

Ágnes Nemes Nagy  
Kassák Sketches

**K**assák owned a copper-coloured pigeon. A strong bird, sturdy, even its eyes were copper. It had come into his possession through some special pigeon-breeding establishment and palpably occupied no ordinary position among the master of the house's other pigeons. That was evident from the way it posed, all stuck-up, at a table edge, with marvellous streamlined roundedness. Its neck. Its breast. The lower belly as it petered out precisely in an elongated parabola. It reminded me most of all of a semi-abstract sculpture of hammered copper on which there is "not a superfluous scrap".

The moment I stepped closer, it pecked my right arm so fiercely that it drew blood. "I told you not to touch it," Kassák fumed.

"A domestic pigeon tolerates that," I fumed back, because I was not used to behaviour like that from animals.

"It's not that sort of domestic pigeon," he rejoined.

This was his favourite pigeon, of course. As soon as the wild creature resumed its stiff immobility after delivering the peck it did not stand out from the room's

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*Ágnes Nemes Nagy*

*(1922–1991) was a poet, essayist and translator. After the war she and her husband, the critic Balázs Lengyel, founded Újhold, a literary journal, which was banned in 1948.*

*Unable to publish, she translated and taught in a secondary school. Her translations include work by Corneille, Racine, Molière, Victor Hugo, Saint-John Perse, Rilke and Brecht. Selections from her poems have been published in translations by Bruce Berlind, Hugh Maxton and George Szirtes. A selection from her essays was published by The Mellen Press in 1998.*

*Lajos Kassák*

*(1887–1967) was the one-man Hungarian avant-garde movement in poetry and the arts. Selections from his poetry and prose have appeared in several issues of this journal, including his finest and most famous long poem, written in 1922, The Horse Dies the Birds Fly Away. Overruling our own practice, we reprint it on pp. 6–20 of this issue in Edwin Morgan's version.*

*The poem tells the story of a journey, or walk rather, to Paris in 1909, which transformed Kassák, an uneducated working-class lad, into a poet and artist. Kassák's status as poet, prose writer, painter, graphic artist, editor of many journals and theorist of the avant-garde stands undisputed in the history of Hungarian modernism. His poetry influenced the work of major poets like Attila József, Miklós Radnóti and Ágnes Nemes Nagy.*

furnishings. The pictures and streamlines of Kassák's environs. It just posed and gazed with those red eyes. An irate museum object.

It took a fair while before I managed to unravel the two axioms that formed the point of departure for Kassák's art. The one was to obliterate everything that had gone before; the other, to create new things that in no ways resembled the old. The analogy: as in society. These had long been commonplaces of literary history in respect of the intentions of the avant-garde. Ah yes, but it's one thing to be acquainted with such matters and quite another to be confronted by the sixty-year-old avant-garde on the street. To be sure, it was hard going for me to accept that Kassák actually wanted what he declared he wanted.

All manner of things followed from his principles. For instance, that in his eyes a poet who wrote rhyming verse was not a bad or obsolete versifier but a coward. Or a reactionary. How many times did he say, in the early days of our acquaintanceship, on occasions when we clashed: "Have the courage to ditch established forms." I need hardly say that I took not the slightest notice of that injunction. I was a child of a different time, different circumstances; the antithesis of courage and cowardice resided in quite another location inside me than did that of rhymed-unrhymed. I considered his principles of prosody to be simply a sign of his one-sidedness, a case of overhasty dogmatism. If he had demanded the opposite from me, I would have looked on that the same way. It was a long, hard job for me, weighing up his axioms over and over again, to grasp that it was not as simple as that.

They had indeed discovered something at the *fin de siècle* or the beginning of the present century. But what? It is not easy to answer that. Modern art? That is to be far too general. Free verse? That's a piffling detail. A new world? Romantic playing with words. At all events, more of their impossibly grand—one might say cumbersomely grand—designs were fulfilled than anyone could have thought. After all, it was they who embarked on what, almost a century later, is more or less the *lingua franca* of poetry.

**K**assák loomed in my life like a phantom classic car. It was as if a Ford automobile of 1900s vintage had slowly pulled into our street. It was not his modernity that first impressed me but his antiquity.

Then again his novelty. Old—new, new—old: how often I turned that antithesis over in my mind. But why was I turning it over so late in the day (in relation to the clock of world literature), in the late Forties and early Fifties?

I shall try to answer that first of all in my capacity as a private person. The reason is that it was then that I realised I could no longer write in the way I had done up till then. It happens to every poet several times in the course of her or his life. In my case it occurred after the initial youthful *élan* and the first unquestioning volume, and that just happened to be—*post hoc ergo propter hoc*?—in the early Fifties. I started groping blindly for tools, words; it was above all the spaces between words that came to hand. And that went on bit by bit until, one way or another, I had built up for myself a form of poetic diction into which I was able to cram the maximum amount possible of ellipsis. To start with, I only expatiated on associations, tinkered with dropping form;

then, emboldened by that, I tore up the rational links, eliminated the self of the author, omitted subject and predicate. Around a decade and a half later it turned out that I wasn't exactly setting the world on fire. The poetry mainstream had carried on flowing behind my back, and when I was able to face up to it again I found, with a touch of astonishment and delight, that I both resembled it and yet didn't.

**A**bout what did I not see eye to eye with him? His axioms. I never felt that his obliteration of the art of the past was either necessary or feasible. Anyway, my life would not be worth a button without Sophocles or Csokonai. I also looked askance on his idea of "totally new" art. Not that he meant it like that. He continually astonished me with his intellectual appetite. He was seventy-six years old when he demanded that I give him the low-down on the alexandrine, its structure, history, everything possible.

The zest—that I did grasp. The power of the deep-rooted eruptions, the social and intellectual fervour, shone through despite the forty-year age difference, the disagreements, geological eras. He could not strive for less than what he wanted.

Then there was his renowned obstinacy. A turn-of-the-century proletarian, a pencil-wielding foreman, chorusmaster for innumerable isms, even at eighty years of age he was as hale as many thirty-year-olds, somehow reminding one of the lions that, in Rilke's phrase, "know no decline".

What was the basic relationship between us? Kassák impressed me. I noted that feeling all the more as fate decreed that it would not bless me with it too often. I knew him for twenty years, from his sixtieth to his eightieth year. During that time I had plenty of opportunity to become acquainted with his sovereignty, with the way an old person resists temptation. The temptations of old age are not less than those of youth. Who knows how much time one has to rebel against the world. Or to what end. But he, the perennial rebel, never posed himself questions like that. He couldn't give a damn about his own age, because at any time, whatever the situation, he only ever sought to find salvation in his own way.

To put it another way: he was able to renounce things. It was this, this first and foremost, that was impressive about him. He did not renounce things because he was an ascetic; he wasn't, he had the same desires for one thing and another, for worldly good, for fame and fortune, as people (writers) generally do. And how greatly he was still able to delight, at the age of seventy or eighty, each time he gained some late token of recognition! That late delight, that vitality, too, was no trivial lesson for those who knew him.

But the point on which I was closest to him I cannot even put a name to. It was the kernel of his individuality, a kind of steadfastness, the untarnishable sameness of old metals. It is no use my trying to define it. All I know is the response to this quality: I esteemed Kassák. Beyond differences and similarities, beyond disputes and human interaction, let me say it again, doffing my hat: I esteem him. ♣

(1975)

*Translated by Tim Wilkinson*