

Four Poems of 1918 by László Moholy-Nagy

Introduced and Translated by Oliver A. I. Botar

The poems by Moholy-Nagy printed below appeared in *Jelenkor* [The Present Age], the literary and cultural journal which Moholy-Nagy assisted his friend Iván Hevesy in editing in 1917 and 1918. They appear here in English translation for the first time, with the permission of Hattula Moholy-Nagy.

The year 1918 was a period of crisis and transition for Moholy-Nagy. After having been injured on the Galician front of the Great War the previous year, the young reserve officer spent much of his time in Budapest, Székesfehérvár and Szeged, now in the barracks, now on leave with family or friends, trying to complete his legal studies. In his spare time he continued the practice of his pre-war youth, writing poems and short stories, though he had traded in Sándor Petőfi and János Arany for Mihály Babits and Endre Ady as his literary models. As a public marker of his mature artistic persona in formation, he replaced the mundane (and assumed) name "Nagy" with "Moholy Nagy" around March of 1918.¹ Moholy sent poems to his literary mentor Babits for approval, with what results, we do not know.² Though he did not like them much, Hevesy agreed to their publication in *Jelenkor*.³ We have no further information on their contemporary reception, but due to their derivative style and their sometimes awkward grammar and syntax, it was likely not enthusiastic.

Like many young poets of the time Moholy was imitating the style and themes of Ady: the obsessive, self-consciously "decadent" sensuality of poems such as "The Victorious Neck" and "Together all Day, and now Homebound Alone" reflect the young Moholy's fascination with the pre-war poetry of the great Hungarian Symbolist poet, while also reflecting his own sexual experiences of the time in brothels and through love affairs.⁴ While engaging in this — by 1918 — out-of-date mode of writing, the young poet also updated it in original ways. One cannot help but remark on the insistent visuality of "The Victorious Neck," its fascination with surface pattern and colour, which prefigures his later concern with *Faktur* (surface effects of material) in painting and photography. In "Like a Telegraph Wire Transmitting Strange Secrets," Moholy's preoccupation with communication technologies is already evident. He employed an unusual technological metaphor, making sophisticated usage of the principles of alternating current within the metaphorical complex and punning wittily on the words *milliom* [million] and "milliohm," topics he would have been informed of through Charles R. Gibson's *Electricity Today*, a copy of which he received as an

academic award in high school.⁵ In his most political and thematically avant-garde poem "Together all Day...", Moholy employs the Expressionist trope of the modern metropolis as nightmare, as monstrous organism (in this case the poet's own body), so eloquently expressed in 1895 by Émile Verhaeren in his poem "Villes tentaculaires,"⁶ and powerfully restated by the Activist painter János Schádl in *The City and Aurél Bernáth* (also known as *The City*) of 1919.⁷ The onomatopoeia of "Forest. May. War." displays Moholy's fascination with non-musical sound as a potential creative medium, an idea which he explored in articles published in 1922 and 1923.⁸

Moholy also wrote erudite criticism for *Jelenkor*,⁹ which reflected his wide knowledge of Hungarian and European literature, and spoke well of his excellent education. But unlike Hevesy, Moholy's perhaps ambivalent ambition to be accepted by Kassák and the avant-garde *Ma*-circle, and despite the publication of "Together all Day..." in the last, September edition of *Jelenkor*, this effort was only partially successful; none of his texts appeared in *Ma* while it was published in Budapest.¹⁰ The latest evidence we have of Moholy's literary ambitions is a post-card sent to Babits late in 1918 in which he relates his plan to become a journalist, since making a living from painting proved impossible.¹¹

As indicated by this postcard, however, Moholy's principal aspiration by the end of the year was to be a visual artist. Finishing with the long series of sketches on military postcards he had begun after being drafted into the army in 1915, Moholy began the production of more ambitious works: dark, Expressionist landscapes of barbed-wire and rolling hills, and probing portraits carried out under the spell of Oskar Kokoschka, Lajos Tihanyi, Béla Uitz and Róbert Berény, the latter whose evening art classes he attended in 1918. Late in the year he began to exhibit publicly, and to paint landscapes and townscapes on cardboard in deep, glowing colours.¹² He gave his *Hills of Buda* as a gift to the idol whom he succeeded in befriending during his last days, Endre Ady. Moholy's brother Jenő remembered that late in 1918 and early in 1919, the young László was a regular visitor at Ady's Pest apartment,¹³ and the poet's death on 27 January 1919 must have dealt Moholy a serious blow, marking perhaps, the final demise of his own literary ambitions. As if to underline the new preeminence of his will to become an artist, Moholy went to Csinszka, Ady's widow, and repossessed *Hills of Buda*.¹⁴

While Moholy continued his engagement with serious literature throughout his career¹⁵ — and he became particularly enamoured with James Joyce¹⁶ — he now devoted himself almost exclusively to producing works in visual media, and was condemned to mostly speaking and writing art theory in German and English, languages for which he had limited spoken aptitude. His accents in his adopted languages were legendary, as were his turns of phrase.¹⁷ Because of this lack of proficiency, the relatively sophisticated style of his late Hungarian poems, and their rich and variegated onomatopoeia and imagery were not incorporated into his later texts, though the sensuality of the poems resound in both the content and style of his photographs, his fascination with the metropolis

reappears in his films, and his communion with nature suffuses his entire oeuvre, though it is present with particular power in his late work. Moholy's love of the Hungarian language is evident particularly towards the end of his life, when, while dying of cancer, he sought out the company of his handyman Kálmán Tomanicka and of Hungarian doctors in order to be able to speak it. By Sibyl Moholy-Nagy's account, the artist's final words were both poetic and in his native language: "aludni, aludni."¹⁸

I would argue that rather than being mere late Symbolist juvenalia, these poems, though adolescent and "amateurish," function synechdochally with respect to the oeuvre as a whole. They perform his exploitation of communication technologies for creative purposes; his old-fashioned attitudes towards women; his passionate sensuality; his related love of and play with surface, colour, texture and light; his liberal attitude towards the economy of ideas, his pacifism; and his feeling for and with nature, what I term his "biocentrism." Regarded this way, these poems counter the generally accepted view of Moholy as a merely "rational" and "formalist" Modernist "technician-artist." They help redefine him as the sensuous Modernist "Bioromantic" I see him as having been.

Poem no. 1.

Idegen titkok sürgönydrótjaként¹⁹

Hogy fáj, hogy rémiszt kedvesem!

Fáj ezer arca, milliomm alakja,
Hogy mindig más, de soha sincs bizonyság:
Nekem változik, vagy másnak üzenet,
Hogy engem csókol, vagy rajtam sikong át
Záporlól, tűzzel újabb kedveséhez.

Drótjául élek idegen titkoknak,
Hogy rajtam át fusson minden üzenet!
Szerencsétlen fonál, remegve, bűgva
Hordozom búmat és minden percemet
Vegyülve buja vágyai tűzével.

De mégis! bennem vágat áramával,
Engem villámoz rejtélyes hatalma,
Hogy holtta sújtom, ki mohón, meztelen
Villamos kéjt vár s szere!met hadarva
Akarja kedvesem csókját fölinni.

Like a Telegraph Wire Transmitting Strange Secrets

How my lover pains and scares me!

Her thousand faces pain me, her million²⁰ forms,
Always different, but there's never certainty²¹
That she alters for me, or signals another,
That she kisses me, or through me rushes,
Spitting fire, to her new lover.

I live as a wire conveying strange secrets,
That all transmissions might run through me!
I carry my pain like some miserable line,
pulsing, humming; my every moment
alternating with the fire of her lust.

But yet! It's through me her charge courses,
Its me her secret power electrifies,
That I might strike him dead, who eagerly
Awaiting raw lightening lust, mumbling his love,
Years to lap my lover's kisses up.

Poem no. 2.

A diadalmas nyak²²

Avas szokás, hogy fáj a szívem.
Pedig be jó a kínban kéjelegni!
A jégbepólyált akarás elaludt
Az a leány ívelt nyakkal tovább él
S nem fül meg görcsös ujjaim közt.

Én azt akartam, hogy márvány-sétány
Legyen nyaka szegény, feszült ujjamnak
De ujjaim lágy egységgé úgy fonódott,
Hogy reszketőn ír verseket neki.
És büszke, átkos villogó nyaka
A megkergült, kuszált erekkel,
Amelyek kéjes izgalomban
Kéken s pirosan
Rohannak össze-vissza rajta,
Mint ezerágú és rángó polip,

A nyaka — szörnyűség! fehérén,
Épen tündöklök s úgy csókoltatja
Magát az éhes és düllelt szemekkel
Hogy én megőrülök.

The Victorious Neck

A rancid habit, this ache in my heart is.
But ach, it's good to take pleasure in pain!
The desire, now swathed in ice, lies asleep
That girl lives on with her arched neck
Unstrangled by my spasmic fingers.

I wished that her neck might be a
Marbled walk for my wretched, twitching fingers
But they weave themselves into pliant integrality
So that, trembling, they write her poems.
And her proud, cursed, gleaming neck
With its mazed and tangled veins
Which in sensuous excitation
Criss-cross its surface
Blue and red,
Like some tentacular, writhing squid
Her neck — oh horror! stands resplendent,
White and unscathed, and invites
The kisses of hungry, bulging eyes
So that I'll go insane.

Poem no. 3.

Erdő. Május. Háború.²³

A gőgös május szentséges szerelme
Zizegve, zsongva nő a szívbe.
Az erdő rázza büszke koronáját
S a zsenge falevél sugdos remegve.
Méhecske döng az ablakívbe.
A fűszál finom, hajladó, reng
Egérke kúsz a napsütésbe.
Az ég kegyeskék s oly szelíd
Hogy fáj a szív.

Kint háború. Itt tompán szól döreje.
Madár csörög s a lenge élet
Ezer hullámos színe, hangja kél itt.
A fecske száll, a villásfarkú fecske!
Az árnyék lila selyme széled.
Csorgó arany a rigó füttye
Mézet csapol a redves kéreg
És termőn, boldogan hasad
A gyenge mag.

A felhő, életem csodás növénye,
Kék habban úszik s úgy virágoz
Vékony szírommal nyilván fönt magassan,
Mint lányka-álom bársony-köntösébe.
Fenyő omol üres csigához,
A csiga árva léttel fénylik.
Egy hangya sűrög, csöpp morzsát hoz —
Elejti, húzza... meg-megáll...
Kis lepke száll:

A szárnya kék és csillog, mint a gyémánt.
Csak száll, suhan. Be szép, be pompás!
A nagy világon csönd, szorongás rezdül,
Mélyen reszketve tör a könnyű fény át.
A nap tűnik. Hideg borzongás
Hulláma csap nyakamba mélyen.
Komoran fest a csiga-csontváz.
Testembe-főmbe, ah, vigyázz!
Már ég a láz.

Forest. May. War.

The sanctified love of haughty May
Humming, droning, grows into the heart.
The forest shakes its proud crown
A tender leaf whispers trembling.
A little bee buzzes in the window arch.
The fine, pliant grass blade quivers.
A little mouse scurries in the sun.
The benign-blue sky's so placid
It pains the heart.

Out there — war. Here its thunder dully thuds.
A bird chirps and the myriad sounds and
Fleeting hues of gossamer life rise.
The swallow flies, the fork-tailed swallow!
The shadow's violet silk spreads out.
A thrush's whistling like gurgling gold
Honey flows from the rotten rind
And the delicate seed bursts
 Fruitful and happy.

Clouds, those marvellous plants of my life,
Float in blue froth and flower
Their wispy petals on high,
As if on a velvet gown of some maiden's dream.
Pine flows through an empty snail's shell,
The snail glimmers in its orphan state.
An ant bustles, it brings a crumb —
It drops it, pulls it... stops now and then...
 A butterfly ascends:

Its azure wings sparkle like diamonds.
It flies, glides. How lovely, how splendid!
Silence in the wide world, fear vibrates.
A thin light breaks through — deep shivers.
Sun's gone. A frigid wave, a shudder
Courses deep into my neck.
The snail's shell: a skeleton lantern.
My body, my head — oh how they churn!
 In them these fevers burn.

Poem no. 4.

Egész nap együtt s most egyedül haza²⁴

A Vérmező, a tágas Vérmező milliomm fűszála, tavasza kísért megint.
Az ég sűrű, nehéz. Mindjárt rámszakad! megfulladok!
Szemem duzzad, fülem nagyobb, a testem méretlenre nő.
És megdagadt testembe ronda utca harsog.
S a sívító mozdony lüktet fejemben és a füstös állomás
És röpít a súlyos szél, vad orkán hullámozó fákon átröpít
Hogy új ország és új ész boltosodjék belém.

Mert meg kell örülni e tikkadt sivatagban.
A déli Rózsadomb lármás szerelmében,
Az esti mozi elterpedt kéjében,
Ahogy a langy délutánnal keveredik most.
És nyúlós, ragadós massa tömi el a szám, orrom és fülem
S már ízlelni sem tudok! mindent kiszítt belőlem az el-nem-csókol,
 agyamban lassan érő, parázna csók,
Hogy ruhám le kell szaggassam magamról, mert hozzáért
 és combja rángatózva verdeste szövétét.

A cél, a cél, a cél rángatózzék és verdesse agyam,
Mint húsos női comb,
Mert esztelen szerelem árján vágatok és nincsen hullám és száguldó torlat,
Mely önerejéből fölborítaná feltarthatatlan végzetem, az örök,
 delíriumos, nyomorult táncolást.

Together all day, and now homebound alone

The countless grasses on the Vérmező,²⁵ spring in the wide
 Vérmező, haunts me again,
The sky is thick, heavy. It's about to fall! I'll suffocate!
My eyes swell, my ears enlarge, my body grows infinite.
And a foul street courses through my swollen body.
And a screeching engine throbs in my head, and a smoky station;
And a heavy wind blows, a wild hurricane surges through trees
That a new land and a new mind might arch into me.

For one must go mad in this arid desert.
Amidst the loud loving on the south slope of Rózsadomb,²⁶
The languid pleasure of the early evening movie,
As it blends now with this sultry afternoon.
And a sticky, viscous paste fills my mouth, nose and ears
And my tastebuds fail! This unconsummated, lascivious kiss
 ripening in my brain has sucked it all out of me,
I'll tear off my clothes, for she touched them;
 her writhing thighs have rubbed their fabric.

The goal, the goal, the goal must rub and slap my brain,
Like some fleshy female thigh,
For I ride the surge of mindless love and there is no wave and no
 speeding barrier,
Which on its own could hinder my inevitable end, the eternal,
 delirious, wretched dancing.

NOTES

¹While he employed the very common name "Nagy" in his publication in *Jelenkor* no. 3-4 (February 1918), he first used "Moholy-Nagy" to sign his review of László Garami's poems in *Jelenkor* no. 5 (April 1918).

²See his postcard to Babits of 17 February 1918 (Documents Division, National Széchényi Library, Budapest).

³Krisztina Passuth, interview with Jenő Nagy, in Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* (Budapest: Corvina, 1982), 356.

⁴C.f. the sketches on postcards evidently made in brothels now in the University Gallery, University of Delaware, Newark. C.f. also his correspondences with young women during this time.

⁵László Péter reports on Moholy's book prizes in "The Young Years of Moholy-Nagy," *The New Hungarian Quarterly* 13, no. 46 (Summer 1972): 63-64. Péter gives the book's title as *Modern Electricity*, which must refer to *Modern villamoság*, translated by Rezső Hajós (Budapest: Franklin Társulat, 1913), the Hungarian translation of Gibson's *Electricity Today. Its Work & Mysteries Described in Non-Technical Language* (London: Seeley & Co., 1907).

⁶On the importance of Verhaeren to the literature of the *Ma*-circle, see Miklós Szabolcsi, ed., *A magyar irodalom története 1905-től 1919-ig* [The History of Hungarian Literature from 1905 to 1919] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1965), 500.

⁷János Schádl, *Város és Bernáth Aurél* [The City and Aurél Bernáth], 1919, oil on canvas, 95 X 75 cm (Janus Pannonius Museum, Pécs). Reproduced in Stephen Mansbach, ed., *Standing in the Tempest: Painters of the Hungarian Avant-Garde 1908-1930* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 124.

⁸Moholy-Nagy, "Produktion — Reproduktion," *De Stijl* 5, no. 7 (July 1922): 98-101 and "Neue Gestaltung in der Musik. Möglichkeiten des Grammophons," *Der Sturm* (July 1923): 102-06.

⁹See his reviews of works by László Fodor and Elemér Pajzs in *Jelenkor* no. 3-4 (February 1918), of Árpád Garami in *Jelenkor* no. 5 (April 1918) and of Gyula Török's *A zöldköves gyűrű* in *Jelenkor* no. 6 (September 1918).

¹⁰On Moholy-Nagy's relations with the Activists in 1918 and 1919, see endnote 6 in Oliver Botar "An Activist-Expressionist in Exile: László Moholy-Nagy 1919-1920," in *László Moholy-Nagy: From Budapest to Berlin, 1914-1923* (Newark, Delaware: University Gallery, University of Delaware, 1995). I say "ambivalent" because of Moholy-Nagy's relative aesthetic conservatism at the time, about which he writes frankly in his autobiographical sketch, *Abstract of an Artist* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1947), 67-68.

¹¹Postcard to Mihály Babits, 18 December 1918. (Documents Division, National Széchényi Library, Budapest).

¹²On Moholy's art at this time, see Botar, "An Activist-Expressionist Artist in Exile..."

¹³Jenő Nagy, remembrances of László Moholy-Nagy, in Krisztina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* (Budapest: Corvina, 1982), 356-57. The contact with Ady must have come through Zsófia Dénes, whom Moholy befriended late in 1918.

¹⁴The day before Ady's death, Árpád Szélpál published "Forradalmi művészet — vagy pártművészet" [Revolutionary art, or party art] in *Ma*, in which he characterized Ady and Babits as "conservative": "A fiatalok, a forradalmárok, az új művészek, elfordultak tőlük. Új utakat, haladottabb tartalmat keresnek" [The young, the revolutionaries, the new artists, have turned away from them. They search for new roads, more progressive content.] (p. 9) While in the following, February 26 issue of *Ma* Kassák felt compelled to publish an appreciation of the late poet he had admired so much, Szélpál's ill-timed article must have reflected the aesthetic feelings of many of the young members of the Activist circle, Moholy-Nagy, by this time, one of them.

¹⁵Information from Hattula Moholy-Nagy, July 1995. See László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Paul Theobald and Co.), 292-351.

¹⁶On Moholy-Nagy and Joyce, see Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, 341-351, and for an analysis see Louis Kaplan, *Laszlo Moholy-Nagy: Biographical Writings* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 170ff. Given the centrality profered by Kaplan on the "signature," it is particularly ironic that he misspells "László" every time the name appears. Or is this a meta-pun central to this witty and enlightening book?

¹⁷See Kaplan on this, *Biographical Writings*, 191-2.

¹⁸"To sleep, to sleep," recounted in Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, *Experiment in Totality* Second edition. (Cambridge Ma.: The MIT Press, 1969), 246-47.

¹⁹*Jelenkor* no. 3-4 (February 1918).

²⁰*Jelenkor* no. 3-4 (February 1918).

²¹*Jelenkor* no. 6 (September 1918).

²²*Jelenkor* no. 6 (September 1918).