-of-the-flaneur/>

contemporary *dérive*: a partial review of issues concerning the contemporary practice of psychogeography,” which analyses what has remained of psychogeography, Smith (2010: 120) writes:

Instead of a spatially defined, ordered utopia, mythogeography proceeds by trajectory rather than architecture and art or anti-art and anti-architecture. Where useful to its asymmetrical projects it adds what it needs, from any discipline, to its conceptual and material orreries (‘itinerant toolkits’), curating artists’ and activists’ interventions in the streets, rubbish tips, sewers and monumental squares of the city (misguided STADTverFÜHRUNGEN, Wien Festwochen, Vienna, 2007, misguided, BBI, Fribourg, 2008). Asymmetrical ‘satellite capture’ is used to remove mediations and to engineer provocations and ‘offers’; its ‘unitary’ mission not the reintegration of the fragmented city, but rather that of the citizen with their own experience. Mythogeographical walking – a detailed and accumulative practice of *dérive* – is about a meshing of geographical spaces, and their ghostly bathing in cultural motion pictures, about the geometrical connectivity of a fragmented self, the integrity of which is constantly modulated by neurological research, critical theory, and speculations about consciousness and transmission, and about direct experience of the unplanned route.

On the development of the figure of the *flâneur*, Stephen Bijan (2013), in his article “In Praise of the Flâneur” on the *Paris Review* writes:

Since Benjamin, the academic establishment has used the *flâneur* as a vehicle for the examination of the condition of modernity - urban life, alienation, class tensions, and the like. In the ensuing decades, however, the idea of *flânerie* as a desirable lifestyle has fallen out of favor, due to some arcane combination of increasing productivity - hello, fruits of the Industrial Revolution! - and the modern horror at the thought of doing absolutely nothing.

He continues his writing, questioning himself on the return of this artistic character in literature: “But as we grow inexorably busier - due in large part to the influence of technology - might *flânerie* be due for a revival? If contemporary literature is any indication, the answer is a soft yes.” He follows



with examples of contemporary authors – amongst them we could well insert Lehoczky. Continuing the reading of Bijan's article, I found to an interesting reflection about a modern, at first unthinkable, version of *flâneurism* – that offered by the Internet.

No less remarkable than that moment when electric lights first blinked brightness across the world, the last few decades have changed the way we interact with the digital: we've gone from dial-up to broadband, from flip phone to smartphone, from local community to a global one. Our doubled lives enable *flânerie*—how often do we search our physical surroundings for things to post on Instagram? How long do we wander the depths of the Internet to find the perfect GIF? How many hours do you spend clicking the random button on Wikipedia? Where is real life? [...] Though Baron Haussmann's avenues made *flânerie* more difficult, and though the rise of street traffic may have endangered those brave *flâneurs* who walked their turtles, the *flâneur's* *raison d'être*—to participate fully through observation—has always remained the same. Now that we're comfortably into the era of the postmodern, perhaps it's time to take a brief stroll into the past, to sample its sights and its sounds.

And the past is found in European cities, which are the ideal setting for the *flâneuse* Lehoczky, where Budapest takes the first place and acts as a bridge in exploring many others. This last theory, not new to psychogeography, is explained by Lehoczky in this way:

Budapest, as the epitome of all cities is crucial for me, personally and creatively. Therefore, this love for this city of course generates new relationships with other capitals/cities, such as London or Rome, for instance. I do not know why. I thought about this before, and I think it is the idea of some kind of sense of recognition again, homecoming, if you like, when I encounter another capital, since I believe all (European) capitals/cities are structured/modelled the same way. If you know one by-heart, you'll never get lost in an unknown one (Fowler 2010).

Budapest, like most European cities, keeps visible traces of its past: a combination of Roman ruins, Austro-Hungarian edifices, and later Communist

concrete buildings, to arrive to contemporary architecture. It is a variety that mirrors the heterogeneity of language and of literary forms. Skoulding (2013: 118) offers a further consideration on this, by asserting that,

Like Nemes Nagy, Lehóczy explores simultaneously metaphorical and synecdochal relationships with the city. A poem, with its palimpsestic layers, contains multiple temporalities as an urban space does, and may also be a means of living in a particular collective moment or 'world' that has a fugitive existence in both city and text.

The idea of exploring a place with the map of another is taken from the practice of the *dérive*, a 'codified' practice, theorised by the Situationist International, which seeks for physical and emotional disorientation in discovering the urban environment. In this process, the psyche explores a geography of supposedly recognized places through smells, sounds, and feelings of *déjà vu*. It consists of what seems an accidental journey through a landscape, usually urban, in which participants drop their everyday relation with the city. Only solitary *dérives* are possible, with the exception of small groups of two or three people who have reached the same level of 'awareness,' since cross-checking these different groups' impressions makes it possible to arrive at more objective conclusions. This approach is taken by Lehóczy in the third collection *Carillonneur*, settled principally in Sheffield and its surroundings, which explored extensively by her.

For Lehóczy, a place can be described by constant reference to its past and the many tangible and intangible traces that mark in specific the urban environment. These pluri-strata and multi-dimensional characteristics of a site well embody Lehóczy's palimpsestic vision of life.

I have a nearly unhealthy obsession with the layers, the strata of cities, visible and invisible layers, undergrounds and upper grounds, their two-three-four-five-dimensions, simply because this density of tangible and non-tangible plates replicates one's inner density, the density of the mind, of the psyche, of memories, of emotions, relationships, love, (invisible and implicitly a major driving force of

these poems), as well as the complex architecture of meaning itself, the meaning of one's own life (Fowler 2010).

This idea of the many 'levels' that compose the personal identity – a renowned concept in psychology – implies that gaining the insight of one's own existence is never completely possible.

Magda Stroińska (2003: 108) in her essay "The role of language in the reconstruction of identity in exile," contained in the volume *Exile, Language and Identity*, highlights a notion related to this, and makes reference to the philosopher John White.

We may, perhaps, conceptualize a number of overlapping multiple identities which are the subject of constant renegotiation in the face of the conflicts and the compromises of everyday life. At any point in our lives we can think of ourselves as relating to a number of identities (White 1995: 2).

The poem "Wrought iron girder railway bridge" offers a good representation of psychogeography. The bridge of Blackfriars in London is compared to "some bridge crossing the Danube," but, at a certain stage in the poem, the two places overlap, merging into a single image. The poem begins in this way:

say Blackfriars today surfaced as some bridge  
crossing the Danube its light electric trains were  
obsolete [...] melting into a metropolis anonymous for the  
fare we stick to a hundred forint coin engraved in  
the centre [...] circular spinning / geography rotating topographic wits velocity of  
thoughts random tête-a-têtes on St Paul's Walk  
opposite an iron bridge a wrought ornament of  
imagination yet exchanging rivers may not craft a  
home from the vagabond's global tune in the  
high street compressing and expanding the  
bellows up and down time and again  
the sound of the voyage is reassuring to you  
although you mistake it for the winding resonance

of sentences [...] we must get off here and  
confide in a bridge that rises in absence alongside,  
relics of eight cylindrical piers in progress of  
disintegrating (Lehóczy 2008: 40)

The strong resemblance of the two capitals' riverfronts, London and Budapest, with their Parliament buildings facing the two rivers, both erected according to the Gothic Revival style, creates in the poet the illusion of a single vision. In her interview, Lehóczy offers a comment on this aspect:

[O]ur world in terms of interpretability, is built strata thus suggesting that a 'specific place' always 'embeds' or 'triggers' memories of another one. I attempt to create a scenario where places can not only swap locations but become one in the mind (i.e. the Thames can be seen as the Danube etc.) (Fowler 2010).

Later in the poem, Lehóczy tries to convince her travel companion/double self by saying that they are not "on a misguided journey," since the two geographies intertwine and mirror each other.

[W]e are not on a misguided journey,  
waves on both river banks are suspended high in  
the air the carriage parades on in parallel  
applause [...] indulgently waiting  
for the apparition by the Thames on the  
Danube's bank [...] how many worlds have we  
exchanged? wait... we can't have missed it, we  
have recognized the insignia on the front we  
have found the tracks for the original alignment (Lehóczy 2008: 41)

A similar loss of reference points is expressed in Hoffman's *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*:

The reference points inside my head are beginning to do a flickering dance.  
I suppose this is the most palpable meaning of displacement. I have been dislocated

from my own centre of the world, and that world has been shifted away from my center. There is no longer a straight axis anchoring my imagination; it begins to oscillate, and I rotate around it unsteadily (1991: 132).

In Lehoczky's works colours are associated to a specific memory, as exemplified in the following poem "Photographs, undeveloped." And so white, black, grey and yellow connote the author's reminiscences. Making a resume, we could say that grey is the colour of undefined experiences of the past, together with sepia, for fading memories, while white and black stand for opposite recollections, where white acquires a sort of magic halo to surround a positive memory of the past, in contrast with black. Yellow depicts the present and the new stimuli it offers. Lehoczky (2008: 53) writes:

Somewhere a tourist book was warning the reader that this capital was grey. I depicted it. [...] later she used colours. But in that era those colours became neutral on the paper; I don't mean decolorized. That era was neither toneless nor grey. It was a thick white glass. [...] Much later, in another millennium, I saw those galleries on a poster. The grey capital's apartments on sale. But it was in a different country. What I mean is that it happened in another century. What happened in another century in another country? I think it is 'it' I talk of that occurred then between the black and the white. If anything this capital is in-between. It was painted naught, or it was. Light yellow, in January, when you look out of the train pulled by the rails, no, not too fast.

In the excerpt above, another peculiarity of Lehoczky's work can be noticed: a narrative interspersed with a-chronological leaps in time, which makes the reader constantly jump from episodes of the present to episodes of the past, which belong to the poet's personal story, but also to a collective one.

This temporal fragmentation creates a nonlinear narrative, where the plot is constructed only by a flow of apparently unconnected memories of the lyric self.

The collection continues with the sequence of short compositions under the name in Hungarian of *Nárcisz* – thus reinforcing the possible parallelism with

the lyric persona – who wanders in his *flâneuristic* tour through Italy, from Venice to Rome. The poems that describe these tours are: “Nárcisz at an exhibition in Budapest,” “Nárcisz vocation in Rome,” “Nárcisz en route for memory,” “Nárcisz’s breakfast letter,” “Nárcisz’s writing tablets,” “Che cos’è?” and “Nárcisz and the Magician - *In and out of Guggenheim.*”

In this last poem, there is the description of a *déjà vu* of an indefinable *à la dérive* trip in Venice:

[S]ay: it is not this place you know but the one  
that is yet undiscovered, the one where you  
have been already is the place that you could  
have been, where it could have happened,  
where it all had already happened, Campo  
Ruga, you sob. [...] Until it is  
rolled up like a ball, a glossy ball, liquefied  
like the map in your hand this city reels  
down with meandering boats like troops  
of rare black swans, neck entwined, wings  
streamlined (Lehóczky 2008: 69).

The comparison rises spontaneously with Brodsky's prose of *Watermark*, which tells us about the parallel discovery of the city and of the narrating self, thanks to his regular visits to Venice: “So you never know as you move through these labyrinths whether you are pursuing a goal or running from yourself, whether you are the hunter or his pray” (1992: 85), Brodsky writes.

For her part, Lehóczky likewise emphasizes the labyrinthine nature of the lagoon city, an elusive characteristic that puzzles the visitor: “The city too labyrinthine and you / got dizzy Those canals on the map were / not to follow, nor to trust. [C]ountless *sotoportegos*, dark *Misericordia*” (Lehóczky 2008: 71).

A further association with Brodsky’s prose can be seen in the combination of English with foreign words – in this case Italian terms – which contributes

to give colour to the narrative as well as transmit a ‘local,’ but also a ‘transnational’ feel.

This first collection, *Budapest to Babel*, concludes with a poem settled in a Hungarian religious site. With the closing of a Marian prayer, Lehóczy reminds that some people find refuge in tradition and faith, “You want to see her, you murmur [...] the woman wrapped in Sun. *Maria, you are beautiful indeed*” (2008: 75). The closure of the poem hints at religion, a theme that introduces the religious setting of many poems of the successive collection, *Rememberer*, published in 2011, that will be examined in the next section.

### 3.6. Polyphony

Part of the urban landscape are places of worship, sources of inspiration for much of Lehóczy’s poetry. And so, monasteries, churches, cathedrals, domes, cupolas, bell towers, and many others recur in the poems of *Rememberer*.

Before examining some of the lyrics contained in this second collection, a reflection must be made on its title, *Rememberer*, which, alongside with its literary meaning, holds a further linguistic significance. In their essay “Speakers and Communities,” contained in *The Cambridge Handbook of Endangered Languages*, Colette Grinevald and Michel Bert (2011: 51) under the term ‘Rememberers’ write:

In order to describe this type of speaker, we introduce the parameters of acquisition and loss. Speakers with limited knowledge of the endangered language due to attrition can be associated with the categories of semi-speaker or terminal speaker. Their language attrition is sometimes due to traumatic circumstances (such as ethnic massacres of the kind still retold in parts of the Americas) that have forced them to hide their knowledge of the language. The term ‘rememberer’ evokes the possibility that such speakers may regain or require some partial active use of the language.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> The definition so continues: “They could be inhibited at first, or unwilling to participate, but they might join a documentation and/or revitalization project at a later point. They should not be overlooked in fieldwork since they can always help reconstitute or even reinvent a sense of community at organized gatherings and contribute to efforts at language revitalization” (Grinevald, and Bert 2011:51).

It is to be assumed that the language that is dying is Lehóczy's mother tongue, but it could be also the old English which she often refers to in her works.

The historical-philological research carried out by Lehóczy supports her vision of a 'multi-layered' reality, and with a 'magic realism,' not new to post-modern literature, she creates a fascinating historiographic metafiction to recount historical events and characters.

The architecture of sacred places, along with their history intertwined with that of the peoples that have erected them, contains overlapping planes that lead to physical and metaphysical worlds, which Lehóczy illustrates by depicting vivid multi-dimensional images, which create a diorama-like effect. The cathedrals' palimpsestic nature well embodies the theme of multiplicity, dear to the author and which is explored in several ways. This is evident in particular in the poem "Prelude - On a Crowded Catacomb of a Ceiling," which opens Lehóczy's second collection.

This well-balanced composition, one of Lehóczy's most effective, shares some features – and even some identical lines – with the successive "Torso in the Window - 11 tokens," which further confirms that the author is creating a sort of thematic cycle about her main topics, which in this poem can be investigated through several steps.

Firstly, the title contains an oxymoronic assertion, in its "catacomb of a ceiling" location: the reader is led to wonder about the features of this mysterious place, crowded by otherworldly creatures, unknown whether it lies in the basement or high above in the cupola of the dome. In these verses, substantives and nouns are often matched with their antonyms, a syncretic feature of Lehóczy's work.

Secondly, we found the theme of polyphony, when the poet realizes that her voice does not stand alone, but it is one 'in a choir,' part of a greater 'polyphonic voice,' which is symbolized by the sound effects produced in the high vaults of the cathedral. Namely, the image that recurs in Lehóczy's first collection is that of the Whispering Gallery of Saint Paul's Cathedral in London, whose significance is explained by the author in these terms:



There is a recurring motif in my book *Budapest to Babel*, a motif which the overall theme of the book is based on. This recurring image is the “Whispering Gallery” of London’s St Paul’s. The circular gallery runs at the point where the vault of the Dome starts to curve inwards. The name comes from an intriguing characteristic the dome possesses: namely, if a person whispers facing the wall on one side, she/he can be clearly heard on the other, since the sound is carried perfectly around the vast curve of the Dome. There are several different angles from which one could interpret the motif. In *Budapest to Babel* one of the many connotations of the “Whispering Gallery” refers to the original myth of the Babelic/linguistic confusion language is always associated with. However, I am not only taking the term in a deconstructive sense, therefore not only am I focusing on the “chaotic” aspect of language (that is, on its general notion of indecipherability, or on its constant deferral of meaning which results in a general concept of lack of understanding of either each other or the symbols of the outside world) but in a constructive sense too (Fowler 2010).

“Listening as a fundamental disposition of a poet,” Lehoczky declares (Fowler 2010), and here we read again the direct influence of Denise Riley’s thought, but I am also reminded of Brodsky, who asserted the importance of listening to the language spoken “in taverns, buses and groceries stores,” in “order to write well” (Brodsky 1972). Listening to the multiplicity of voices is opening to a greater polyphony that creates the chorus of human existence, and the aim of Lehoczky’s poem seems to depict this grand representation, to show that empathy is the clue to understand life.

The exploration of the cathedral of Norwich – the city where Lehoczky lived while attending university – is done through several stages that move the focus of the narrative on to different planes.

At first, Lehoczky starts from the factual observation of the ‘alien’ origin of the Caen-lime stones of which the cathedral of Norwich is built, to assimilate later her condition of foreigner – and then her reader’s/interlocutor’s one – to that of the stones, which were shipped from France, during the Middle Ages. The Caen-lime stones here represent the ‘migration’ of the materials used in building the inhabited landscape of Europe. About the role the Caen-lime stone

played in the Medieval constructions, it is worth to report an historical reference:

It was the preferred building stone of the Normans and was often used ahead of the local British stone. The Norman builders would have been familiar with the stone and, as it was quarried in their own land, it would probably have been easier and cheaper for them to use.<sup>57</sup>

By comparing the human condition to the stones, the author emphasizes the materiality implicit in human nature, an aspect that lies beneath all Lehóczky's work, and which can be again derived from Nemes Nagy. This concept is found in other poems by Lehóczky, as in "Balaton 7: Philemon on the Zenith:" "Blowy phantasmagoria. But somehow we doubt those light shafts could shine through grandmother's thin, transparent lilac veins. Grandmother, who was once made of the geology of the planets. Of the same chewy red clay" (Lehóczky 2011a: 55). And further, in "Balaton 9: In Baucis' Vineyard: "And then grandmother, who was once made of the same chewy red clay as the planets" (Lehóczky 2011a: 58).

Secondly, Lehóczky offers her readers the opportunity to go beyond the physical aspect of the cathedral, to reflect about historical facts, supernatural events and, ultimately, the meaning of life. The poem, one of the most structured of Lehóczky's poetry, begins with the indirect addressing to an indefinite 'you.'

You say, we too are made of cream-coloured Caen lime stones in the end. Shipped in silence to this city on anonymous rivers; [...], whispering sailors, masons and workmen on wooden decks. Carguing granite bricks of unknown geographies (Lehóczky 2011a: 9).

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<sup>57</sup> Further information can be found at: <http://info.amarestone.com/blog/caen-limestone-its-place-in-english-history>

The fast rhythm of the poem is given by parataxis, of which Lehoczky makes large use, and which requires the reader to keep up the pace of an extremely conceptual narrative. The use of this literary technique is a common feature in English contemporary poetry. On this, Scott Thurston (2015: 8) claims:

One feature [of British innovative poetry, A/N] is that of the appropriation and juxtaposition of found materials that is akin to collage in visual art, whilst the other is a more generalised form of parataxis – a placing of unsubordinated phrases side by side creating a fragmentary effect and disrupting the illusion of a consistent narrative voice.

By observing both the Norman cathedral's construction and the history of the past commercial connection between places, Lehoczky gives voice to the many unknown lives of traders and sailors, whose journeys shaped the landscape of European urbanization. History once more shows that the notions of national boundaries and identities are questionable, and this is what Lehoczky tries to remind in her work.

To the silent existence of Lehoczky's medieval nameless builders, we can assimilate the anonymous humanity who passed by this world without leaving a permanent trace. Thus, Lehoczky once more makes us reflect on the fragility of life.

In "Prelude - On a Crowded Catacomb of a Ceiling" many craftsmen are at work, and to them Lehoczky provides a very specialised vocabulary – which is similar to that found in the poem "Balaton 2" that follows in the collection – listing all the materials used to build a cathedral.

It is in this land's curling characteristics, domes of basilicas, flights of stairs, layers of geology, chalk, bath stone, basalt, slate, lava, tufa, dolomite, calcium, magnesium carbonate, loess, silt, wind-blown, the abbey in front of us with two spinning spires (2011a: 50).

Changing the perspective is a way of having different views, and Lehoczky's readers becomes accustomed to these continuous movements in verticality. She

says: “I am particularly obsessed with the panorama of these capitals from a bird’s eye view, for example from the top of domes, towers or hillsides” (Fowler 2010), Leńóczy explains. A further example of this in “Prelude” is found in the line “Tonight we exchange storeys of / air and time. The sky with an abyss, the ceiling with a / crater. The upper with the underground” (Leńóczy 2011a: 9).

The series of antonyms reinforces this sequence of fading lives, with no apparent meaning, in which the poet seems to look for a clue, which may be found in the only possible form of eternity: that of the materials that form the cathedral and its decorations. The quick passage of man on Earth could at least aspire to being immortalized in various forms of art, whether pictorial or graphic:

And render  
shadows of former fabrics with blood-circulation. Iron  
with mortar, water with cement. And replicate resemblances.  
So that one day we too will be an album of a  
milliard faces frescoed on the ceiling. Stories told in  
stones. Reiterated in flint. Plastered with human planets,  
unpeelable visages of grins and mascara (Leńóczy 2011a: 9).

Life is browsing a page from a calendar that seems to proceed without any apparent meaning. Again, the thought conveyed here is that attaining eternity is possible only for material objects:

[N]arratives of  
another sky, repeated patterns of calendars, pages of  
mortal-faced martyrs, parched skins of Benedictine  
monks, lime-stone bishops and black princes carved  
out from flint, shadows of the woods with vegetative  
smiles, ecstatic humour in hollow eyelids. Staring  
inward. Outward. Into the windy world. Towards the  
sea. Blinded by the invisible horizon between sea and  
sky. Eyelids staring from a black chasm of centuries (Leńóczy 2011a: 9).

Lehóczy is referring to the magnificent decorations of Norwich cathedral, to the hundreds of carved wooden bosses in the nave – a thousand in whole. These realistic wooden artworks tell the Biblical story, but, even more, depict all the characters of the Medieval society.

Parchment skin, precious material which was used when Norwich cathedral was built, is often present in Lehóczy's poems, and possess the quality of being possibly written and overwritten. Its multiple layers represent in a sense human history, personal and collective, with its inexhaustible succession of temporal planes. This layering is rendered in the poem through an unceasing switch of the description of the cathedral levels, that go from the basement – where catacombs are – to the ceiling and roof.

Following the lyric self in leaving the interior of the cathedral to go on its rooftop, the reader enjoys a panoramic view, both real and metaphorical: "From the world's cupolas and towers. The medieval panorama of / terracotta rooftops. And chimney tops" (Lehóczy 2011a: 9). In these lines, we notice the absence of verbs, as if the haste of the narrative does not allow to indulge in description while reaching the top of the dome. This expectation of something to happen foresees a climax, or at least a breaking point, which will never occur.

It is worth to pause for a while on the terracotta rooftops image, which recurs also in other poems. In the one I am considering here below, likewise linked to the poet's experience of the visit to a basilica, the narrative is more descriptive, and the poem ends with the same lapidary affirmation, as if Lehóczy was labelling another picture of a personal collection of 'terracotta rooftop snapshots.'

There is an abbey in the middle of this playground. It bursts out of nowhere, like a bud, right in the middle of the sandpit, a horse-chestnut. A basilica. We walk up to the zenith photographing the dome's inner construction. Then the outer construction. Photographing the architecture of air. A rooftop experience. It is just another terracotta rooftop experience (Lehóczy 2011a: 57).

In “Prelude” there is the recurring image of the spiral, which is also borrowed from Nemes Nagy, but which may also suggest Dante's spiral in the *Divine Comedy*.

The cathedral, besides being the stage of the display of a Medieval carousel, symbolizes the universe, while the same universe is symbolized in it: “The universe: / an enormous empty cathedral” (Lehóczky 2011a: 9).<sup>58</sup> And further:

An effigy of dead  
fathers. The arteries, the aisles, the spiral stairs, the lost  
thoughts. The billions of last breaths. And it is because  
you are gone. But where you are now I too have been (Lehóczky 2011a: 9).

Offering an interpretation of these last lines may not be easy. The unknown ‘you’ in Lehóczky’s poems looks more tangible at times, but when his/her identity seems to be revealed, Lehóczky diverts her reader with verses that leave space to several interpretations.

The visit to the cathedral continues, wrapped in an atmosphere of constant alternation between the tangible and the intangible:

Replicating the  
corporeal. Dismembered memories. Their mundanities.  
The morbidities. Stone snapshots, immaterial  
moments of a millennium. Lined with high windows  
nestled above the roofline of the lower aisles, above  
sea level, above eye-level as the level of once approximate  
horizons (Lehóczky 2011a: 10).

The bare list of verb-free nouns – a sort of ‘catalogue’ made of many substantives where any action lacks – underlines the recognition of unknown presences Lehóczky cannot explain to her reader, when not even to herself. The intertwining dialogue between the author and her lyric counterpart includes the

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<sup>58</sup> We cannot avoid remembering here de Certeau, quoting Erasmus’s famous sentence “The city is a huge monastery.”

living and the dead. Life is evoked through human thoughts and breaths and understanding the great mystery of death is not done to man.

In the verses that follow, the reader is almost overwhelmed by a triumph of characters which seem to come out of a Medieval carnival that includes real and allegorical animals, depicted according to a ‘magic realism.’

Carved in the  
highest vertex of the geometric solid, just above the  
choir: brick layers, rock layers of an otherworldly home.  
[...] On the curvature of the vaults, diagonally, transversely,  
intermediately, slim figurines walk across in haste, the  
half beastly, the half anthropomorphic lurk here with  
intent... shadows of circus animals march across  
the arches, camels, laden, caged-in-monkeys, agitated, acrobats,  
fire-eaters (Lehóczy 2011a: 10).

Real and allegorical animals come to the scene, to complete and enliven the whole picture. Further in the poem we read:

The city tonight levitates, archbishops and  
midwives, criminals and archangels tumbling towards a  
timeless present, dragons and shepherds, sheepdogs  
and unicorns, beasts and birds, perpetually changing  
shapes and shadows, erasing contours and colour,  
dependent too on the parameters of the sun and other  
planets (Lehóczy 2011a: 10-11).

Bearing in mind Brodsky’s work, the sequence above inevitably takes back to his *Watermark* prose, which reads as follow:

In the hole, all these nightmarish creatures – dragons, gargoyles, basilisks, female-breasted sphynxes, winged lions, Cerberuses, Minotaurs, centaurs, chimeras – that come to us from mythology – (which should have the status of classical surrealism)

are our self-portraits, in the sense that they denote the species genetic memories of evolution (Brodsky 1992: 82).

The cathedral is a place of spirituality, but at the same time it possesses a materiality, strongly emphasised by Lehóczy, which is represented by the stones, the marble, the wood, and all the materials used for its building and its internal and external decorations, so attentively described in the poem.

In these lines, materiality is nearly touchable, and it seems for Lehóczy to be the only surviving form on Earth. This idea, as seen, is borrowed from Nemes Nagy: “Objects assert a sense of survival” (Lehóczy 2011b: 29). In her study about Nemes Nagy’s work, Lehóczy has extensively explored this topic. She writes:

Nemes Nagy claims, the poetic image creates a three-dimensional universe in which objects can act and exist as themselves. [...] The objective world in its solidity ostensibly provides some security to a restless mind that struggles with poetic articulations. [...] According to Nemes Nagy, objects in their physics, within their perceptibility or palpability, simultaneously grant comfort and generate tension when “they rise above the general feeling of peril, as expressions or perhaps counterpoints of that endangerment” (Lehóczy 2011b: 30-31).

Lehóczy’s assertion about Nemes Nagy’s poetry according to whom “Objects are radiant, they stand out spatially, and not only do they concern us but they also address us, they talk to us with the ‘news’ they transfer” (Lehóczy 2011b: 22) resounds in Joseph Brodsky’s prosopopoeial writing, as seen in the poem “To my daughter,” where the ageing poet imagines himself personified in objects that will survive him, to watch over his little daughter.

This vision on material things can be read as a sort of primitivism, a ‘return to the origins,’ and the necessary rest of a mind which has long explored geographies, histories and philosophies, seeking for answers to the eternal, unanswered questions. In *Watermark*, Brodsky wrote: “An object, after all, is what makes infinity private” (1992: 81).



For the postmodern subject-object relation, I found relevant what Yvonne Bezrucka (1995: 105), in her analysis of Postmodernism, says:

Postmodernism sees the subject as a relational entity, rather than as an autonomous source, a product of the interrelation between subject and culture, a code made of a *corpus* of codes, a subject immanent in the world where humankind lives. Indeed, it is exactly the alleged distance between subject and object, fixed by Descartes, that postmodernism thoroughly deconstructs.<sup>59</sup>

On this shifting relationship between the lyric self and the elements – objects and places – of an environment that changes, it is based the dialogue of Lehoczky's poetry.

Then spot the city in the  
making. Your routine attic-trip. Climbing up the timber  
boards of the wooden vaults. You are good at spotting  
fictitious city walls of unknown capitals. Carved in the  
highest vertex of the geometric solid, just above the  
choir: brick layers, rock layers of an otherworldly home (Lehoczky 2011a: 10).

The real and the imagined intertwine. At the end of the poem, the humble and anonymous workers, creators of such an architectonic wonder, finally join in: “builders, masons, bricklayers, in the / process of building. Knocking down. Building” (Lehoczky 2011a: 10).

Over the centuries, Norwich cathedral has been realized through construction and destruction, and this fact serves the poet to introduce another recurrent topic of her work: the antinomic processes of building and destroying. In this last part of the poem, the initial picture of the unknown Medieval workers is offered again in the closing sequence as to complete a circle which reinforces the theme of nomadism. Lehoczky underlines that peoples' displacement has contributed to the basis of urbanization, and in specific of the

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<sup>59</sup> My translation from Yvonne Bezrucka's (1995) “Il postmodernismo: l'accettazione ironica del doppio senso.”

European one; besides, she reminds, ‘nomadism’ is related to the formation of languages.

Going back to the image of the suggestive night vision, we are offered an example of an ‘inner’ intertextuality: this same image is in fact represented in “part 10” of “Torso in the Window,” a successive poem that contains many parts identical to “Prelude.”

The poem “Prelude” has no proper beginning, middle or end, and concludes with this evocative night apparition of the new settlers, in which, once again, the boundary between life and death is imperceptible: “Unclear. The difference. Between departures and arrivals” (Lehóczy 2011a: 11).

Talking about the present is possible only through digging deep into the past, whether it be a medieval or a primordial one. By going beyond the external appearance of places and buildings, Lehóczy makes her readers revive history, whether it be a real or fictionally recreated one. The poet’s creativity re-enacts in fact vibrant historical episodes of colonisation and trade, to start a discourse about identity and belonging, language and migration, in an intense dialogue between the living and the dead. In her review on the back cover of *Rememberer*, Carrie Ette on this point writes:

In the opening poem, cathedral becomes universe becomes city and back again, in one of a number of pieces reminiscent of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. The job of the rememberer, it seems, is to see the past in the present, to keep both in view simultaneously.

And this is what Lehóczy effectively does.

### **3.7. A Palimpsestic City Space**

In the following sequence of poems, “Brown and Grey - *Five Folios from 1979*,” the mood of the narration completely changes, since the poet offers us a sort of re-enactment of an amusing trip across the Alps, made with old P50

cars, in 1976.<sup>60</sup> Again, the readers are expected to make connections on their own to understand the historical allusions contained in these short poems.

In them, Lehoczky offers an example of the humoristic, almost satirical vein of her poetry, in the description of the trip made with these minuscule cars. Peter Riley suggests an interpretation about this unusual choice made by the poet, in his review on Ágnes Lehoczky's work: "Its function in this mock-narrative sequence is distinctly comic, even Chaplinesque, but the refusal to identify it in the text is a typical move of a determined modernist" (2014).

This curious car is in fact not immediately mentioned in the poems, but appears at some points later, as if this device could be "A preliminary method of achieving a sense of authorial anonymity" (Peter Riley 2014). The use of historic metafiction is often employed in postmodernist literature with the precise purpose of undermining the author's authority: a device which allows emotional distance and opens to unexpected shifts in the narration.

We already know that Lehoczky has accustomed her readers to carry their own research to understand much of the contents of her poems, thus making reading her poetry a demanding, but also rewarding, cultural experience.

In the next sequence, which goes under the name of "Folios,"<sup>61</sup> elements which have been previously anticipated can be found: the intertwine of present and past, and of life and death, to describe the world of an underground city, with a connected imagery of evanescence presences – ghosts, cordial spectres, psychopomps, ghost-trams, shafts light, crypts, catacombs, sarcophaguses, and so on and so forth.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Defined as the "smallest" car in the world, the peel P50, a three-wheeled microcar manufactured in the 1960's on the Isle of Man - the "smallest production of the world" - was designed as a city car, to set "one adult and a shopping bag." Today, P50 cars are rare and expensive remnants for collectors.

<sup>61</sup> The term 'folio,' from the Latin *folium* (leaf), has three connected but distinct meanings: first, it is a term for a common method of arranging sheets of paper into book form, and a term for a book made in this way. Second, it is a general term for a sheet, leaf or page in old books and manuscripts, and third, a general term for the size of a book, and for a book of this size.

<sup>62</sup> 'Psychopomps' (from the Greek word ψυχοπομπός, psuchopompos, literally meaning the "guide of souls") are creatures, spirits, angels, or deities in many religions whose responsibility is to escort newly deceased souls from the Earth to the afterlife. Their role is not to judge the deceased, but simply to provide safe passage. Appearing frequently on funerary art, psychopomps have been depicted at different times and in different cultures as anthropomorphic entities, horses, deer, dogs, whip-poor-wills, ravens, crows, owls, sparrows and cuckoos.

Here following are some excerpts that exemplify these topics. In “Under Erasure II” (Kentish Canvas I), it is written:

Dependent on the angle from which the train, tangible or transparent, rolls into the metamorphic landscape, into an old town of cordialspectres, medieval chubby wax figurines. No sensation. Though their look feels real when you lean over. [...] It is a pilgrimage for the blind. From chimney to chimney, here I am again. Travelling into landscapes of an unknown season. [...] Waving at roofs. Sketching drafts of squares and triangles in this fog. Their palpable contours crumble away in your gloves like chalk. They are Saxon. Your cadences freeze in the air. Muted under an opaque snowfall. Triplets of spiral cones, tinted wooden arrows, brick-stones of Benedictine abbeys, pyramidal roofs, bloodstained tiles of a cathedral transept. They were here, you insist, pointing at outlines of air, contours of nothing (2011a: 25).

This “pilgrimage for the blind” brings the poet into the countryside, to discover a typical British landscape strewn with mediaeval abbeys and ruins – places where Lehóczyky locates the ancient inhabitants of the Saxon tribes.

The collection continues with poems which depart from visions of the present – Lehóczyky has now definitively settled in Sheffield – as a pretext to speculate about the past, in which nevertheless the present appears to be stronger.

Can you imagine this town not now but then, can you see a sedimentary pit? I can't imagine, no. I can only see its here and now, the market's stripy roofs, the tiny river that arrives inaudibly at the edge of town and departs anonymously, never heard or seen, like a hooded monk. And that's because I live here (Lehóczyky 2011a: 28).

Living is not possible without remembering, often a painful act for Lehóczyky. In the following excerpts, it is expressed the difficulty in accepting her current situation while the memory of her home town, as well as of the places she visited, is still strong.

There are a lot of cities I would like not to remember. To talk of them as if they weren't. As if those cities had not existed before. There has to be a hole in the membrane of memory this way. Through which these places can escape into the atmosphere and spill. And refill themselves as memories of no-one and find their home in nowhere. [...] I didn't want to remember. A city with a river. This city has not got a name, and the river too, is anonymous. He or she dwelt. A town-dweller, non-significant, that could be I (Lehóczy 2011a: 37).

The city with a river could be Budapest, but it could be also Sheffield, which is crossed by five small rivers, amongst which is the river Don, the longest, whose presence in a marginal zone of the city goes almost unnoticed today. History tells us that in the past it supplied mills, foundries and cutlers' wheels in a city world-renown for steel industry. In many poems Lehóczy refers to this river and its surrounding areas, whose significant historical traces are the pretext for her long walks and poetic digressions.<sup>63</sup>

In this collection, the position of the author as a new inhabitant of the city is not yet defined, as she writes: "A town dweller, non-significant, that could be I," while in the third collection her identity becomes more recognizable, a more 'rounded' character that will be developed in the successive poems, as for instance in "Parasite of town," which will be analysed later.

Unlike reasoning, remembering is an uncontrolled mental process: "Memory always gets in the way randomly, like displayed museum objects, a mummified cat, a sarcophagus, or a bronze Augustine head from Iran (Lehóczy 2011a: 29). In "2 Geology of a Notebook," many elements of Lehóczy's poetic imaginary are found, which all contribute to build her 'palimpsestic' vision of life. Through the study of the Earth stratigraphy, its layers and fossils, petroglyphs and pictographs, and mediaeval frescoes, Lehóczy leads her readers to the "most recent graffiti" – modern version of rock engravings.

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<sup>63</sup> Queen Mary of Scotland was kept imprisoned in the 'Castle', of whom there are still the remains. In Sheffield it is possible to find also traces of Anglo Saxons, Roman, Celts and Normans vestiges.

I found countless manuscripts in this notebook, after all. Diverging horizons, converged at one end. One annotating the other. A close study of layers. Rocks and fossils. Frescos on medieval walls painted over old frescos. Then someone a thousand years later peels the last layer off. And finds an old god's peeling face. The most recent graffiti sprayed on the railway wall. His figures, scraped out, added up. Subtracted. Then erased again. [...] The other day you repainted the whiteboard all white. You coated inborn petroglyphs. Not pictographs. The latter is a drawing on the surface. This one is an incision into the flesh of the rock (Lehóczy 2011a: 35).

The distinction made by Lehóczy between the two forms of prehistoric drawings once more denotes her meticulous historiographic knowledge, which positively stimulates the reader in making a further personal research.<sup>64</sup>

Writing is of extreme importance for Lehóczy, since it is related to her profession, but more, it is a means which contributes to create her new identity in English; with this in mind, in the excerpt that follows we read about letters that metaphorically 'come to life.'

In the poem, there is a citation from the first chapter of *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes, quoted in Spanish – the sense of which in the context of the poem is unclear, although we guess that probably it refers to the loss of the use of De Cervantes' left hand.

Playing with intertextuality is nevertheless a prominent characteristic of contemporary writing, in which various elements of the texts – plot, characters,

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<sup>64</sup> An historical note: "Long before writing was developed, people recorded events, ideas, plans, and feelings by marking them on a rock. Sometimes they carved into the stone. Sometimes they scratched off a surface coating. Sometimes they painted on the rocks. The method that they used was typically determined by the availability of a "paint," the hardness of the rocks, and the availability of tools that could be used to produce their message. [...] All of these markings are referred to as "Rock Art." A petroglyph is an image that is carved into a rock. This "carving" can produce a visible indentation in the rock, or it can simply be the scratching away of a weathered surface to reveal unweathered material of a different color below. [...] A pictograph is a drawing or painting that is created on a rock. Because they are merely a surface coating, pictographs tend to be less durable than petroglyphs. The ones that survive are most often found in caves, rock shelters, and areas with dry climates. A variety of pigments have been used to make pictographs. Examples of these pigments include pieces of charcoal from a campfire; blood from hunted or sacrificed animals; and mineral materials such as chalk, limonite, or hematite." Geology.com: <http://geology.com/articles/petroglyphs.shtml> (accessed April 2017).

themes, imagery and factual notes – are often fragmented and dispersed throughout the entire work, as in Lehóczy's poems.

Letters pulsate if you touch them. Palpable under the paint. The wall is white so that you remember. The wiped off scribble in the left hand side corner you forgot. You hadn't forgotten. *En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme* (Lehóczy 2011a: 36).

Memories, but also dreams and nightmares, contribute to permeate with dark – even sometimes macabre – tones some of Lehóczy's poetry. Emblematic for this topic is "5 The Album of the Living:"

Because it's hard to be optimistic sometimes. To have trust in your texture, to recall geology. Am I only reproducing yet another negative of numerous negatives of you? Am I getting not an inch closer to your surface? This icon is painstakingly observing itself in dark tunnels of kaleidoscopes reeling gradually an inch further each time backwards. When I say you, I am talking about the earth. [...] But there is always the protection of the linen. Do you think? The sepia shroud glued to the skin. The white folio. The atlas. I must start a new page. And leave it blank (Lehóczy 2011a: 40).

In the first line, the difficulty to be optimistic is openly declared, and conveys the subtle pessimistic vision that permeates the whole collection.

In the lines that follow, the poet speaks of a profound dialogue with 'the other,' which is difficult to attain, due to the "protection of the linen" and "the sepia shroud glued to the skin:" strata that are difficult to penetrate. Again, in these lines it is possible to find an example of Lehóczy's conception of a multi-layered reality.

As previously mentioned, a recurring image in *Rememberer* is that of the parchment, a material that well embodies the process of writing and rewriting of the medieval manuscripts, written and 'overwritten' by the monks, silent witnesses of the story of mankind. It is an act that calls to mind the never-ending cycle of life, where energy and matters are transformed but preserved. The

monks link also to the further, almost grotesque, image of the monks' dried skins, 'like parchments' – monks who, with their well conserved corpses, seem to have overcome the boundary of life and death.

The following excerpt, taken from the poem "6 Monday, Midsummer," starts with the nightmarish representation of the poet being buried alive, and continues with images of the mummified monks, who stare at death, agape.

That night I dreamt of another solstice. I was buried alive in a catacomb wrapped tightly in white linen. Always the underground cities after all. Labyrinths of minerals. Crypts of solar eclipses. Mummified moments. Good soil. The stunning system of air holes. This way memory is corporate. This way memories are parched like the monks of Brno. Many parched monks with mouths agape resting horizontally in a row. They almost look alive (Lehóczy 2011a: 41-42).

The dreadful image of awakening in a catacomb wrapped in white linen inevitably reminds us of Christ's awakening in the Gospel.

It appears, then, that the *fil rouge* of the whole collection is remembering. In the following poem, "7 The Parchment Skin," remembering is associated again with death, represented by the image of the carved coffins.

I mean, to remember is like carving coffins out of cedars and graffitiing a simple word all over the façade. Learning reiterations by heart. Against traps of falling towards forgetfulness. Coffin texts engraved about the detours of the forgotten. [...] like odd church towers which, you say, look unfinished like the past. [...] Is this journey ever going to end? Between now and then, to and fro in this notebook? Back and forth between these visitations. We are lost between the length and height, width and breadth of remembering. Enveloped. Between layers of shadows (Lehóczy 2011a: 43).

The image of the carved coffins recurs later, where dying is equalled to forgetting. The only possible alternative to remembering offered to man is to disappear into the shadows of oblivion, but, as Lehóczy says, that would be "dying for the second time."



Remembering has no limits and encompasses all. Remembering through writing for Lehoczky is an almost rabid process that produces an urgent narrating activity, which needs to leave permanent traces on several matters, like parchment, wood, stone, etc. And indeed, in the dictionary verbs as ‘inscribing,’ ‘engraving,’ ‘carving,’ and ‘marking’ are found as synonyms of the term ‘writing.’

You say, the absence of memories is a little bit like dying. Or dying for the second time. That’s why. Let’s try and graffiti coffins carved out of cedars. You do mine. Here, on my dry skin. [...] The cocoon of the sepia city in waiting. A light yellow home. Cities don’t leave, they stay. They don’t. They travel in sunburnt parchments. In sand grains. In the vertigo of the sea. In the shell of the crab crawling to and fro (Lehoczky 2011a: 54).

In the third part of the collection, there is the sequence “Balaton,” which bears a subtitle in Hungarian. I will then examine some excerpts taken from “Balaton 6: A City in a Keyhole,” since the poems are significant for studying Lehoczky’s work for they possess some features not encountered in the previous poems.

Having used her readers to a poetry that analyses the ground depths in geological, historical and archaeological terms, Lehoczky here surprises by talking about the more recent aspects of roads construction works, nevertheless combining them with speculations about the after-life.

European cities’ inhabitants well know that digging for road construction often brings to light remains of the past – usually Roman ruins – thus resulting in a standstill in the works, that leaves holes in the ground till the experts come to examine the construction sites.

This city will soon be world-renowned for craters. I mean for perpetual construction and road works. For never-will-be post-modern undergrounds dug from one end of the bridge to the other. You can observe its post-mortem from my house through a net-curtain and spot a sedimentary pit, through which a city escaped. Slipping through a lightshaft. Although we have agreed cities would not

travel. But would you dare explore a catacomb-night by diving down the gravel in search of the city that fled? Digging your way, blindfold in a mine groping along invisible rail tracks? Would you dare sit on ghost-trams opposite real ghosts en route for an exit, for air, for a fissure, for a light shaft, for stars and stairways? Would you dare take a look at a mausoleum of shipwrecks and plane-wrecks? (Lehóczky 2011a: 54).

Surprisingly, Sheffield and Budapest share in part a similar past: the two cities were both founded by the Celts, then conquered by the Romans, to later enjoy a thriving Middle Age.

Cities and language possess multiple layers, created through ages that bind them indissolubly, to weave the unique fabric of each territory. On this, Skoulding writes that,

Lehóczky has written of her own work as palimpsestic, referring to the ways in which both cities and languages involve historical layering. The palimpsest is, in its literal sense, destructive: one text or image is overwritten with another that is more necessary in the present than the old one that it replaces. Cityscape is palimpsestic as buildings are destroyed in order to make room for those that answer the needs of the present (2013: 111).

Language is also a means to eternize the feeling of love, as in the poem “7 The Parchment Skin” (Noénak), where love is presented in association with death. “You wondered, when you died, whether you could bequeath your ashes to me and send them in a tiny ceramic pot by post” (Lehóczky 2011a: 43).

In the title of this poem there is the Biblical name of *Noénak*, ‘Noah,’ who saved himself and his family (together with some species of animals) from God’s punishment of flooding, by embarking on an ark. The link from the above poem and the next one seems to be a simple object, a ‘pot,’ but the underlying theme of all these poems is love, accompanied by a desire for stability, as found in “Balaton 1: The Ceramic Pot:”

So, for example, to love the lake you are thinking of, to love the city you want to imagine, first you must let the city drown and let the lake submerge too whirling

silt of memories, one layer after another. [...] Arrivals must not equate to departures any longer. You cannot go around in circles anymore. To love a place, to love a segment of geography, a fragment of rock, a mote of a mountain, you must leave this segment, this fragment, this mote in a codex, locked away in blocks of wood, you must then entrust this codex to a glass case, the glass case to an unattended museum, the museum to a necropolis. You must forget how to pronounce (Lehóczy 2011a: 49).

Searching for a point of balance in her wanderings and detours, and for a place to call 'home,' Lehóczy constantly seems to rescale her spatial and temporal co-ordinates, bringing her readers through episodes that belong not only to her own history, but also to a collective one.

The second volume ends with a poem that gives the title to the entire collection, "Rememberer," as if again the reader is forced to come to the same point of departure, in an apparently meaningless circularity. Memories of Budapest are recollected, while a last, non-answered question leaves the reader in suspense, as per the modernist cliché of the 'open end.'

And you thought of the hill, the liquefied afternoons you spent with them levitating a few hundred metres above the city. But what does one do with these unidentifiable details? you urged them. The Budapest parks, evaporating. The nameless omens scattered under arches of aqueducts, the small, fictitious failures. [...] What language were they remembering in the end? Did they in fact say anything at all (Lehóczy 2011a: 79)?

In the first two collections the two geographic extremities between which the poet's life is divided are initially identified as distinct poles; eventually they merge into a single place, that encompasses both.

In *Carillonneur*, published in 2014, the city of Sheffield, with its peripheral areas, is the main source for the narration. This small collection, divided into three parts, "Parasite of Town," "Carillonneur" and "*Phantom Poems*" owes its curious title – I discovered during my stay in Sheffield – to the carillon of the bell tower of Sheffield Town Hall, which has been installed in place of the bells

originally planned, to make the streets of the city centre resound of an unexpected 'naïf' atmosphere.<sup>65</sup>

Lehóczy imagines that the town dwellers of this "city without bells" decide to take on the task to impersonate time, and this is depicted in the tale-poem "When Tremble and Tremor Turned up in Crookes" in almost farcical tones. As in the previous collections, the poems are presented in sequences, or groups, of long compositions which fill the page of a dense prose, some without paragraphing, but the majority with conventional punctuation.

Lehóczy accompanies her readers in long walks through the urban and suburban environment of Sheffield, making them notice details which normally go unnoticed, but which her foreigner's view carefully detects. Far from being a guide of the city, the poems seek to show aspects of apparently minor importance, but which nevertheless explain the city's contemporary traits. It is a very personal perception of the urban environment, which anyway aims at objectivity, conveyed by Lehóczy's urgency of naming everything, as if in a catalogue. In this detailed account of the city, each noun is linked to the next one to create continuity in the narration.

This meticulous attentiveness to details is inspired also by Paul Celan, who asserts that: "Certainly the poem, the poem today shows – and this I think has only indirectly to do with not-to-be – underestimated difficulty of word choice, with the sharper fall of syntax or heightened sense of ellipsis" (2005: 409). And further:

The attentiveness a poem devotes to all its encounters, with its sharper sense of detail, outline, structure, colour, but also of "quiverings" and "intimations" - all this, I think is not attained by an eye vying, (or conniving) with constantly more perfect instruments. Rather, it is a concentration that stays mindful of all our dates (Celan 2005: 409-410).

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<sup>65</sup> In place of the original bells planned in the 19<sup>th</sup> century project, an electronic bell sound system, a "carillon," has been installed, to mark the time every fifteen minutes, during daytime, similar to the Westminster chime.

Paying attention to any detail of the environment around her, Lehoczky starts her wanderings, in this way seeking for opportunities to begin a verbal and historical exploration of the places, which, as common in her work, offer factual data from which to elaborate the fiction of narrative. Lehoczky communicates a 'spirit of adventure' which forces the reader to follow her in discovering unknown territories.

In "Greystones' Backyards," the first poem of the sequence "Parasite of Town," Lehoczky writes:

But these rivers retreat into tiny arteries pulsing under the skin when you approach them. Then, they offer you panorama. [...] you feel that you too should become a parasite on the carpet of this soggy cityscape. In the riverbed of this pale town. And accumulate clutter in your own cobbled courtyard. Two hours from London. Up towards the nucleus. Its whole life organized by its Northern aorta, the Pennines. [...] the sea must have been here a long time ago. And that's just possibly another lie too (Lehoczky 2014: 13-14).

Lehoczky's admission of making an unrealistic description of the city is stated with the terms "another lie too" and "through numerous lies." Whether it be irony or truth, Lehoczky succeeds in puzzling her readers again.

In searching to adapt to her new life in Sheffield, Lehoczky tries to discover the hidden beauty of a city strongly marked by its industrial past – a past so significant that it cannot be ignored. Lehoczky therefore decides to depart exactly from its industrial periphery: "... through numerous lies this city unpeels its stratigraphy, by means of camouflage, by hiding, blending in long sequences of bus trips to and fro in late October" (2014: 13).

The fragmented recounts of her wanderings avoid any linearity, with the precise purpose of getting lost in remote and labyrinthine backyards, as according to the practice of the *dérive*:

Impenetrable ginnels, untouched geographies, [...] flooded impasses and cul-de-sacs, rivers of unknown neighbour's junk, [...] liquefied maps with fuzzy street names to track down the old town which you can't quite touch yet with your mind.

“...walking into twilight I got lost following the instructions of a cacophonous map, its clandestine directions written over one another” (Lehóczky 2014: 13).

These excerpts are taken from the sequence that opens the collection and that declares the poet’s alienation, in search for an adaptation to the new environment which is not yet accomplished, represented by the self-referential image of the “Parasite of Town.”

In the poem “Sheffield Mágus,” Lehóczky defines her lyric self with the Hungarian word of ‘magician:’ she is a Hungarian magician settled in Sheffield, a city with a “malformed map,” in a phantasmagorical land, where she brings her readers, to amaze them by showing herself as a “Silky legerdemain,” in an atmosphere of ‘magic realism:’

Once when you visited this phantasmagoria land... its hideousness ... its malformed maps, solid houses with anaemic colours, the pre-cast and poured-in shapes of composites, and wondered at the antonym of the word ‘ostentatious’ (Lehóczky 2014: 15).

The city cannot flaunt a great beauty, nevertheless it has an undisputed charm on the poet, who, in the neon effects of the signs, sees the ghosts of the past:

These yellow, pink and lilac light effects at night enveloping the carcass of the city, erecting the outline of another ghost town, you established, are nothing but simulacrum. Silky legerdemain. And we dived into comparison with which we linked this geography to former and forgotten ones by mistake Bákó, Miskolc, Warsaw, to Dunaújvaros or Dresden... and then disappeared in the fluid afternoon through curvilinear glass pavilions of botanical gardens and fiery Guy Fawkes nights crowded autumn fairgrounds, dizzying merry-go-round like the ones we’d seen at the edges of derelict seaside towns (2014: 15).

Peripheral areas around Sheffield city centre offer a landscape of abandoned factories, a ghost town that reminds Lehóczky of other Eastern cities. Soon these images of past-known places fade away, in a blurred, surreal atmosphere, in which cities that were familiar to the author disappear, to re-materialize into

the present, represented by the glasses of the Botanical Gardens and the autumn fairground of the Guy Fawkes Night celebration.

The tour moves from the periphery, where the arterial street, the ‘Wicker,’ departs, to go backwards, towards the centre. This liminal approach to the city allows to have a detached vision, and additionally functions as a literary device to foster in the reader the expectation for the “core of it” – supposedly, the city centre – which, nevertheless, is carefully bypassed, as we read in “Panorama from the top of the Wicker Arches:”

All at once blown out into the streets towards the district, where, you said, the Wicker began to stretch out into nowhere. To the edge of the heart. To the periphery where ghost kids kick phantom football and dark clothed locals group at corners laconically nodding that they know how to inhabit this town without words. A spot which enables you to look at things from a distance sometimes allows you to fit every single miniature chip into a small but perfect pocket guide or map. And from the stone bridge over the watyr of Dune neghe the castell of Sheffield we saw the angle of the city as if we had always been pilgriming in reverse, crawling backwards towards the core (Lehóczy 2014: 17-18).

In these last lines, we find an example of a device Lehóczy often employs to reinforce the link with the past: the use of old English. Thus, we read about the medieval description of the castle by the river Don, where the Queen of Scots Mary Stuart had been imprisoned in 1570, for sixteen years, and by which the so-called “Lady’s Bridge” was located.

It might be noticed that the narrative here becomes closer to prose than to poetry, as if both forms are needed to recount life, in its poetic and prosodic aspects, which sometimes entwine, but in which factuality must prevail.

The past rapidly vanishes to surrender to the present of a city which is also a wasteland of abandoned factories, stations, and suburbs that seem to be lost into nowhere.

Wicker crisscrossing the disused station and disappearing with the intermittent ‘chuff’ into the valley of no man’s land. And then from the top of the forty-one invisible aches we saw the city from this twisted Eastern angle subdued under a weighty petrol-blue skyline, the city walls, the fire walls, the derelict factory surfaces, then the blind-glassed office walls, the enormous rounded gas tanks, unstrippable folios grown eclectically together, like fractured bones imperfectly healed, clumsily designed prosthetic limbs, mismatching mosaics of the afternoon hour in between, the pale palimpsest of now. We watched the tired posture of the landscape from this frame, paralysed in the hour where nothing really happens (Lehóczy 2014: 18).

Lehóczy seems to linger in the periphery, which allows her to observe the city from a distant perspective, i.e. its large industrial suburb, where the true essence of the city lies. And this is a fact, since Sheffield owes its aspect to its industrial past, which has made it universally famous for steel processing until the first half of the twentieth century.

And then we got tired of staring at the littered streets, the deserted wide avenues draggling their way back to the plastered city hall, wrapped in barbed wire (in its chronic battle with guano) and to the pinnacles of the two cathedrals each engaged in their own solipsistic monologue and decided not to return to the centre until we have exchanged words with those who, although so cunningly camouflaged, have colonized this peripheral segment of the world (Lehóczy 2014: 18-19).

In the following excerpt, taken from the poem “The Concrete Space: I in Heterotopia,” a reflection is needed on the term ‘heterotopia’ – from the Ancient Greek ἕτερος (héteros, "other, another, different") and τόπος ("place"), which means ‘other place,’ a notion of human geography which was elaborated by the philosopher Michel Foucault to describe places and spaces, both physical and mental, that interact on equal terms. Foucault uses the term ‘heterotopia’ (*hétérotopie*) to describe spaces that have more layers of meaning or relationships to other places than what is immediately visible.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Foucault's elaborations on heterotopias were published in an article entitled *Des espaces autres (Of Other Spaces)*. The philosopher calls for a society with many heterotopias, not only



Having briefly analysed the title of the poem, the focus is now to be addressed on its main character. Particularly in this poem, Lehóczy's lyric self-embodies the figure of the modern female *flâneur* – a *flâneuse* then – who enjoys her independence and anonymity in roaming the city in solitary walks, in what apparently seems ‘*a la dérive*’ explorations through the suburbs of Sheffield, here defined as “Heterotopia.” Lehóczy's wanderings seem to all intents real ‘expeditions,’ as if she were searching for a confirmation to her geographical-geological-historical assumptions. These tours, therefore, are supported and allowed by a detailed knowledge of the place, and, more than ‘improvised’ strolls, they are the fruit of her careful personal research, which can be seen also as a sort of ‘homage’ to her new country.

It becomes then necessary to recall here briefly the theory of the *dérive*, formulated by the Situationist Guy Debord in his "Theory of the *Dérive*," published in 1955, and first translated into English by Ken Knabb in 1958, a document which could serve as an instruction manual for the psychogeographic procedure, carried through the act of the *dérive* (‘drift’).

In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there... But the *dérive* includes both this letting go and its necessary contradiction: the domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities (Debord 1995: 50).

And here is Lehóczy's vision of her *a la dérive* practice, perfectly described in the following excerpt taken from the poem “The Concrete Space: I in Heterotopia:”

But getting lost or drifting with the fluctuating crowd is much more artless than premeditated city meanderings. Allowing one to somersault impromptu into deep valleys and gutters, cracks of cobbled pavements tumbling down towards the

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as a space with several places of/for the affirmation of difference, but also as a means of escaping from authoritarianism and repression.

bottom of a colossal gravel pit forgetting names of former cities for a while or letting their vacuums be flooded by the weiry Don. Absentmindedly consenting to early December to envelop them with thick snow. All tautologies attached to these discarded landscapes too become one thick layer of altocumulus mackerel sky, unpronounceable words I frequently - mispronounced one day vanish in the winter whirlwinds of these drifting turnings eventually into nothing but erased full stops. Geographically, so to say, missing the scheduled destinations and arriving at the unknown square I all at once rolled inside an enormous cementitious bowl like a kite pulled by a gravitational ghost semi-attached by the arm, magnetically drown to the bottom of the basin rimmed with the slopes unscalable, confined by seven chasms undulating unnoticeably like seven laundry ropes gone loose in the wind blending into a panorama always already fractured (2014: 20-21).

The impression of Sheffield which results from these verses, is of a fragmented landscape that lacks a unitarian urban plan, and where the poet's 'unresolved' trips are the only ways to explore it.

On Lehóczy's approach to the city, Skoulding's opinion goes even further, by asserting its relevance also for the historical evaluation of the urban environment that Lehóczy makes. This all reminds us of Bauman's critique of the city as a place of 'consumption,' a reproach also made by the Situationists. Skoulding's words read as follows:

The potential relevance to Lehóczy's work is clear, since not only does the *dérive* offers a model for her fluidity associative re-routings, but her detailed historical knowledge of place combined with sharp attention to the senses offers an implied critique of the city as a site of consumption (2014: 121).

In the poem "The Owls of Never Edge," Lehóczy purposely mistakes the names of the places: "Nether Edge" becomes then "Never Edge:" a place she described through its legends, the "telling lies," and the "twittering tales." This playing with the names may refer to Jacques Derrida's idea of deconstruction and incompleteness, as part of all systems of meaning – in specific, it refers to 'catachresis,' i.e. a semantic misuse: a word with an arbitrary connection to its meaning, imposed upon people but considered semantically incorrect.

And so to fabricate a city so unknown the telling lies continues. Never Edge is an undulating home of a street-lined deep valley without a rim. Beneath the earth's surface. It is because this valley must have been filled up by the North Sea a long time ago. According to the impromptu sign in the underpass near Bramall Lane [...] His words, like the dozen of Honey Buzzards circulating around the church tower, flew out of his mouth high up in the air as far as the tiles on the roof twittering tales of the old graveyard over there, of the three thousand sailors, the mad murderer and his two hundred Happisburgh virgins, all inhabiting the same cemetery (Lehóczky 2014: 22).

Leading her readers through unexpected tracks, Lehóczky quotes the locality of Happisburgh for its cemetery, where two hundred young girls were murdered, instead of mentioning it for the important archaeological discovery made in 2010.<sup>67</sup>

Great Britain – or ‘Albion,’ as it is here named with its Hellenised form and Greek characters – is a country rich in legends, myths, stories, and songs, as the call of the Tawny Owl by Shakespeare, cited at the end of this passage.

A large number of these solitary spectres seem to lurk in ‘Αλβιών’, bog man and bog women of the Isles, drifting from the North Pole to the South, from Aberdeen to Aberystwyth, from town to town, tavern to tavern humming or occasionally whistling the same song between dusk and dawn “Tu-whit”, Tu-who” to an anonymous *who*. You have heard this tune before, a long time ago, a mantra of an East-Anglian ghost who stopped you in the Rose and asked about words (Lehóczky 2014: 23).<sup>68</sup>

Besides the Shakespearean reference, Lehóczky mentions here the bog bodies, or bog people, which are corpses of humans and animals, naturally mummified and preserved, found in peat bogs.<sup>69</sup> As in the recurring descriptions of the

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<sup>67</sup> In 2010, the village of Happisburgh, in the county of Norfolk, became known for the archaeological discovery of 800,000-year-old flint tools: it is the oldest evidence of human settlement in the United Kingdom.

<sup>68</sup> Lehóczky is referring to William Shakespeare, who used the owl's song in *Love's Labour's Lost* (Act 5, Scene 2): "Then nightly sings the staring owl, Tu-whit; Tu-who."

<sup>69</sup> These bodies have been most commonly found in Northern European countries: Denmark, Germany, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Ireland, and have been dated between

mummified monks, the natural bewilderment we could feel in front of these miserable human remains soon fades away, being used by Leńóczy to encounter them in her verses as if they were living creatures, and not only silent witnesses to the mystery of death.

It all creates a sort of grotesque and surreal situation, which seems to make a mockery of life and death. Only in a successive poem, “Post Scriptum on Mute Bell Clappers,” which belongs to the third, and last, section, their status of dead people is finally acknowledged: “Those who could have begun the sentence have gone to bogland. With syntaxes which could have constructed a border between highlands and catacombs” (Leńóczy 2014: 59).

It is typical of modern and postmodern poetry to interweave paradox in its texts, and we have learnt that Leńóczy is keen on it, in particular on what Skoulding defines the “paradox of distances,” in which places geographically distant are associated for implicit reasons, known to the poet. Paradoxes can be also those created by the inaccuracy of memory.

The last poem of the first section is “Postcard from West Street.” Many places of Sheffield are here referred to – as West Street, one of the main arterial roads. Again, in this poem there are quotations in old English.

[T]o find the heart of city signposted by the colossal writing of the city’s firewall drawing my memories from somewhere-elles to here arysyng fram shefeld carriage-place and shef-sqware to gon wandrynge abuten laberlinthe of aere. I decided to learn this pictograph by hearth reiterating every syllable until it made some sense, hieroglyphs which claim to have the magic power to decorate blank facades... (Leńóczy 2014: 26).

Reading these sentences in old English is a further opportunity Leńóczy offers her readers, making them enjoy the play of testing themselves in deciphering the verses. Peter Riley (2014) so expresses his opinion on these passages in old English:

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8000 BCE and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The unifying factor of the bog bodies is that they have been found in peat and are preserved, though their levels of preservation may vary.

It is as if the line of language is suddenly dipped into past time and then withdrawn from it without anything won from it, without any catch. It remains a linguistic experience, as does everything else; the city is catalogued as a collection of words.

The narrative seems to be interspersed almost naturally by these words in old English, which stop when modern English reminds us that more lives will soon arrive to write new stories on old ‘manuscripts,’ which will be read or unread: an effective image to represent the renewal of life, in its never-ending cycle, of the heard or unheard voices of people.

The almost Kafkaesque image of the humanised poet-parasite recurs in many poems of the collection, as if to signify that Lehoczky can inhabit her new city only by first crawling unnoticedly under the urban subsoil crevices, to discover its real core, and then emerge on the surface, where, she argues, she can browse an ‘erratic map.’

One needs to be a parasite gnawing through strata crawling with bright pupils under the skin of the many cities fossilised under plaster. To find the soft core, the delicate porous heart of the concrete. I pan over the erratic surface of maps every day to find the seven rivers entangling the city’s heart like a wire greten and understonden hwat lyen abouten as yit nat rede. But sooner or later unread lives and never written manuscripts, too, show through the topographic paper. That each map maker has their own vision of the absolute map. But there is a misplaced magnolia, a lost bogeywoman lurking on every eclectic atlas [...] According to the new time (Lehoczky 2014: 26-27).

Almost like in a thriller, we are involved in this search, wandering where the mysterious essence of the city lies; it is a quest that, as it will be discovered later, goes unsatisfied. Again, we find the recurrent postmodern feature of the open unresolved ending. On this search, Peter Riley (2014) suggests that,

There is a sense of ruthless progression, cataloguing the detail as if in search of something, some key or clue, naming everything from railways lines to the contents of charity shops as if there must be an answer somewhere; but the only answer is

the unattainable total. The search is for a “core”, identified as a “focal point”, “soft core”, “delicate core”, “where everything happens”, which remains unlocated and perhaps illusory, and the quest continues.

Individuals creates their own geography, assuming their centrality in the world, but this ‘absolute’ map does not exist, since everything is relative. Anybody or anything can be in the right or wrong place, as Leńóczyk (2014: 26) reminds us: “Each map maker has their own vision of the absolute map. But there is a misplaced magnolia, a lost bogeywoman lurking on every eclectic atlas.” This is for Leńóczyk a new acknowledgement, as she admits “According to the new time,” (2014: 27), i.e. the English time.

In “The Carillonneur’s Song,” a poem that concludes the second part of the collection, Leńóczyk recounts of a tour in the periphery of Sheffield, which starts with a quotation in old English, in “Ye bells of forgotten belfries, damp Hillsborough bedsits. There is no world out of this labyrinth” (Leńóczyk 2014: 40), which probably alludes to Shakespeare’s verses “There is no word without Verona walls,” from his tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*.

The Sheffield suburb of Hillsborough is mentioned in several poems of the collection, as here, but, as Peter Riley (2014) observes “there is not a hint of the Hillsborough Disaster of 1989. That would be a public, mediated event and the world of these poems is a paradoxical construct of uniquely individual perception and stark detailed objectivity.” We remind that on April 15, 1989, ninety-six Liverpool fans were killed at the Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield, in the worst stadium-related disaster in English sports history.

The bells are evoked three times, an act that links to a previous poem, but also a repetition that conveys musicality to the versification, as a refrain. In this way, their ‘sound absence’ even more resonates in the city. On this musical effect, Peter Riley (2014) writes:

Musical, but not lyrical except in moments caught up in the prose flux. This repetition of the opening words within a long poem has a kind of balladic effect without a narrative other than the narrative of the quest itself, and the verbal

resources made possible by it, rather than anything leading to a summation which would halt the process.

Sheffield is a labyrinthine place for Lehóczy, since, beside its irregular map, in her vision past and present are indissolubly interwoven; furthermore, Sheffield holds a double nature, with implicit cross-references to her native Budapest.

This is seen clearly in the poem which starts with the description of Sheffield's deserted industrial areas in January, and continues up to a hill in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century cemetery, where the poet settles the stories of deceased young people.<sup>70</sup> The cemetery location reminds Lehóczy of the Budapest-hills, and then, as a perfect example of psychogeography, the narrative soon moves to Budapest – without any notice to the reader – to return to Sheffield again. Lehóczy writes:

The periphery of the city, at the edge of the urban night they [the boars, A/N] vanished, right into the middle of the black woods of the Buda Hills. Then. But not now. [...] The Danube, it was. The river Don. The litter. The letter. There is no separation between words in the end. They weight the same weight (Lehóczy previous 2014: 41).

The passage above captures the whole essence of this third volume: Sheffield is the new focus of the narration, nevertheless, the city serves as a means to accompany the author's thoughts back to Hungary, where places and locations seem to hold now less importance for the poet.

The last part of the collection is entitled "*Phantom Poems*." It contains eighteen short poems, matched in two, of which all the second ones start with an epigraphic "Post Scriptum," as if they were the result of the poet's reconsidering.

In two of them there is the name of the village of Kelebia, located in a small region in southern Hungary, on the border with Serbia. Again, Lehóczy forces

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<sup>70</sup> Further indications can be found at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/happened-hillsborough-1989/>

her readers to do a personal research, in order to give the verses, the correct collocation, by making them focalize on the geographical coordinates of this liminal region, crossed by the railway, through which Lehóczy has probably made many train journeys. In “Post Graffiti on Kelebia Wagons” we read:

In a way that everything absences. Budapest – Swab suburbia. Not much to remember here. You are always already gone elsewhere. Not much to forget. To recall the moment when you grew up. Dark coats retreat into dusk. [...] Brueghel winter market scene. One must wear at least two skins. [...] And then *it*, like some estranged creature, suddenly washed out into time, finally finds rest on rust right by the passing Kelebia Express (Number X of the Pan-European rail corridor), running up and down between the capital and the South, strolling through gravel mines, detouring into Andromeda fog. The territory of slow zones. The sovereignty of the still-born self. Heads for the new tracks of the circular mind. No such things as absolute origo. Only the balkan desire to enter (exit) a world where cargo wagons pull in, in the end, the last depot of the continent. Where cargo wagons originate from. Where they’ll once have unbecome. Szabadka. A postcard from a stranger. *Peu de liberté* (Lehóczy 2014: 61).

In these poems, as well as in her whole narrative, Lehóczy seems to contemplate marginality, with the ‘estranged’ gaze that characterized also Brodsky. The isolation-desolation transmitted by this place is recognizable in certain postmodern literary *topoi* and sounds even more striking in a world that seems obsessed by interconnection. Peter Riley’s (2014) clarifies his point:

Borders are crucial to the experience of this book, they are what make you a stranger, and a massive political question could lurk there, but that is not the kind of writing that goes on here. The lesson is always “This is how it is” rather than “This is what could be done about it”. There is even a touch of resignation across the post-industrial suburbs of Sheffield and their various borders. There is certainly a creative determination born out of the contemplation of marginality.

Many poems begin and end in the same way: this literary device seems to underline the inutility of the narration, as in a Beckettian text (and Beckett is



indeed mentioned in one poem); the sense of nullity is additionally reinforced with the citation of the inexistent saints of “Saint Zero” and “Saint Nil.”

The mention to de Certeau is explicit in “De Certeau’s Night Webcam.” In the poem – which is without punctuation and, in some parts, has larger word spacings – the view progressively widens: thus, from the interior of an office, it reaches the nest of a peregrine falcon, on the top of the deconsecrated church of St George in Sheffield. Lehóczy here talks about to the peregrine birds which have successfully been bred for the first time in the city in 2012, supported by the “Peregrine Project,” on a specially-erected nest platform on The University of Sheffield’s St George’s church, now a lecture theatre. They are constantly watched by a webcam, hence the inspired title of the night webcam creatively related, in a contemporary transposition, to de Certeau.<sup>71</sup>

Again, through a migratory animal – we have previously mentioned the storks – the suggestion is here to migration, obtained with the evocative poetic image of the peregrine mother that watch over Sheffield’s citizens – migrant and non.

An opaque night dice office space (recognizable) dusked up books what’s left of them in corners small bones of maps used coffee cups the quadrangular life of a black box of one’s life [...] as if changing the route on the track was labour as if the routine hurt the metallic noise of settling and unsettling feathers bristling in the breeze [...] the sheltered the unsheltered the concave and the convex the inside turned inside out four terracotta eggs the rattle of fear atlases falcon fluffs just everywhere peregrine mother tonight watch over us (Lehóczy 2014: 62).

The peregrine falcon has been previously mentioned in the poem “The Ecology of Air Corridors,” alongside with the recurring images of the urn, of the terracotta rooftops, of the palimpsests and celestial bodies. The Earth is for Lehóczy a new Eliotian “Waste Land:” a vast cemetery, and this bitter consideration denotes, once more, the pessimism that underlies the whole collection.

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<sup>71</sup> More information of this curious fact can be found at: <http://peregrine.group.shef.ac.uk/>

You always measure yourself in relation to the cosmos, the armchair astronomer said. Down there, she pointed with her index finger on the map on her lap, *terra firma*, space's largest necropolis. The orb: an urn of calcium. A terracotta palimpsest of imploded mindscapes. The Moon, the Earth. Collimate drifting atlases of thoughts which know nothing about thinking. We were flying above the city encircled in fog evading other planets and planets suspended in the Northern hemisphere unable to land due to severe weather conditions in Budapest. [...] Think of the falcon family perched on the top of St George's relentlessly pecking at the map of their nest (Lehóczy 2014: 53).

It must be noted here the almost compulsive occurrence of antinomies, in an intermittent syntax structure which restlessly reflects the bouncing of the poet's subconscious fears and obsessions during her exploration of a seemingly chaotic world.

It is not by chance, then, that the meaning of the whole collection seems to be assigned to a beggar of West Street in Sheffield, symbol of a homelessness, nomadic existence brought to its extremes. This image could possibly be referred to Walter Benjamin's works. Deborah Parsons (2000: 36) in her volume *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* highlights in Benjamin's writings the two contraposed figures of the 'dandy' and the 'ragpicker,' who embody opposite inhabitants of the modern urban landscape. She writes:

The figure who takes precedence for Benjamin as the dominant walker of the city in the later stages of modernity is the rag-picker or the *chiffonier*. For Baudelaire and for Benjamin, the dandy and the rag-picker mark the progressive demise of the bourgeois subject in the city, at one representing and heroically yet vainly resisting the modern. Benjamin's surrealist rag-picker probably resembles Baudelaire's avant-garde more accurately than the authoritative figure he is usually attributed with. Benjamin himself, in his twentieth-century retrieval and revaluation of the obsolete nineteenth-century arcades, acts as a Baudelaire-inspired rag-picker, concerned with the refuse objects of everyday-life and forming a connective relationship with the city in which the urban landscape is regarded as palimpsest of layered time.

The last sentence in the passage refers again to the idea of the palimpsest of layers of time: a concept dear to Leńóczy, associated, also by other authors. to the urban fabric

In the last poem of the collection, “Kelebia Express,” there is depicted this figure of the vagabond/ragpicker:

And the vagabond of West Street, willowstick on his back feathers in hair, bells on hat, is always right in the end. Tiresome the not trying. Look to speak slowly. You are taking part in a walking race, she suggests. [...] The desire for a narrative, growing, a metropolis, in either directions, she thinks. [...] The crawling of the Kelebia Express across the lack (Leńóczy 2014: 64).

Here again the village of Kelebia is mentioned; this sort of ‘no-man’s land,’ epitomizes the poet’s solitude in her ‘personal blind map.’ In “Kelebia Express” we read further:

The resistance to arriving anywhere at all. Phantom station along the edge. A personal blind map, soulless, peopleless. Orion. Andromeda. Centaur. The Moon. Study the anatomy of amnesia. The size of an iota, an omega. An empty fin-de-siècle pool. And in there, the marginalia. Tons of ash flooding the mirror. No such thing as recognition between *now* and its old reflection. Because it’s not who runs. Here the lessening air. Earth slows you down (Leńóczy 2014: 64-65).

As customary to Leńóczy, her gaze turns to the celestial vault, and so in her verses constellations and astronomical bodies are present: “Orion, Andromeda. Centaur. The Moon,” as if to search for solace for the ephemeral human condition. But, again, nature is indifferent to man: soon the narration ‘tumbles down,’ to focus on an iota, the Greek letter, used to signify a small amount, and then to an omega, the end of everything.

In this reference to the celestial bodies as if to search for an impossible answer to the finite nature of man – whose desire for infinity expresses itself through language – a link could be found with Brodsky’s poem “Lithuanian

Nocturne,” (“Litovskii noktiurna”): “Heaven’s vault is a molecular chorus of consonants and vowels, in common parlance - souls.”

Lehóczy concludes her amazing travel into a quite unlikely, almost ‘bizarre’ place: a swimming pool, which anticipates what has become the elected setting of her last writings, to reduce all the rest to “a few notes scribbled in the margin.” The poem ends with the effective image of the impossibility of breathing at high altitudes, and the discourse is thus brought down to earthly things: “Here the lessening air. Earth slows you down.”

Human beings seem to be deemed to fly high with their thought, but, at the same time, also to resign to their frail and soon-expiring condition. Peter Riley’s (2014) opinion comes to the same point, well summarized in the following passage:

The central experience of this remarkable book is the mystery of human physical presence in earthly space, all the more mysterious for being sited in a foreign maze of house-lined streets, seedy pubs and pathetic charity shops peopled by homeless vagabonds postmen and sobbing toddlers in pushchairs. It is a mystery that can never be solved.

### **3.8. A Fluid Identity**

The poem “Post Scriptum on Mud,” contained in the collection *Carillonneur*, anticipates the focus theme of Lehóczy’s successive works: water and the world related to it. Immersed in a protective limbo, almost amniotic and mother-like, where painful memories and melancholy are temporarily muted, the poet first appears in search for happiness:

And the condition of happiness is in the correlative. I mean in the relation with luck [...] The distant vision, the state of torpor, the centaur mindscape, half clay half fluid, and then the swift hesitation whether to belong to earth or liquid or in-between (Lehóczy 2014: 54).

An apparent calm is described here, a calm which foresees a stream of poetic inspiration soon to come and linked to water: the attraction for this element

becomes in fact progressively so strong that Lehoczky ‘dives’ into it headlong – and still enjoys lingering in it, as testified by all her last publications.

In 2015, Lehoczky inaugurated a series of poems that have the unusual settings of swimming pools, and swimmers as protagonists: a series which starts with the poem “On the Swimming Pool” and later develops into *Poems from the Swimming Pool*, a chapbook with some of her early works about swimming pools; the last publication is a pamphlet, *Pool Epitaphs and Other Love Letters*, published in April 2017.

In this section, I will briefly analyse some topics that emerge from these last collections, with the understanding that a more comprehensive assessment on Lehoczky’s work will be possible after the release of the new volume *Swimming Pool*, at the end of 2017, which also promises to be her amplest. Some of the lyrics I am going to comment will be included in this new publication.

It could be said, then, that the thematic development of Lehoczky’s last production demonstrates a further affinity with Joseph Brodsky’s writings.

The first poem centred on the theme of water is “On the Swimming Pool,” a long poem published in *English: Journal of the English Association* in 2015. In his poem, emblematic for the study of her last work, Lehoczky plays with the semantics referred to the term ‘pool,’ which in English has multiple meanings. Taking as a source the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we find that the richest terminology is nevertheless related to water, when the term pool refers to its Germanic matter: thus, it can be ‘water pool,’ which can be a natural basin – like a pond – or an artificial one, like a swimming pool, but it can be also a ‘shallow patch of liquid on a surface,’ as well as a ‘deep place in a river. In a transposed significance, pool means ‘a pool of blood,’ which signifies the accumulation of blood in parts of the venous system.

When the term ‘pool’ refers to its late 17<sup>th</sup>-century meaning, it acquires additional semantic values: it is used to define the sport played on a billiard table, for a group of people which represents a human resource for work; it stands also for the resource of shared vehicles supply. ‘Pool’ can also be the collective number of players' stakes in gambling, or a group of contestants who

compete against each other in a tournament, or the legal agreement of a group of people to put money into a common fund; pool is also a computer database. Besides, it should not be forgotten that from some of these substantives, the corresponding verbs derive.

In such an overwhelming plethora of terms, Lehóczy broadens the range, making new associations to the term ‘pool,’ by creating a chain of linked notions, which makes this long poem a sequence of innumerable allusions, leaving no pause to the reader. Allen Fisher (2017), in the back-cover review to this poem contained in the 2017 volume, argues that “The poem compels attention to itself as it expands, alliterates, rhymes, moves off at tangent and is wonderfully obsessive.”

“On the Swimming Pool” appears to be an incredible series of verbal ‘movements’ which seem to follow “the fluidity of language and social exchange,” as John Hall (2017) suggests:

No wonder that the poem here makes such recourse to layering, folding, piling, refraining, riffing on instabilities in grammatical class (often reaching for a verb from the interior of a noun, for example), concatenating the resulting variations in a singing continuity rather than a stumbling uncertainty between them.

Lehóczy begins her poem with what seems a continuation of a previously established conversation with her readers:

... but we must, the anonymous author continues,  
pause at this absolute city – the Pool. The total polis  
whose job is to await you, silent correspondent; pool  
the every polis that awaits the other too. Pool a  
nocturnal polis. Pool patient polis. Pool  
the democratic. Pool Parthenon. Pool an unmarried  
woman’s apartment. Pool marginal. Pool eccentric.  
Pool *my* temple. Pool her sovereign cell. Pool the full.  
[...] Pool the western *cella* of a larger pool. The much larger  
pool the unconscious of the city (2015a: 131).

From the very the beginning of the poem, Leńóczy matches the term ‘pool’ with ‘polis,’ ‘city’ in Greek. The city is a ‘personified’ place that ‘awaits’ the poet, but a place which also conforms to the ideal of the city, found in ancient Greece. The discourse bounces from the poet’s personal references to more general assertions, indulging in no description of sort: a long sequence of nouns bound only thanks to their conceptual connections, where soon the reference to metaphysical aspects is called into question: “pool the unconscious of the city.”

Pool agora. Pool assembles. Pool where  
one *speaks* in thoughts. Pool the once crowded central  
market Socrates failed to take me to in winter. The one  
that now floats in regret and aggravation. Regret and  
silence. Pool is not for agoraphobics. Pool is also  
where Socrates used to lean outside, waiting for me to  
come out at last. But that was a long time ago. Pool is now.  
Pool is Citadel, water containing oxygen. Pool is  
Heidegger’s *horizon*. Pool is coins. Pool is coins in a  
pool. Pool is pocket money. Pool is (my) Capital. Pool  
is cathedral. But not the one in Sheffield (Leńóczy 2015a: 131).

Leńóczy plays with the Greek terminology, combining nouns and their antonyms, to make an historical excursus of the city formation, which also encompasses the city destruction, represented by the bombing of Cologne during the Second World War. Here, as in many of Leńóczy’s poems, the opposite actions of constructing and destroying are represented, to stimulate reflection on man’s contradictions.

In the lines that follow Leńóczy alludes to the symbol of the publishing house Penguin: “Pool explored in *Swimming Studies* by Leanne Shapton (an imprint of Penguin),” which nonetheless serves as a pretext to come again to water, through two aquatic animals – a penguin and a whale.

Pool is a penguin. Pool is a  
universal whale. Pool is the dome of Cologne  
surviving all apocalypses both in the future and in the

past. Pool is cosmopolis, astropolis, ecumenopolis  
megapolis. Pool is necropolis and pool is Heliopolis  
too. Heliopolis for the hydrophilic. I am a  
hydrophilic. Pool in Sheffield is steelopolis. The term  
Metalopolis has been used already for another polis.  
Pool Holy City. Pool my hieropolis. Pool citta  
eterna from Greek rheo or Latin ruo both meaning  
'flow'. Pool everything and everywhere. It is this  
hieropolis where Adam will chant 'Viva Pool'. Pool is  
not what you think it is. Pool is certainly not what *I*  
think it is. Pool is what you are thinking. Pool is what  
I am thinking too (2015a: 132).

The verses bring finally to Sheffield, for which Lehóczyk invents the term  
"steelopolis," a term which refers to the city's renown past of steel producer,  
but "not Metalopolis," Lehóczyk warns. With it, she is probably hinting at the  
term already used for an imaginary city in the game StarCraft.<sup>72</sup> Reading these  
lines, we have a further confirmation of Lehóczyk's verbal inventive, which,  
again, reminisces of Brodsky, as the continuous rebound between high and low  
registers.

Further historical suggestions are reinforced by quotations from Greek and  
Latin, which hint at the etymology of the noun 'Rome,' apparently derived from  
the verb 'to flow' in Greek and Latin: it could then be interpreted as 'a city on  
the river,' the river Tiber; a notion that Lehóczyk demonstrates to know.

In this long poem, Lehóczyk shows all her erudition, which allows her to  
make unexpected associations.

On this, John Hall (2017) writes:

Here the text or the poem is a swimming pool, a pool in which language or thought-  
as-body glide through cultural and or phenomenological spaces; fluid places for

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<sup>72</sup> StarCraft is a science fiction media franchise, set in the beginning of the 26th century, based  
on a military galactic struggle for dominance among four species. It was first released as a  
videogame in 1998. Since then, many series, as well as novelizations, films, games and toys  
have been created on its theme. "Metalopolis" is one of the city maps used in it.



being, thinking or even swimming in the world. It is polyglot within English, let alone in relation to all the other tongues that are almost audible and to the maps of Europe that move to and fro somewhere beneath the text.

And a map is explicitly – and unpredictably – present, in the middle of the poem: that of the Athens underground, Athens which has been previously evoked by the many references to its past of ‘cradle’ of the Western civilization. The underground map, sometimes with modifications, was a peculiarity of psychogeography manifestos.

It is clear from the very beginning that Leńóczy asks her reader the difficult task of interpreting the meaning of the word ‘pool,’ leaving any possibility open. As we have read in the lines quoted, Leńóczy writes: “Pool is not what you think it is. Pool is certainly not what *I* think it is. Pool is what you are thinking. Pool is what I am thinking too” (2015a: 132).

Pool the personal history turned  
upside down. [...] Pool tautology. Pool  
heteroglossia. Pool glossolalia. Pool the female  
shower room crowded with elderly Yorkshire women  
all talking at once. The best is that you can still speak  
when your mouth is full of pool. Viva the pool, viva  
Pool. Pool is where you, the swimmer, can become a  
polyglot. Pool is where you speak no language(s) and  
it is also where you speak them all. Pool echolalia.  
[...] Pool the unnameable. Pool is  
unnameable although you can pronounce it with one  
breath. In the other’s language it’s pronounced with  
two. Pool is irritating alteration times (Leńóczy 2015a: 134-135).

A literary attitude Leńóczy holds is to keep control of her authorial voice – a feature particularly evident in this poem – to maintain her real “I” a step back in respect of her lyrical *I*. The author in fact does not offer anything to the explanation of her personal story, “turned upside down,” but instead she soon returns to more general issues. Terms as “heteroglossia” and “glossolalia” are

present and already encountered in Lehoczky's poems, as well as other conceptions related to language and unusual cultural phenomena.

Pool, in this lyrical representation, is the place where surrealistically everything happens, 'even' where a swimmer becomes a polyglot. The indication which leads to the author herself is clear since Lehoczky declared on many occasions her love for water ("I am a hydrophilic," she writes in the first part of this piece), but everything is reduced to this.

In water, all is possible: you speak no language – speaking in water is not possible – but, at the same time, you potentially speak many of them. In pool words seem to make an echo: thus, the effect of echolalia. The term 'pool' – Lehoczky notices – requires a minimum effort to be pronounced due to its brevity in English, compared with Hungarian, "the other's language," where the noun has two phonetic syllables ('medence').

In the lines quoted below, Lehoczky moves from urban flâneurism to a new conception of 'liquid' flâneurism, made of "topography, calligraphy and cartography," following the route of the river Danube, which passes through her native Budapest.

Pool fluid flânerie. Pool topography, calligraphy,  
cartography. Pool the river Danube, passing through  
four capital cities, discharging itself into the Black  
Sea, the one which Anonymous Author always wants  
to bathe in. [...] Study of water and  
pool concrete. O the aquatic flâneur and his private  
view of an island race and a people with a deep  
affinity for water. From the sea, from rock pools,  
from rivers and streams, tarns, lakes, lochs, ponds,  
lidos, swimming pools and spas, from fens, dykes,  
moats, aqueducts, waterfalls, flooded quarries, even  
canals (Lehoczky 2015a: 135-136).

In these lines, there is Lehoczky's vision of the British people, "an island race," with "a deep affinity for water," and it is no coincidence, it could be said, that

the United Kingdom is her elected country. And the hints here can be ventured forward, by recalling the greatness of the British naval fleet.

A fast list of terms related to water, starting from the open waters of the ocean and the sea, brings us to the secluded waters of a pool, passing through many watery ponds and systems where waters artificially are conveyed, like dykes, aqueducts and canals.

The last passage I have selected belongs to the final part of the poem: in it Lehóczy seems to draw a more personal picture, which speaks of her disorientation. “Pool is a personal blind map.” A ‘blind map,’ we are reminded, is a map where geographical features and political boundaries are shown, but which contains no defining names. In these verses, Lehóczy offers a clue on the relation she has established between the pool and the city, which ‘awaits’ her arrival – another recurrent image in her works. Moreover, in the lines that follow, there is a further hint on the connection between Lehóczy’s writing related to the pool, namely the verses “Where the pool ends the word begins:”

Pool a personal blind map.  
Pool cycle. Pool the spasmodic beeping of the clock  
on the arena’s wall. [...] Pool is a polis that awaits your arrival  
late into the night. Pool is a nocturnal polis.  
Where the pool ends the word begins and  
where it begins beginning unends. Pool deafness, pool  
languagelessness. Underwater a wrist watch goes off.  
Did you hear that? And off again (Lehóczy 2015a: 136).

The pool is linked to Lehóczy’s love for swimming, and therefore, with an easy interpretation, we could say that after swimming, she starts writing literally, but also metaphorically, since swimming offers further inspiration for her poetry.

In a pool, sounds are muffled (“Pool deafness”), no language is spoken, and time stands still – this last notion is effectively conveyed by the poetic image of the wrist watch that goes off. After reading the poem, an obvious question

arises on the significance of the term ‘pool.’ John Hall (2017) poses the question for us, trying to find an answer:

Nothing here is ever as simple as an unambiguous noun. What on earth, in the name of currency, is a *pool*? Occasionally a simple, and for that reason seductive, image is glimpsed: for a moment there is the clarity of a single swimmer’s body cutting a line through water, and then that clarity is not so much lost – it never is – but disallowed the status of whole, as ungenerous within these shifting overlays. The literal is thus inseparable from metaphor, perhaps also from allegory, since all is set in motion by a cumulative aggregation – though *always already* in motion –, moving in and through the long poem-paragraphs, which themselves pile up in breath-defying sentences that themselves keep accumulating on the principle of echo, inclusiveness, alternation, always refusing to settle, even into a narrative possibility that at times beckons.

The poem “On the Swimming Pool” contains many topics that Lehoczky would further develop in her chapbook *Poems from the Swimming Pool*, published in 2015, by Constitutional Information. The poems contained in this collection are entitled “Word One,” “Hypnos and Hajnočzy,” “Melancholy Swimmer,” “Enunciation,” which comprises “The Rhetorical Swimmer,” “The Museologist Swimmer,” “The Polyglot Swimmer,” and “The Mother.” As their titles show, these poems hint at subjects already touched in “On the Swimming Pool,” but which are here explored more extensively.

To briefly summarize, we could say that in the poems there are references to many Greek cultural and linguistic elements.

The beginning of the poem “Word One” reads in fact as follows: “The word (*word* One in this language) begins with Ἄλφα in the / other’s alphabet. Its prior symbol like a letter A tilted on its side, / suspended in air and time, is now morphed into swimming pool, a priori” (Lehoczky 2015b: 3). Further down in the poem the readers are offered an explanation about the poet’s involvement with the swimming pool subject:

Those days

I talked much about swimming as search for correlations between two parabola poles. And it's because the swimming pool is yet another aporia. Thinking de profundis. Thinking of punctuation. Ending the sentence by drowning. À-propos of melancholia. Or even more superfluous. Narcissistic. A universal weakness. The desire to navigate the body home through language.

In my opinion, this last line is epigrammatic for all Lehóczy's poetry since she declares here her intent of exploring her 'body' – 'home' in her nomadic existence – through the 'navigation' offered by the fluidity of language.

An analogous thought related to the soul and the possibility of its exploration offered by poetry and its 'fluid language,' epitomized in water representations, is found in the poem "The Rhetorical Swimmer," in the section "Enunciation." The poem is illustrative for Lehóczy's poetry since not only it contains all the themes related to cultural nomadism which are at the focus of her writing, but even more because it offers many clues to understand Lehóczy's latest development – a poetry at times intimate, which is based and moves through water symbology.

And despite it all, the poem flows with the flow.  
But how should we break out a revolution in the  
writing space when the soul, the script is stuck  
between time's invisible margins, how to find  
the new language we could speak with everyone  
and everywhere. How can the soul *sance* soul,  
the anchor, save the body from drowning? At  
the bottom of the pool an old language invents  
time. Original language announces its origin.  
The daring thought that dares you dive down to  
the bottom of the pool covered with dry leaves,  
human hair and skin and return with nothing  
but a handful of dry leaves, human hair and skin.  
O rhetorical reader; live a good life, sing a long  
song, die a quiet death (Lehóczy 2015b: 13).

The poem, which “flows with the flow,” begins with the title “The Rhetorical Swimmer” and ends addressing itself to a “rhetorical reader,” in an assimilation of the two figures.

As Lehóczy declares in these lines, poetry is a powerful means to express her thoughts, although constrained within time and space. Additionally, the poem is a means to search for a universal language, a “new language that could speak to everyone and everywhere,” both old and new. In this, a reference may be found to the “protosemantic nucleus” called for by Pierre Joris.

The lines that follow in this passage hint at human nature, undeniably frail: the soul must act as an anchor that rescues a body tempted to drown. But at the bottom of the pool, the salvation is unexpectedly offered by “an old language,” which “invents” new time. The reference is to history, which, as we have seen, can be a clue to accept life and its great mystery. The “daring” thought must anyway surrender to a wretched reality, represented by dry leaves, human hair and skin.

The end of the poem contains a philosophical exhortation to enjoy life, and to sing a long song, and concludes with the poet’s wishes for a peaceful death, which reminds of an epitaph, acting as a launch for Lehóczy’s successive collection, *Pool Epitaph and Other Love Letters*, a pamphlet published in April 2017. I will make only a brief comment on the poems here collected, which are conceived in the form of letter-epitaphs, written “For the swimming pool lover,” and contain a citation from Denise Riley’s poem “Time How Short.”

The lyric self and its double, as well as the multiple variety of humans, are here represented by swimmers, who crawl through life and its multiple phenomena, and are described thanks to an incredible allegory of images that draw on famous and different artworks, as *The Gardens of the Earthly Delights* (1490-1510), Helen Chadwick’s *The Oval Court* (1984-86), and a series of short films shot underwater by Karine Laval. The collection also draws on Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, from Cimabue to Our Times* (1568), but also from Keats, Catullus, Benjamin, and many others, as the same Lehóczy declares in the section “Acknowledgements” of her volume.

This poetical immersion in the fluid element offers isolation to the poet, while it also represents the concrete, extremized form of the ‘estrangement’ sought for by Brodsky. We can find an example of it in the first poem of the collection, which has the complicated, almost ‘evangelical,’ but also ‘funereal’ title and subtitle of “[† Prologos: [Apostil 1/Illuminations 1];1:1] ‘And so when we enter the swimming pool.’”

When you are in pool you are *not*,  
in other words. Because the anti-swimmer exists and it  
insists on swimming, swimming against the *right*  
direction. The self-doubter who, on behalf of us would  
doubt ourselves, the erratic eraser who scraps every  
second thought before we could feel, desire, think or  
write it down. The anti-scribe in the faithful scribe who  
writes a poem to parallel the poem you write. Because  
there is always an anti-lover inside the lover inside. A  
twin writer resisting writing writing down. An absent  
swimmer self always already swimming opposite the  
necessary tide contradicting anything we attempt to  
understand and so disputing the *thing* we love (Lehóczy 2017: 15).

What is described here is the conflict between our external and inner self, a never-ending debate between our rational and irrational parts; Lehóczy bases all these poems on the antonymic discussion between herself and her alter ego, the “anti-scribe,” who does not encourage her writing.

Water becomes a metaphor for life – and we remember Joseph Brodsky’s peculiar conception of the water element – for which language is the best means to represent this fluidity. Artistically, water is then transformed into ‘the word,’ the fluid means which allows man to crawl ‘smoothly’ into life.

A comment by Adam Piette (2017) on the back cover of the volume *Swimming Pool*, in my opinion well summarises all this:

Enter the pool of language, memory, strange encounter, meet Celan, Sebald, Derrida, Bosch, Attila József, Vasari and hosts of other artists of water and flows

of mind. Meet your watery other, the swimmer within. And enjoy, with the same inky block on the page, a wonderful cultural history of the swimming pool, a liquid space for Ágnes Lehóczky's exploration of her times, her encounters, her languages, in England, in Budapest, in the Europe of the spirit so soon to be abandoned.

The relevance of Lehóczky's message is evident in this last, bitter sentence by Piette on her newest poetry: about the "Europe of the spirit so soon to be abandoned," which reminds us of the forthcoming departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union. Despite the teachings of the nomadic aspects of history - and the meticulous historical and philological research of Lehóczky reminded of this - in the United Kingdom the island mentality prevailed, thus opening unforeseen scenarios for the next future.



## CONCLUSION

With a restless, even rabid, process of self-exploration, Lehoczky tries to define her 'nomadic' identity in her life 'in transit.' Avoiding any explicit self-reference, she nevertheless interrogates about her individuality, extending the discourse to a wider, collective perspective. On this topic, which is at the core of post-modern – 'post-avantgardist' for Lehoczky – literature, Peter Philpott provides an appealing remarkable reflection, in his review on *Modern Poetry*:

The answer seems to be that the poet's "I" must act as a verb, rather than a noun; the "I" must be a searching-for-a-self, rather than an assumed constant. The self is perceived as "dynamic" rather than "essential" ([Lyn] Hejinian [The Language of Inquiry], 203), a process rather than a stabilized, identifiable element. As such, post-avant poets look to poetry for a way to question the established values of socially constructed identities; poetry becomes a means whereby complacency is transmuted into a quest for moral, social, aesthetic, & personal justification. The theory determining this method is that by taking out the "I", the post-avant poet can develop a more comprehensive view of the human condition as it exists in the world: in politics, art, social groups, countries & histories of art, politics, social groups and so on. In addition, by eschewing the epiphanic "I" (who usually has a sermon of some kind to deliver), the post-avant poet is free to cultivate a unique relationship to language, which often takes the form of a kind of interrogation.

The layers of Lehoczky's personal memory become then the recollected substrata of a common European history, which has even broader ties.

This process of 'scanning' the self in its heights and depths, apparently unavoidable for Lehoczky, applies to the ever-changing environment that surrounds her, whether it be Hungary, England, or the places she visits. Her gaze scrutinizes the dense contents of her verses, with the technical device of rapid switches in the visual planes of the lyrical observer, and keeping an apparent objectivity as a rule for writing.

Adopting a psychological interpretation, these vertical planes could mirror the layers of the individual personality, in its inner and outer multiple aspects.<sup>73</sup> I have found a comparable ‘multi-layered’ vision in the essay of Magda Stroińska, whose words curiously refer to the same palimpsestic image of the old parchments proposed by Lehóczy. Stroińska (2003: 108) affirms that,

Identity, like the parchment of a medieval palimpsest, endures infinitely many auto-corrections. Nothing is ever entirely lost there. Old memories are buried under new experiences but they have already left traces and shaped the way we see the world. The memories too will change as we re-evaluate our past and continue to grow. The palimpsest nature of our identity allows us to make endless interventions and to continue writing our life history in the 1<sup>st</sup> Person Singular in whichever language best fits the purpose of an inner monologue.

This last statement brings in my opinion an implicit, positive note thanks to the inexhaustible, generative power offered by a ‘palimpsestic vision’ of reality.

Lehóczy’s dialogue-oriented versification, as we have seen, suggests a multiplicity of selves which reflects the complexity of finding an identity in today’s mobile society, but also the “dialogue with the other which is the essence of the work of art,” borrowing Lehóczy’s assessment on Nemes Nagy (2011b: 22). This discourse is for Lehóczy founded on a dialectics of opposites, which in their antinomic essence reach a complementarity that represents the complexity of life.

We have seen that Lehóczy’s approach to the environment, main source of inspiration for her poetry, is borrowed from de Certeau’s technique of discovering the city and its language, a theme she explores throughout all her versification. Lehóczy’s innovative narrative is then the result of an historical research and a new interpretation of poetry, which creates her unique style.

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<sup>73</sup> In psychology, a similar vision of personality is known as the “onion theory,” according to which personality is comparable to a multi-layered onion, where the public self lies on the external layers and the most private self at the core. The metaphor continues, by assuming that with the passing on time, and with an increased intimacy, the layers of personality unfold to reveal the core of the person.

Bezrucka, in her essay on postmodernism, provides a clarification of the difference between the modern and the postmodern *flâneur*, useful for an examination of Leńóczy's *flâneurist* approach to poetry and, in general, to contemporary poetry related to the city. She writes:

The postmodernist attitude can be detected in the Baudelairian modernist flâneur, but with a difference. If the 19<sup>th</sup>-century modernist flâneur is enticed by the seductions of the metropolis – and the metropolis with its paratactical relations is the paradigmatic site of both modernity and postmodernity – the difference between the two lies in the fact that the twentieth-century flâneur knows perfectly that they are confronted with void seductions, void because they are infinite and in constant renewal, but they accept this play, and live this tragedy with irony.” [...] Irony being for her the dividing demarcation line between the tragic modernist attitude towards the triumph of variety, compared to its postmodern ironic acceptance (Bezrucka 1995: 92).

She then continues:

Postmodern art is therefore difficult, in that it - programmatically - rejects holistic solutions as the single answer or cathartic beauty but, on the contrary, creates catachrestic works that at the same time contain their principle and its negation, works that powerfully claim the collaboration of the viewer, reader, observer in the interpretative process, whose accountability is in reality the real goal of these works (Bezrucka 1995: 92-93).<sup>74</sup>

The concepts highlighted in these last lines relate to Leńóczy's unresolved poems, in which the reader is always called into question to interpret the text.

Post-modern poetry does not require its readers to understand all its meanings, instead, it demands to catch the feeling and the mood of the poem, taking what needed and which may not be what the author intended. It is therefore sometimes a hard but challenging task to interpret Leńóczy's verses, in poems based on intertextuality, where beginning and ends often coincide.

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<sup>74</sup> Both quotations are my translation from the original text in Italian.

Besides, many poems are constructed on the site of previous poems and on earlier memories, thus giving the idea of uncertainty, since no fixed points of departure or arrival are possible for Leńóczyky.

A certain fictional obscurity in poetry is called for also by Celan (2005: 403), one of the authors who have inspired Leńóczyky, who claims: “Homage here is to the majesty of the absurd, testifying to human presence. And that ladies and gentlemen, has no fixed name once and for all time, yet it is, I believe... poetry.” And further: “That obscurity is, I believe, if not congenital, then the obscurity associated with poetry for the sake of an encounter, by perhaps, self-devised distance or strangeness” (Celan 2005: 407). So, according to Celan, obscurity must become an intrinsic feature of poetry. This idea is reinforced further on:

The absolute poem-no, that certainly doesn't exist, that can't exist! But there is with every real poem, with the most undemanding poem, there is this unavoidable question, this unheard-off demand.

And then what would the images be?

Something perceived and to be perceived only now and only here, once, again and again once. And so a poem would be the place where all tropes and metaphors will be carried ad absurdum (Celan 2005: 410).

Leńóczyky's use of paradox is an expedient to convey an underlying humour – which at some points becomes almost a ‘black humour’ – that contributes to discard a narrative of historical episodes, otherwise difficult to understand, also given our parameters.

Accepting from the very beginning the challenge of writing in her second language, Leńóczyky “[E]nacts a far more ambiguous set of relationships between languages and places” (Skoulding 2013: 111) and thus declares that a profound personal change has already happened, “a process [...] that cannot be contained in the concept of translation” (Joris 2003: 104).

The relationship with the second language is multifaceted and never accomplished: always a ‘work in progress’ for the migrant author, a process which goes much further than the linguistic aspect, involving personal and

cultural aspects. Von Humboldt in his studies (1999: 60) explores this topic and underlines the cultural significance implicit in learning a new language. He writes that,

By the same act whereby [the individual] spins language out of himself, he spins himself into it, and every language draws about the people that possesses it a circle whence it is possible to exit only by stepping over at once into the circle of another one. To learn a foreign language should therefore be to acquire a new standpoint in the world-view hitherto possessed, and in fact to a certain extent is so, since every language contains the whole conceptual fabric and mode of presentation of a portion of mankind.

This assertion can well suit Leńóczy's way of making poetry, in which social and cultural suggestions contribute to weave the texture of the literary plot. The acknowledgement of the enrichment gained by mastering a second language – and the consequent knowledge of a second culture – is further testified by the attention Leńóczy, and Brodsky, paid to the cultural environment of their new countries, since the very beginning of their 'emigration.' Braidotti (1994: 9) suggests that,

The polyglot is a linguistic nomad. The polyglot is a specialist of the treacherous nature of language. Words have a way of not standing still, of following their own path. They come and go, pursuing present semantic trails, leaving behind acoustic, graphic, or unconscious traces.

Much of Brodsky's poetry, as Efim Etkind points out, deals with a humanity "wandering about the planet without any goal or meaning, realizing that nothing changes anywhere and that all the notions of an earthly paradise are merely illusions" (1988: 13). Brodsky and Leńóczy's nomadism – for which it could be used the recent definition of 'transnationality,' encountered in the first chapter – makes them live in a constant cross-cultural condition, always searching for a balance between their past life and their current one, while building their 'new selves.'

In her studies, Christina Paulston explores extensively the related themes of bilingualism and biculturalism. She has coined the expression “bicultural eclecticism,” to describe the process through which individuals mix elements of the two cultures, possessing one basic cultural competence, but two scales of socio-cultural performances, like Brodsky and Lehóczy. This bicultural condition is well known by our nomadic authors, and their art undoubtedly took advantage from it. The bilingual authors’ ‘multilingualism’ – testified by the many linguistic citations in Brodsky and Lehóczy’s works – encompasses an ambition for an enhanced creativity that explores territories unknown to the monolingual. This theme is also approached by Garrett (2011: 92), who states that,

The changed (and changing) interconnected world has allowed for a greater possibility and acceptance of such hybrid relationship. It has also opened up new creative spaces in which artists can produce works that are a commentary on the contemporary human conditions.

Garrett poses then a central question, to which this study has attempted to give an answer: “Is there such a thing as a transnational identity? A world that allows for a transnational life also requires a new understanding of one’s place in it” (2011: 18).

In the literary field, Lehóczy suggests her personal response: English has offered her a new artistic possibility, and thanks to her continuous linguistic, cultural and historical research, she has enriched her poetic repertoire. As Greg Madison (2006: 238) claims: “[these migrants] are seeking greater possibilities for self-actualizing, exploring cultures in order to assess their own identity, and ultimately grappling with issues of home and belonging in the world generally.” Furthermore, according to many research studies, “[t]he results point out that the experience of creative self-expression in more than one language might foster a deeper understanding of the writing process in itself” (Stakhnevich 2013: 27).

Doloughan (2016: 4) adds a more critical opinion, adding a further consideration about the current social investment in the linguistic field made in the United Kingdom:

Moreover, I will argue that while not a sufficient condition for creativity, access to more than one language and/or culture can enhance creativity, given the ways in which plurilingualism can serve to extend the range of linguistic and cultural possibilities. I will also argue that what we are witnessing is a shift in attitudes to the cognitive and creative benefits of access to more than one language, even as in some parts of the English-speaking world such as the UK, there appears to be a retrenchment in relation to the politics of language.

Undoubtedly, English has opened the nomadic authors' works to a wider audience, but far from being a mere *lingua franca*, it has achieved new characteristics, being modified and enriched by their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Blending two cultures, it is a new language that creates the poets' unique style. Not only a vehicle for expression then, but a third linguistic space, the middle ground between the authors' mother tongue and the foreign language, which offers new opportunities for their artistic and social recognition.

Brodsky and Lehóczy, both translators, but also poets and writers in English, can be seen as 'translators' of their Central and Eastern European cultures into the Anglophone world, acting as 'cultural intermediaries,' through an 'epistemology' offered by their works. Stroińska's opinion regarding language use and language behaviour, which both define an individual in the eyes of others, underlines the relevance of a public acknowledgement for the emigrant authors in their new language. She writes:

The question of finding a new voice or constructing a new self is of particular importance to people who work with language. Their professional identity is manifested through the medium of language and any change of the medium distorts their identity (Stroińska 2003: 104).

For both Brodsky and Lehóczy the public acknowledgement is further seen in the working opportunities they found in the academic world of their host countries. The scholar Riva Kastoryano, of Turkish origin but who works in several academic institutions around the world, explores in her studies aspects of transnationalism as well as “transnational nationalism”. In her essay “Settlement, Transnational Communities and Citizenship,” she writes:

Transnationalism leads, in any case, to an institutional expression of multiple belonging, where the country of origin becomes a source of identity, the country of residence a source of rights, and the emerging transnational space, a space of political action combining the two or more countries (Kastoryano 2000: 311).

More than a political, the careers of our authors show a public commitment in their new cultural *milieu*. The choice of English as a vehicle for the artistic expression has allowed Brodsky and Lehóczy to address their voices to an audience that goes beyond national barriers, thus approaching, from their unique perspectives, themes related to displacements and identity. But, independently from the language of expression, Brodsky and Lehóczy’s literary works praise knowledge in relation to fundamental human values.

This complex relationship between language, thought and literary expression is examined also in an article by Guy Deutscher (2010) “Does Your Language Shape How You Think,” published in the *New York Time Magazine*, which discusses issues that, again, refer to the Sapir-Whorf theory, questioning it:

For many years, our mother tongue was claimed to be a ‘prison house’ that constrained our capacity to reason. Once it turned out that there was no evidence for such claims, this was taken as proof that people of all cultures think in fundamentally the same way. But surely it is a mistake to overestimate the importance of abstract reasoning in our lives. After all, how many daily decisions do we make on the basis of deductive logic compared with those guided by gut feeling, intuition, emotions, impulse or practical skills? The habits of mind that our culture has instilled in us from infancy shape our orientation to the world and our emotional responses to the objects we encounter, and their consequences probably



go far beyond what has been experimentally demonstrated so far; they may also have a marked impact on our beliefs, values and ideologies. We may not know as yet how to measure these consequences directly or how to assess their contribution to cultural or political misunderstandings. But as a first step toward understanding one another, we can do better than pretending we all think the same.

Through Lehóczy's first three collections in English, we have seen the passage from a narrative whose traits are closer to poetry to a narrative which has neared prose, though keeping in some parts its characteristic hybrid form. This same path, in a reverse order, is followed by Brodsky.

If this transition between the two antinomic kinds of literature can be read as a path towards an increased objectivity for Lehóczy – needed to depart from the initial poetic inspiration to recount her new reality in Sheffield in a more factual way – this same objectivity is nevertheless put into question by the last two small collections, focused on the theme of water, which seem to possess more self-referential tones, and which could well situate Lehóczy into the postmodern focus.

Lehóczy's idiosyncratic constructions of space – a blend of scientific data and metaphysical descriptions – can likewise be found in Brodsky's prosody, as shown in my comment to the prose of *Watermark*.

Observing Lehóczy's work, I can assert that from the materiality represented by the stones of the cities – the metaphoric Babel, but also Budapest, Sheffield, and many others – it is no coincidence that we witness Lehóczy's attraction towards the fluid element, seemingly in literal compliance with Zygmunt Bauman's statement: "Transnational tend to embrace their 'liquid life'" (2005).

Water, the *fil rouge* of her last poems, as our inner self, does not encompass liminal spaces and cannot likewise be contained, representing the perfect epitome for a fluid, 'non-static' and ultimately nomadic conception of life. It bears an additional complex symbology that has been related to the work of Joseph Brodsky.

Comparably, the water-bound vocabulary becomes progressively more and more frequent in Lehóczy's first three collections, in which "sedimentary

basins,” “liquified maps,” swimmers and swimming pools, rivers and even underground streams can be found. It could be asserted then that the thread that connects these two authors is, once more confirmed.

Connecting two separate worlds to create a place to call home – a real or sentimentally transposed one, as in Lehoczky’s psychogeographic visions – is for an émigré a demanding and never accomplished experience. Lehoczky seems to have found her personal solution, which lies in a scrupulous, historical and philological research to explain a present which is never sufficient to itself, due to its link with the past. Lehoczky makes us reflect on the fact that any location – and the city in particular – possesses a multiplicity of characteristics which relate to other places and cultures, in a fluid context of peoples’ constant displacement. Consequently, no place can be completely isolated, and no one should ever feel isolated anywhere, due to the innumerable social, linguistic and historical connections possessed by places.

“The earth has only one topography at a time. It’s one simultaneous pan-global event,” Lehoczky (2014: 23-24) writes. This idea, simple but illuminating, is much true for the urban context, which contains many small words in it, a characteristic pointed out also by Skoulding:

The palimpsestic city offers a means of exploring important relationships, not just between two different cities or different languages or different periods, but also between the obstinate specificity of particular urban locations and the nomadic tendencies of language itself (2013: 15).

It is indeed language – and the English language in specific – that acknowledges and allows this mobility, well known by our authors. Besides, it must not be forgotten that, being the most widely spoken language in the world, English is often seen in the context of other languages, particularly in today’s landscape of global mobility.

The adoption of English by the migrant authors inevitably poses questions on its phagocytosing nature, to the detriment of the mother tongue. This issue is investigated, between others, by Alastair Pennycook in his recent essay “English as a Language Always in Translation,” who maintains that:

Current thinking about the global spread of English has also fallen into the trap of becoming over-obsessed with English as a language unto itself, rather than focusing on the ways in which English is always a language in translation. Debates over the role of English in Europe are caught between several competing positions. First, is the concern that the spread of English is threatening other European languages: ‘If inaction on language policy in Europe continues, at the national and supranational levels’, Robert Phillipson (2003: 192) warns, ‘we may be heading for an American-English only Europe.’ The perceived threat of English to European languages and cultures may, from this point of view, be countered by safeguarding diversity through the support of other European languages (2008: 36-37).

The influence of English has long brought concerns about the death of languages, as well as claims of linguistic colonisation: many English words, for instance, have been assimilated into the vocabularies of other languages. This last issue has provoked resistance to the spread of English, even though the number of its speakers continues to increase due also to the work opportunities it offers.

Another question that emerges from the passage quoted above regards the multilingual readership of texts in English – as it could be the case for Brodsky and Lehoczky – an issue raised also by Doloughan, who argues that,

As well as being informed by changes in attitudes to the cognitive and cultural benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism, these shifts can be seen to mirror a changing politics of language or at least a greater awareness of what is at stake in what Pennycook (2008: 43) calls ‘translingual activism’, whereby the role that English plays in the world is unsettled through recognition of the complexities and inequalities of translation and understanding of the ways in which meaning are diversified through language crossing and mixing. Inevitably, this raises questions not just for writers but also for readers of texts where traces of the presence of other languages and cultures are part of the fabric of the work. A monolingual reader may well react differently from a bilingual or multilingual reader of an ‘accented’ English text, preferring perhaps to see linguistic inadequacies or grammatical

deficiencies rather than playfulness, inventiveness or critique at work in a text that does not conform to that reader's view of 'standard' English (2016: 1-2).

Belonging to this multilingual readership, I cannot but agree with the assumptions stated above, not forgetting that to a multilingual readership belong also our two authors, who have initially been themselves readers of literature in English – a literature they have explored, and appreciated, through the linguistic and cultural background given by their native languages.

Basing on her own experience of Macedonian student émigré in the United States, what Garrett writes, regarding the multilingual readership, seems in a sense to confirm the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis:

Each language guides me to frame my thoughts differently, even though they may be the same thoughts. I am a version of myself in each language, the essence is still the same, but the contexts are different. Like a poem, I depend on my readership. My audiences differ in Macedonian and English, their existing frame of reference will direct the way they read me (2011: 67).

All this offers further hints to reflect about the authorial voice that expresses itself in the two languages, as it is for Brodsky and Leńóczyky's double versification in English and in their mother tongues. In Leńóczyky's poems, we have found the recounts of her journeys, symbols of her existence 'in transit,' in which she includes many literary and cultural references, as a sort of 'comfort reading' during her travels. Her mobility, firstly dictated by study and work, responds likewise to her need for always-new cultural stimuli – a need strongly felt by Brodsky. And, last but not least, the poets' nomadic lives are the best expression of their 'vital' need for cultural and personal freedom, a concept explored in the studies of Greg Madison (2006: 12), who writes:

Self-direction (self-creation) in life prevails over the importance of belonging and security, in fact anything seems worth sacrificing in order to maintain the freedom to choose for oneself. Conformity to the conventional is avoided at all costs – life is meaningless unless it is self-directed. Independence and choice require space from impinging environmental demands. Physical space is a prerequisite for the

reflective space within which self-direction manifests. Moving to a foreign place and international travel are archetypal situations for protecting and expressing the need for freedom and independence.

In his studies of psychology, Madison explores themes related to new aspects of cultural mobility. In 2006, he coined the term “existential migration” which in my opinion effectively describes the voluntary emigrants – or ‘expatriates’ as they are otherwise called – who seem to have had an ‘existential’ motivation to migrate, unlike economic migrants, refugees or exiles. According to Madison, their “existential migration,” which makes them leave their homeland to become foreigners in a new country, is essentially a way to satisfy their thirst for knowledge. Although the life of the emigrant authors seems to be progressively projected towards a future out of their home country – and this is demonstrated by the adoption of their second language as the main vehicle for the literary expression – the importance of the place of origin is undisputed, as seen in Leńóczy’s poems, with her innumerable allusions to Budapest and Hungary.

Joseph Brodsky’s search for his native Saint Petersburg in the cities he visits finds his accomplishment in Venice. In “The Condition We Call Exile,” on this explicit topic Brodsky (1995: 27) writes:

And perhaps the third truth of the matter is that a writer in exile is, by and large, a retrospective and retroactive being. In other words, retrospection plays an excessive [compared with other people’s lives] role in his existence, overshadowing his reality and dimming the future into something thicker than its usual pea soup. Like the false prophets of Dante’s *Inferno*, his head is forever turned backwards, and his tears, or saliva, are running down between his shoulders blades. Whether or not he is of elegiac disposition by nature is beside the point: doomed to a limited audience abroad, he cannot help pinning for the multitudes, real or imagined, left behind. Just as the former fill him with venom, the latter fuel his fantasy. Even having gained the freedom to travel, even having actually done some traveling, he will stick in his writing to the familiar material of his past, producing, as it were, sequels to his previous works. Approached on this subject,

an exiled writer will most likely evoke Ovid's Rome, Dante's Florence, and – after a small pause – Joyce's Dublin.

From her own recent experience of young émigré, Garrett (2011: 56) resumes the same point:

The sense of freedom can come not only from the self-designed nature of the new home, but also, unexpectedly, from the home one leaves behind. The knowledge that there is a permanent base somewhere else, always available, always willing to take you back, allows for a greater willingness to experiment with the new homes. The original home is both a source of security and a source of freedom, both roots and wings.

The narration of an analogous experience emerges from Lehóczy's poetry, while for Brodsky the relationship with the mother country is troubled and mediated by the 'third space' represented by Venice.

Lehóczy's dense poetry, rich in cultural suggestions – albeit concise and never trite – shows an 'intuitive' reasoning, as underlined in this summarizing review made by Fowler (2010):

Ágnes Lehóczy has the rare gift of both instinct and consideration, sophistication and brevity. Her poetry is profound, yet earthen, it reaches and grips, it takes hold. She wields a philosophical assurance to match her multi-linguistic ambition and supersedes the irrelevancy of poetic orthodoxy for all the right reasons – her poetry overwhelms posturing and poise with the kind of intellect that reassures and reminds.

The hints offered by this study open further lines of research, with the conviction that Lehóczy's work, crossing places and languages, will write a significant page of contemporary poetry in English.

As a last personal note, I must say that I was undoubtedly gratified by the encounter with a new poetic voice, which successfully addresses the timeless themes of identity and belonging that passionately engaged the life and work of Joseph Brodsky.

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## APPENDICES

### **“Prelude: On a Crowded Catacomb of a Ceiling” From *Rememberer* (2011)**

You say, we too are made of cream-coloured Caen lime stones in the end. Shipped in silence to this city on anonymous rivers; whispering sailors, masons and workmen on wooden decks. Cargoing granite bricks of unknown geographies. Tonight we exchange storeys of air and time. The sky with an abyss, the ceiling with a crater. The upper with the underground. And render shadows of former fabrics with blood-circulation. Iron with mortar, water with cement. And replicate resemblances. So that one day we too will be an album of a milliard faces frescoed on the ceiling. Stories told in stones. Reiterated in flint. Plastered with human planets, unpeelable visages of grins and mascaras, narratives of another sky, repeated patterns of calendars, pages of mortal-faced martyrs, parched skins of Benedictine monks, lime-stone bishops and black princes carved out from flint, shadows of the woods with vegetative smiles, ecstatic humour in hollow eyelids. Staring inward. Outward. Into the windy world. Towards the sea. Blinded by the invisible horizon between sea and sky. Eyelids staring from a black chasm of centuries. Through a keyhole. Then through a dot. From the world's cupolas and towers. The medieval panorama of terracotta rooftops. And chimney tops. The universe: an enormous empty cathedral. An effigy of dead fathers. The arteries, the aisles, the spiral stairs, the lost thoughts. The billions of last breaths. And it is because you are gone. But where you are now I too have been. They say this building aims for longitude, a neverending distance end to end. The nave: a caesura, wide

and hollow recedes when you attempt to enter its colour-washed inside. The nave: the body. The body: the absent. The ceiling: the skin, the vellum, the cover of the codex. The one who is present. Replicating the corporeal. Dismembered memories. Their mundanities. The morbidities. Stone snapshots, immaterial moments of a millennium. Lined with high windows nestled above the roofline of the lower aisles, above sea level, above eye-level as the level of once approximate horizons. Of undraining seas. You squint upwards. You stare into a masonry heaven. Then into a pitch black lake. Then into the throat of an abyss beneath you. Above you. Let's be buried vertically, you whisper, so that you could spring up and be first into a catacombal Eden. You say this is the way to spot what no-one notices. Under eye-level, under sea-level, under the level of clerestory lights, of muddy riverbeds. Tonight is upwards. Tonight's tangible. Like the texture of your skin. Look up behind the structure of the vaulted ceiling. The shadows' danse macabre. Then spot the city in the making. Your routine attic-trip. Climbing up the timber boards of the wooden vaults. You are good at spotting fictitious city walls of unknown capitals. Carved in the highest vertex of the geometric solid, just above the choir: brick layers, rock layers of an otherworldly home. Your eyes are drawn to an enormous bonfire. The ceiling: a street map. Stretches out like fishnet made of braided fibres, robust ribs, arches of bridges, cobbled arteries, marshes, wetlands, lowlands and sloping riverbanks. On the curvature of the vaults, diagonally, transversely, intermediately, slim figurines walk across in haste, the half beastly, the half anthropomorphic lurk here with intent.... shadows of circus animals march across the arches, camels, laden, caged-in monkeys, agitated, acrobats, fire eaters. The city tonight levitates, archbishops and

midwives, criminals and archangels tumbling towards a timeless present, dragons and shepherds, sheepdogs and unicorns, beasts and birds, perpetually changing shapes and shadows, erasing contours and colour, dependent too on the parameters of the sun, and other planets, a non-stop preparation in dusk, you spot blurred outlines of builders, masons, bricklayers, in the process of building. Knocking down. Building. To get to the core of the place they have been travelling to for so long to people an empty city, a city with no topography, the sky without impasses, cobbled cul-desacs, crowded catacombs, horizontal reminiscences. They travel so that they can be exactly where you are now. They travel to settle, you say. To illustrate the biosphere around us. To illuminate the darkness tonight. They arrive. To live among us. Slow rows of caravans, bright lanterns, departing on the ridges of the vault. On the edges of the universe. Unclear. The difference. Between departures and arrivals.

**Part One: Parasite of Town: “Greystones’ Backyards”**  
**From *Carillonneur* (2014)**

... through numerous lies this city unpeels its stratigraphy, by means of camouflage, by hiding, blending in long sequences of bus trips to and fro in late October rain between downtown and dark bricked alleyways. It is mostly steely rain, which streams down from the surrounding hills into the cracks of the concrete heart of this Northern settlement. When you do not know someone, like the way you don't know the intricacies of unfamiliar bodies, impenetrable ginnels, untouched geographies, you trust whatever they offer, allowing yourself to plunge into flooded impasses and cul-de-sacs, rivers of unknown neighbours' junk, cast-off children's toys, blown up rubber tyres, winter spades, ice axes thrown on the ground of hoar-frosty backyards' glossy ice rinks, wading through open doors of littered garages to lock your own bike in the shed. They offer you the post of the river diver to rummage through their junk. In this sense, there is no deception involved, since they too know riverbeds are thick, dense and grey. But sometimes they offer you more: liquefied maps with fuzzy street names to track down the old town which you can't quite touch yet with your mind. They often promise you a large number of rivers instead of the sea, hills instead of hazy dreams which they reckon are more tangible to climb. Or dive into. No gear needed to live here day by day apart from an oily anorak and a pair of old rubber thigh waders. But these rivers always seem to retreat into tiny arteries pulsing under the skin when you approach them. Then they offer you panorama. An afternoon through the kitchen window a solitary boy kicking a football within a square metre muddy grass knot or bizarre angles of tiny back gardens with the irregular visit of the odd guest who hangs their laundry out in the rain. So that you feel that you too should become a parasite on the carpet of this soggy cityscape. In the riverbed of this grey town. And culminate clutter in your own cobbled courtyard. Two hours from London. Up towards the nucleus. Its whole life organised by its Northern aorta, the Pennine. According to the sign someone randomly left in the underpass one day near Bramall Lane the sea must have been here a long time ago. And that's just possibly another lie too.

## **“On the Swimming Pool”**

**From *English: Journal of the English Association* 64. 245 (2015)**

... but we must, the anonymous author continues,  
pause at this absolute city – the Pool. The total polis  
whose job is to await you, silent correspondent; pool  
the every polis that awaits the other too. Pool a  
nocturnal polis. Pool patient. Pool patient polis. Pool  
the democratic. Pool Parthenon. Pool an unmarried  
woman’s apartment. Pool marginal. Pool eccentric.  
Pool my temple. Pool her sovereign cell. Pull the full.  
Pool to the full. Complete. Pool pars pro toto. Pool the  
western cella of a much larger pool. The much larger  
pool the unconscious of the city. Pool that never  
drains. Pool undrains, Eliot says, brown edged where  
the lotos rose. Pool agora. Pool assembles. Pool where  
one speaks in thoughts. Pool the once crowded central  
market Socrates failed to take me to in winter. The one  
that now floats in regret and aggravation. Regret and  
silence. Pool is not for agoraphobics. Pool is also  
where Socrates used to lean outside, waiting for me to  
come out at last. But that was a long time ago. Pool is  
now. So pool Botanical Gardens Clarkehouse Road  
S10 2LN in the organic city. Pool another garden in  
this Botanical Garden or that Botanical Garden. Pool  
is Barker’s Pool with the 90 foot tall war memorial  
erected at its focus. Pool as parthenon the highest  
point in town, reservoir, lemon balm, drinking water  
and water supply to cleanse the city’s streets,  
youngsters, dogs and pigs, houses, windows, ginnels  
and cul-de-sacs four times a year. If pool cleanses the  
polis pool will cleanse you of your own glossic guilt.  
Pool where language speaks instead of you. De  
profundis. It’s a laminated postcard from the pool.  
Pool is public shower rooms where you can stand for

hours waiting to be cleansed. Deafened by the dictation of writing in water. O all the books published in the pool. Pool is Library, books you'll never write or regret ever having written. Pool is Theatre. Pool is re-entering the world feeling filthy all over again. Pool is Citadel, water containing oxygen. Pool is Heidegger's horizon. Pool is coins. Pool is coins in a pool. Pool is pocket money. Pool is (my) Capital. Pool is cathedral. But not the one in Sheffield. Pool explored in *Swimming Studies* by Leanne Shapton (an imprint of Penguin). Pool is a penguin. Pool is a universal whale. Pool is the dome of Cologne surviving all apocalypses both in the future and the past. Pool is cosmopolis, astropolis, ecumenopolis, megapolis. Pool is necropolis and pool is heliopolis too. Heliopolis for the hydrophilic. I am a hydrophilic. Pool in Sheffield is steelopolis. The term Metalopolis has been used already for another polis. Pool Holy City. Pool my hieropolis. Pool citta eterna from Greek rhe`o or Latin ruo both meaning 'flow'. Pool everything and everywhere. It is this hieropolis where Adam will chant 'Viva Pool'. Pool is not what you think it is. Pool is certainly not what *I* thinks it is. Pool is what you are thinking. Pool is what I am thinking too. Pool populus. Pool the identity-free crowd. Pool a crowd with free identity. Pool is plans to process. From hydrophilia (via acrophobia) to pool is concrete-phobia. Pool a large tap. Pool alcoholics anonymous. Pool essentially water but pool with four walls. Pool boggy land. Pool the eerie abstract landscape. Pool Cardigan Bay from which a prehistoric forest emerges one day, where Geraldine&Alan once will have stood in long winter coats staring at skeletal oak, pine, alder and birch tree trunks not noticing the watchful photographer taking a



photo of them from afar that appears in the Guardian in February without their consent or knowledge. Pool, the enclosed garden the Catalan Society president writes about in 'Cultural Centring of Catalan Swimming Pools', reads almost like a poem. Pool is airport. Pool the seaport. Pool a gymnasium with a crowd of gymnos. Pool is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Pool the river where the nameless ornithologist loses her phone and dives after it managing to rescue the sim-card. Somewhere in Derbyshire in September. Pool Budapest. Pool nakedness. O the dressing and undressing. All the costumes and the costumelessness. Pool the other skin. Pool imitation. The competitive anonymous other. Pool and its own chain of command. Micro-societal. Pool a Neolithic pictograph. Pool cinema. Pool citizenship. Pool the Pool of Tears. Pool the Darwinian at times. Pool, you are Empson. Pool you are full of Dodos and Mice and Monkeys. Pool is either a competition or a splash session (with Sigmund Freud) in a competition slash leisure pool. Pool is wunderkammer, the precursor of museums full of stuffed fish and corals. Pool objects in order: plastic kayaks, canoes, ropes, and red-and white life-belts all waiting here to let go of their contours and become themselves. Pool paraphernalia. Pool hierarchy and administration. Pool technology. Pool both death and life drive. Pool the aquatic dream machine. Pool both innocent and hostile neon light. Pool the first polis. Pool the last polis. Pool the sky turned upside down. Pool is eternal since pool is already dead. Pool is Pericles' visionary city. Pool unrealistic, absurd, therefore exists. As opposed to divine. Pool the phenomenology of fluid; the physiology of time liquefied in a green bottle neck. There is time for being in the water is body for being

in the world. Pool the choice of goggles through which you take a look at this world. In pool the speed mirrored goggles with anti-fog panoramic lenses give you enhanced peripheral vision. This also allows you to see the world while the world cannot see you. But sometimes in pool even the anti-fog lenses can get steamed-up from the inside. And you can bleed internally, anonymously, even to death - without a name. Pool is where one posits him or herself as a vertebra or an amphibian. Pool ars poetica. Pool the immersion in the world. So pool the body. Pool the many bodies. Pool embodiment. Pool knowledge of one's alternate weight. Recognition of pressure on skin. Pool the weightless psyche of a boy God Socrates asked me to photograph in Athens. Or the sleeping woman at Ambelokipi, stood in the middle of Mavili Square; around her oranges and urban pigeons scattered.



Pool, Eliot says, is down the passage which we did not take. Through the first gate into our first world, along the empty alley, filled with water out of sunlight. And they were behind us, reflected in the pool. Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty. Pool tabula rasa. Pool utopia. Pool heterotopia. Pool the ahistorical. The asexual. Pool dissymmetry. Pool asymmetry. Ahistory. Pool the personal history turned upside down. Pool the genderless for pool is clothelessness. But pool Speedo or Arena. Pool athletic sportswear. If pool is populus & industry then pool enactment. Its role is to house the Olympic team sponsored by Arena. But the anonymous *I* in pool prefers Speedo and questions pool's absolute goodness from time to time wondering whether pool were simulacrum. To make any statement about a pool won't ever be possible. Pool always already all possibilities. Improbabilities. Pool tautology. Pool heteroglossia. Pool glossolalia. Pool the female shower room crowded with elderly Yorkshire women all talking at once. The best is that you can still speak when your mouth is full of pool. Viva the pool, viva Pool. Pool is where you, the swimmer, can become a polyglot. Pool is where you speak no language(s) and it is also where you speak them all. Pool echolalia. Pool the deaf world. Pool is someone lying at the bottom of the pool. Pool is you lying dead at the bottom of the pool. Pool is Paul Klee's angel staring back at you from the bottom of the pool. Distancing. Distancing. Slowly. Slowly. Away from the pool. Pool present. Pool past. Pool is Death riding out of Persia, written by the dead author, the anonym alcoholic who prefers water to writing. He finds it easier, somewhat lighter. Pool dead language. Pool the second language. Pool unlike language at all. All syntactic combinations

possible in water. Nothing, too, is possible in pool. If all this fails at least pool is freedom of thought in pool. Pool all personal, pool all political, pool collective, pool civic. Pool motions, pool idles, too. The other day a hydrophilic friend chose pool instead of heated conversation about Scottish referendum. I read this on the pool's online public forum. Pool choice. But pool idea. Pool the ideal. Pool the anti-Platonic. Pool democracy. Pool anti-perspiration. You still can sweat in pool; it just goes unnoticed. Pool rarely bloodbath. Pool the bloodbath in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics Water Polo semi-final. Pool the Suez Canal British troops are wading through during the water polo match in Melbourne. Pool atemporality. For pool an erased word. Pool the unnameable. Pool is unnameables although you can pronounce it with one breath. In the other's language it's pronounced with two. Pool is irritating alteration times. Pool ordered timetables, too. Pool punctuation. Pool is not where you learn to swim. Pool is where you swim. Pool is where you think. Pool is the hut in the Black Forest with Heidegger hiding while a storm rages outside. Pool is business at times. Pool water polis. Pool is what I look for. Pool calendar. Pool the valediction of weeping according to John Donne. Pool is the British Isles Roger Deakin set out in 1996 to swim through. Pool fluid fla<sup>^</sup>nerie. Pool topography, calligraphy cartography. Pool the river Danube, passing through four capital cities, discharging itself into the Black Sea, the one which Anonymous Author always wants to bathe in. I never told my hydrophilic friend that grandfather used to stand by the bank of this river watching the water corpses of the continent floating downwards towards the sea. The Danube which Madeleine thought is so shallow that boats navigate it

with wheels touching the bottom. Pool black pool. The river into which Paul ran naked, hungover one August evening, overheated, sunstruck. Study of water and pool concrete. O the aquatic fla<sup>^</sup>neur and his private view of an island race and a people with a deep affinity for water. From the sea, from rock pools, from rivers and streams, tarns, lakes, lochs, ponds, lidos, swimming pools and spas, from fens, dykes, moats, aqueducts, waterfalls, flooded quarries, even canals. Pool is where Deakin gets detained by water bailiffs in Winchester, intercepted in the Fowey estuary by coastguards, mistaken for a suicide on Camber sands, confronting the Corryvreckan whirlpool in the Hebrides. Pool a personal blind map. Pool cycle. Pool the spasmodic beeping of the clock on the arena's wall. Pool the life cycle of an eighty two year old swimming pool in Cambridge captured in a documentary through the work of artist across four seasons. Pool that just is. Pool is where you are. Pool is where I'd always want to be. Pool is where I always am. Sometimes pool just isn't. Pool John Cheever the swimmer. Egerszegi, or Darnyi. Pool cultural and natural history. Pool is public conversations. Pool is current news. Pool many pools at the same time. Pool, on the other hand, is your local swimming pool. My hydrophilic friend's is Ponds Forge or Goodwin in Sheffield, and Komja'di in Budapest. Which one do you go to? Pool anthropology. Pool the eureka moment of all body parts including brain and lungs. Pool elementary skill. Pool awaits you, silent correspondent. Pool is a polis that awaits your arrival late into the night. Pool is a nocturnal polis. Pool patient. Pool cosmos. Pool cosmology (which argues Big Bang was caused by noisy couple from upstairs). For pool is never jealous. Pool is never boastful or

conceited. Pool sometimes is full of plastic boats.  
Pool at night is full of other planets. Pool is tough  
when pool is water-polo. Although pool is tough pool  
always plays fair-play. Pool never plays a foul play.  
For pool is never rude or selfish. Pool is mainly  
summer. For pool is not resentful. Pool delights in  
truth and light. Pool is always ready to excuse, to trust,  
to hope, and to endure whatever comes. Pool the  
mopped up tiled corridor and changing room. Pool the  
cleaning lady early winter morning who endures  
whatever comes. Pool is winter. Pool is winterization.  
Pool migration. Pool builds new polis in which there  
will always be new pools. Pool the creative. Pool the  
prehistoric. Pool post-historic. Pool autumn, spring.  
Pool is never histrionic. Pool pastoral. Pool  
monolingual. But pool is first and foremost pool.  
Although pool is practically destroyable, pool is  
ultimate. Pool non-deconstructable. Yet pool came  
before everything else. There was the pool and the  
pool was pool. Pool is sous rature. Pool is its own  
absolute reflection. Pool is the absolute polis at which  
one must pause. Pool is syllogism. Pool contra logical.  
But pool pro thinking. Ergo pool is ultimately good  
(for you). Where pool begins pool is already over.  
Pool is where you only have to make one right or  
wrong step. Where the pool ends the word begins and  
where it begins beginning unends. Pool deafness, pool  
languagelessness. Underwater a wrist watch goes off.  
Did you hear that? And off again.