

Education for Quality of Life in the Works of László Németh

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To become a respected author in a small East-Central European country such as Hungary is far from easy, and a rather special task. The role of, as well as the results expected from, authors is very different from that of writers living in the West. The reason lies not only in linguistic limitations, but also in the fact that only a few million people understand the language. The task of "men of letters" in Hungary could easily be construed as a mission. Authors can become an integral part of, and foster social processes, sense the subconscious needs of society and then attempt to respond.

From time to time, an author's intentions may be misunderstood. His vision may be mistakenly regarded by others as a political program. But literature aims higher than politics, anticipating future alternatives, rather than merely those of the present. Such anticipation can also occur in the fields of sociology and education, and, it is true, even in politics, but it should never be confused with a definite program.

László Németh alerts us to the problems of the future through his works and suggests how to avoid such problems with a foresight involving local and universal concerns of human interest. The life-work of Németh (1901-1975) spans forty-five years and acts as a sensitive gauge reflecting successive waves of social needs in Hungary. Though he had ceased writing a number of years before his death, his works are more timely now than when they were written. This essay seeks to introduce Németh, particularly in the context of his world of ideas that he regarded as "long-range weapons," and to expound such views of his that may be applicable today in suggesting solutions for the future.

Active young people of today are not likely to find the time or patience to pore over Németh's multifaceted collected works, which

fill some fifty volumes, even if they are able to read Hungarian. They may know some of his novels, or perhaps they have seen one of his plays performed, but the true measure of his message, and the genius with which he parlayed it, is best seen in his essays and articles. The yield of his last working years, in particular, offers valuable insight distilled from a lifetime of experiences and struggles.

On his father's side, Németh came from Transdanubian peasant stock. His father was the first educated man in the family, a secondary-school teacher, and a model for his son. Németh went through medical school in Budapest, but he was more interested in literature. Christmas 1925 was an important milestone in his life, for that was when he married and, coincidentally, also launched his literary career by winning a short-story competition sponsored by the magazine, *Nyugat* (The West), the most prestigious and significant Hungarian periodical of the day.

After that, Németh decided to devote his life to literature, but he almost always had other jobs on the side. He worked variously as a dentist, a medical doctor in the school system and a secondary-school teacher like his father. Of his large family, four of his daughters reached adulthood. During the siege of Budapest in 1945, Németh's family home and his library were destroyed. When the war was over, he chose to live mostly in the country, first at Hódmezővásárhely and then at Sajkód, a small settlement on Lake Balaton's Tihany peninsula.

Németh's education was particularly broad in that he kept up his studies in the natural sciences based on his university training and was widely read in history as well as world literature. He had a strong critical acumen for picking out literary talent both in Hungary and abroad. He could read in 15 languages and, therefore, knew contemporary literature in a variety of original tongues. Németh came to grips with all forms of literary expression, and while his results were outstanding in all *métiers*, he forsook a solely literary career. When he was twenty-four he tried to become the "organizer of Hungarian intellectual forces."¹ For twenty years he strove to fulfill this goal; only as a result of decades of tribulation did this aim evolve into a pedagogic one.

Finding insufficient opportunities for publication, Németh launched his own one-man periodical, *Tanú* (Witness), of which seventeen volumes were published between 1932 and 1937. The magazine was intended to be a means of inquiry and information. He said, "My periodical is inspired by...the anguish in ignorance... I regard the essay as the genre of public learning... I want this periodical to be the chlorophyll of our intellectual life... through which

knowledge is converted into attitude... and into morality.”² Németh recognized the risk of an education with an over-emphasis on humanistic aspects. He believed that such an education would eventually lead to a schism between humanism and science and was always the proponent of a synthesis of the two.

In 1934, Németh was appointed director of literary programs at Radio Budapest. He attempted, subsequently, to develop the station into a cultural organ. From the outset he warned that radio (and by extension, all mass media) could educate people, but it could also just as effectively mislead and stupefy them. The 1930s were perhaps Németh’s most creative period, in which ideas and programs for change that had inspired him up to then began to crystallize in writing.

For Németh, the ideal person was in harmony with his environment, was well balanced, and had fully developed his potentials. He wanted to invent a way of establishing a truly up-to-date cultural fabric for Hungary. According to him, a cultured person “understands his mission, and his actions become an integral part of the problem-solving process of humanity.”³ Quality was the central theme of Németh’s world of ideas, and he set this down as a guiding principle not only for himself and his work, but also for his fellow-men.

In 1925, José Ortega y Gasset’s *Revolt of the Masses* outlined the domination of a gray mediocrity in all walks of life; for Ortega, “the masses” signified a segment of society that lacked outstanding qualities. Németh confronted this concept with one of his own: the “revolution of quality.” He first mentioned the term in 1933, in *Tanú*, and later incorporated it into most of his writings. In the capitalist and Marxist systems alike, the most important consideration seems to be quantity; Németh sought to establish a system whereby value would be measured on a scale of quality. “Quality,” in this sense, should be the leading principle not only in regard to social structure, but in all walks of life. Németh opposed the soulless nature of labour and hoped to see mere bread-winning converted into interesting work. Every office or workshop could in effect be a kind of laboratory in which experimentation would enrich daily work. All that was needed was for people to find a means of converting their work-places into “laboratories.” Németh believed that such an idea of “quality,” in tandem with a more equitable distribution of goods and services, could be achieved best through a socialistic order, albeit a qualified one—qualified in that he saw a classless society more as a populace of intellectuals than as representing the lowest common, proletarian, denominator. In future, not only would the propor-

tion of intellectuals in society increase rapidly, but also, in his vision, almost all jobs would require more brain power; thereby, most industrial and agricultural occupations would be almost considered intellectual pursuits. He said, “The motto ‘proletarians of the world, unite’ [implying that we must sink to a proletarian level] was a nineteenth-century slogan. Today I tend to hear a more optimistic slogan: Let’s all become intellectuals.”⁴ Németh was not referring to the old-fashioned middle class as his ideal (he was actually quite critical of this segment of society), but a new group of intellectuals he wished to cultivate and develop through his writings. He himself was the most typical representative of this group.

At a 1943 conference in Balatonszárszó, Németh outlined the immediate tasks of the “new intellectual.”⁵ Analyzing the causes for, and possible solutions to, Hungary’s wartime woes, he was moved to ask:

What is the reason for the intense suffering, unknown for the last few centuries, that has suddenly been dumped onto humanity? The cause is mechanized despotism on the part of marauders in alliance with new technology. Despots believe the soul of a nation is measured by the amount of weaponry it has. They seek to change nations into hordes of collectives, and attempt to replace our high, God-inspired standards with low ones of their own invention. They control our dreams by artifice. While “plunder” and “impotence” are contradictory terms, still, when men ally themselves with machinery, people are impotent to stop the plunder, and the machines will not cease oppressing our souls. As if we haven’t got enough problems fighting our day-to-day enemies, we also have to wage war against this man-machine centaur. The beast will trample the crop of our diligence until God, in the embodiment of heroism, nobleness and self-sacrifice, converts these horrid machines into domestic animals of love.⁶

What should the new man of intellect be like? If reform is merely external and superficial, instead of being tied to the reform of human integrity as well, the “new order” cannot be much of an improvement over its predecessor. Instead, certain qualities—greater nobility, more self-criticism, stronger morals, a heightened sense of responsibility and higher ideals of life—must be developed. Németh’s version of socialism based on quality had nothing to do with wielding power; rather, it represented a moral standard. His

model human being would be of strong morality and have a great sense of culture. "Quality" would be inseparable from his flesh, and would characterize his disposition. Németh considered that idea important, saying "man weighs only the secondary matters with his brain, but uses intuition to decide about destiny."⁷ A small nation's right to survive, he reasoned, should be dependent on the fact that it exemplifies the best qualities of the individual, in macrocosm.

The years 1944 and 1945 brought many changes in Németh's life. His home was destroyed in the war and he moved to the country. From that point on, he was no longer a part of the intellectual ferment of Budapest or of the launching of new programs at the war's end. He could quite easily have been liquidated during the Rákosi régime. Until 1956 he lived in constant fear for his life. In the interim, he earned his living mostly by translating from at least six languages. Also in this period, Németh developed into a true educator, teaching at a country school for five years, a period he later recalled as being a very happy time. Though writing was always a lifelong passion for him, he was very much an educator at heart, and in that role he still strove to develop his ideal of the moralistic human being and the exemplary lifestyle for his nation.

Miklós Béládi very aptly characterized Németh's method thus:

László Németh did not surround his writings with a scaffolding of abstract nomenclature. However, it would be wrong to conclude that he undervalued theoretical ideas as opposed to practical ones. He thought highly of ideas in general; only the morality of a sound lifestyle was more important to him. Ideas interested him in so far as they were vehicles for clarifying real-life problems. Technical questions in the field of natural sciences were interesting to him because they represented a part of life, and his outlook on literature was also scientific.⁸

As an educator, Németh was a man of logic, insight and synthesis. He approached the teaching of humanistic subjects in a scientific way and stressed the integral nature of the "two cultures." Quality of life was very much dependent on one's system of values, and was closely related to one's knowledge and education.

In September of 1945 Németh wrote the booklet, *Reorganization of Public Education*.⁹ In it he made a number of suggestions that he hoped would be implemented for the reform of school system from the elementary to the university level. The end of the war, in his view, should have made his suggestions for reform particularly time-

ly. With a postwar growth in prosperity, intellectual progress should also occur. He recommended six elementary grades, followed by six secondary that would emphasize four different streams of scholarly activity, that is, humanities, technology, agriculture and administration. Németh proposed three years of industrial or agricultural training for particularly weak students. All high schools would teach the four major streams, but in varying proportions according to the schools' mandates.

In his work *Negyven év* (Forty Years), Németh summed up this immediate postwar period thus:

On the surface it may have seemed that I was concerned solely with compiling a new curriculum, yet in reality I wanted to see produced a new man of world civilization. This would be reflected in the aspirations of the curriculum. In my first article, "The Reorganization of Public Education," I defined these aspirations: school should become a concentrated preparation for life, giving a wide view on the world, as well as on vocations. At its best, education should instill a high level of brotherhood in the populace and produce a society in which people respect one another's work. My book was the first to suggest to the Hungarian public that agricultural and technical training be introduced into the curriculum. During the years I taught at Vásárhely, my goal was to prepare notes on the lessons I taught and from them to compile four textbooks, one each on history, natural sciences, applied mathematics and languages. It was also my desire to introduce an innovative model for textbooks; the books would start off with a survey of the subject, proceed to the main lessons, then some short articles to stimulate more interest, and end up with a guide to further reading, a bibliography and a glossary. I intended such textbooks to serve as a kind of Noah's Ark for the preservation of the elements—and particularly the sparkle and buoyancy—of Western civilization. But though I attempted to work on them even during the years I was slaving as a translator, unfortunately only a few fragments of my four textbooks actually got written.¹⁰

It is regrettable that the Hungarian regime in the late 1940s, when instituting educational reforms, gave no serious considerations to Németh's ideas and suggestions for practical changes.

In 1961, with many years of teaching behind him, he turned again to the subject of education in a series of essays published under the title, *A második hullám* (The Second Wave).¹¹ His four major themes were still the foundation of an ideal curriculum, guided by historical principles; in his approach to the teaching of history, Németh followed and used chronology as much as possible. He believed education should give an overview of the subject to the student, but the real goal was “to understand our place in the world, and to mould our existence into a useful component in harmony with the rest.”(p. 320)

The most timely essay for today’s world in *The Second Wave* is “Ha most fiatal lennék” (If I Were Young Today) (pp. 331–47).

In it, Németh suggested that though most young people enjoyed better economic conditions now than several decades earlier, they are none the less not happier. The fact of having more free time than ever before was a mixed blessing. He said, “The more independence and leisure time young people have, the more they must face the new task of creating their selves. In the past, young people used to be shaped by a long work-day or, if they were not working, by need and distress.”(p. 332) Németh reasoned that, “as the free time not occupied by work and sleep continues to grow, everybody’s life becomes like a small ‘research institute,’ in which individuals and families must make informed decisions on the use of leisure hours, and intelligent choices concerning entertainment and education.” (p. 333)

This is not a trifling question. Work, in healthy surroundings, cannot ruin people; on the other hand, free time, if not applied properly, can have a disastrous effect. History has shown... many examples of children, born into a rising social class with a historic mission, suddenly finding themselves secure and prosperous, and beginning to decay morally because of it. (*Ibid.*)

Németh wished to see people to arrange their lives according to his philosophy of life in general, which is not to say that he regarded the world necessarily in the same way as the good Christians of the past, as a place of trials and tribulations. Nor did he see earthly existence as a difficult, but important, test that would entitle him to salvation in the next world. However, he found he could not conceive of the world in the popular conception, as being a garden of pleasure in which one gets by with a little bit of work, or if one were clever enough, with the right kind of maneuvering.

For a truer perspective, Németh started by analyzing the functioning of the universe:

What is this enormous machinery of magnificent order, and yet sometimes of exasperating irrationality?... How could it be seen in any other way but as a field of enormous possibilities? Not only possibilities already realized, but also those latent under the surface. A chemist would easily understand what I mean. Where were those many hundreds of thousands of organic and inorganic compounds before they were called up in the last century by chemical technology? Obviously they were present in our world, but undeveloped. Life, too, was latent until—perhaps only on our planet with its favourable conditions, or maybe at distant points in the universe as well, like the tips of a Christmas tree—life was activated, just lit up. Since then, life has dashed through infinite varieties and forms before human awareness suddenly burst forth.... The fact that I am the proprietor of such an awareness, although it sometimes makes me uncomfortable, is nevertheless marvelous.... (p. 334)

László Németh saw life as a voyage in which we pass through the landscape of various ages. On a voyage, our perception is more acute than at other times, and we are more like travellers in our first years of life, living in a state of searching interest, trying to understand human secrets and the depths of social relationships. Why, he asked, can we not sharpen our attention with the passing years, instead of allowing it to fade and become sluggish. Németh did indeed believe that we could sharpen our sense of discernment, that the possibility exists now more than ever:

If on leaving... I were asked what provided me with my greatest joy in life on earth, I should say it was learning. Not the learning that leads to an examination, but the inquiry conducted out of curiosity—for instance an excursion into a new language, and through that, into an unknown world, into a science or into an occupation. (p. 335)

Németh believed that broadening one's base of experience and knowledge was what made life intriguing. It was his opinion that the current problems inherent in learning derived from the lack of a program with an overview; people rushed through studies selected

purely at random, rapaciously, and the result of such a grasping greed was that one was unable to construct a proper model for oneself of the world. He recommended that introducing the spirit of natural sciences into life, conducting experiments and making observations, would make the onerous seem interesting and the infamous, instructive. He even likened the bench of the galley to a laboratory bench. Moreover, Németh claimed, the new-found interest would light the soul and keep it alert, increasing the capacity to learn. On the other hand the worries and pains that gnaw into the soul tend to dampen our enthusiasm for the world around us.

He postulated that most suffering comes from our improper comprehension of the second major proposal of our invitation to life. In fact, while life can be likened to a voyage, it can also be considered a process of sculpturing. Man exists not merely to admire already realized potentials in the world; the latent possibilities of our world must be continually developed, our lives and ourselves shaped, bent or carved into the best possible configuration. Németh saw morality as being a regulatory system that serves to bring the most out of a person after biological development was complete, and ambition as its impulse. However, he warned that the wrong kind of ambition, infusing us at a tender age, might lead to a great deal of unhappiness.

For Németh, the right kind of ambition was cause-centred rather than self-centred; those with the right kind would become advocates of a beautiful, majestic purpose. Proper ambition, he reasoned, would not only prevent great suffering, but it would enable one to develop fully:

People grow like trees, groping in all directions with their roots, their connections. Taller and healthier foliage may be produced by developing more and better connections in the world. Someone who takes his mother, his child, his friends, his homeland seriously, will become wealthier in the process, no matter what these relationships come to later. The wrong kind of ambition cuts off, tears up, rots away these fibres with its impatience and tough competitive spirit. It locks the soul into a shell of offensive self-adulation, and the spirit withers away. On the other hand, the right kind of ambition turns the attention to a purpose, to work and to people, by seeking out, like a tree, new nutritive minerals that will help it broaden its root system. (pp. 338f)

Németh felt that no one field of endeavour, whether artistic, scientific or political, had a monopoly on either the creative or the destructive forces of such opposing ambitions. There are those in all walks of life who are quite willing to bend the rules in order to succeed at any cost, being interested in appearances alone, while some turn their attention to the reason behind their labours:

[...] the real strength of a society lies not in its rocket-like talents, but in the values of ordinary people working at ordinary tasks in society. In practice, however, the age of free enterprise turned the self-asserting instinct of the young towards careers that are spectacular and lucrative. (p. 339)

Real success, to Németh, consisted of a harmoniously developed and well-balanced life, which would share its warmth with others. The dignity of such a life could be recognized immediately; people sought its secrets and tried to follow its prescriptions.(p. 340) “If I were one of the young people of today,” he said, “I should seek to associate myself with major exploratory interests in life.”(p. 341)

Németh was indeed inclined to express opinions on a multitude of subjects, for instance, on the closely connected themes of work, leisure and education; he cautioned people not to let their work and their interests become separated, but to do what they enjoyed, if possible. He also said man ought not to live only to consume; “It is sad that a significant part of mankind spends life in acquiring and consuming the available products. We can protect ourselves from this danger through self-control and self-development.” Németh believed the dividing line between real entertainment and real learning should not be too distinct.(p. 344)

He also had things to say about the perennial battle of the sexes; for one thing, although conditions for good male-female relationships were more favourable than those of a few years earlier, relationships had not adequately improved. However, he noted, the sexes are not segregated today, and women can earn a living and, therefore, do not depend on men. Divorce is a means whereby people can extricate themselves from failed marriages, yet there are even more problems related to “love” than ever before. The reason for this, as he saw it, was that:

[...] our imagination and taste are directed towards certain stereotypes by movies, the arts and fashion. There are only a few (not necessarily the best) individuals in the opposite sex who approach this stereotype; others are regarded as

merely a compromise or a substitute. By challenging these stereotypes, literature and—particularly—the visual arts are able to help perceive the charm often mixed with plainness in real individuals. This then should facilitate the physical approach of the souls; it should teach our sensuality to be more spiritual, and at the same time, more realistic.(p. 345)

An even more serious problem, as he saw it, was that the feeling of economic security eventually leads many to plunge into pleasure, and love itself is made indistinguishable from mere physical pleasure. All the other values one's partner might have, we do not bother to discover, or these facets become boring and we neglect them. Furthermore, he warned us not to take marriage too selfishly or too carelessly. One should not get involved in a marriage impulsively or at too early an age. Németh said he himself approached marriage with a pledge of semi-asceticism, and this tack was rewarded with the moral support necessary for such an undertaking.(p. 345)

At times, when parents are disappointed in their lives or marriages, they transfer their aspirations and ambitions to their offspring, and an exaggerated "cult" of children follows. There is a limit to how much care and pleasure a young person needs and, indeed, can absorb. Exaggerated attention, whether in the form of indulgence or pretense, results in more harm than neglect does:

The ability of a child is neither our disgrace nor our honour. It is drawn through the lottery of genetics from the properties of our ancestors. It is wise... to regard children as our portion of man's future. They are small bodies, in which we have to support sprouting potentials with a continuous radiance of good will.(p. 346)

In *Sajkódi esték* Németh also published an essay on religious education ("A 'vallásos' nevelésről," pp. 9–73) Religious upbringing, he reasoned, should have as its goal the development in the child of a pious awareness of the integration of the universe that would include a sense of responsibility towards his own potential, as well as an interest in, respect for and compassion towards all men and all forms of life.(p. 52) Németh's idea of an ideal educator was of one who set an example that would motivate youth to direct themselves toward, and imitate, true nobility of conduct. "The family or the classroom should have an atmosphere [as it is ultimately the atmosphere that is effective in education] in which the instinct of self-assertion is converted to morality."(p. 60)

Németh felt we should regard the universe with awe and balance our own self-admiration with a healthy respect for the world:

Where this respect is replaced by disregard or insolence, man becomes his own God, [...] and instead of developing himself further, he cuts off all roots of self-evolution. For his interrupted growth he begins to compensate with hollow delusions. People develop themselves through their relationships; these are the root-tissues which provide nutrients necessary for man's unfolding.(p. 36)

In other words, people can best develop through synthesizing a respect for the universe with good relations with their fellow-men. In his last productive years, Németh sensitively analyzed the very same problems in his novels, *Esther Égető* and *Compassion*, and in his play, *The Large Family*.

He considered morality, rather than pleasure, to be the motivating life force and understood that to accept moral guidance requires considerable effort and self-discipline, but the reward would be a better society and a richer life. He asked us, does not the blessing of human intellect oblige us to preserve, use and further develop our intelligence? Readers, whether they agree or disagree with Németh's program for life, should nonetheless give some thought to his suggestions and think of them as an antithesis to our chaotic present.

Notes

1. László Németh to Ernő Osváth, editor-in-chief of the *Nyugat*, December 1925, Vienna. Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum, Budapest.
2. *Tanú*, I:1 (1932).
3. László Németh, *Sajkódi esték* [Evenings in Sajkód] (Budapest: Szépirodalmi 1961). Our source: a reprint in Németh's collected works, vol. 16, 1974. Quotation on p. 293. All subsequent references to this work are incorporated in the text.
4. László Németh, *Az értelmiség hivatása* [The Mission of the Intelligentia] (Budapest: Turul, 1944).
5. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
8. Miklós Béládi, "Minőség és erkölcs Németh László gondolatvilágában," in *A mindentudás igézete* (Budapest: József Attila Kör, 1984) p. 214.
9. László Németh, *A tanügy rendezése* [The Reorganization of Public Education] (Budapest: Sarló, 1946). More recently reprinted in *A kísérletező ember* (Budapest: Magvető, 1973).
10. László Németh, *Negyven év* [Forty Years] (Budapest: Magvető / Szépirodalmi, 1969), p. 28.
11. Published in the collective work *Sajkódi esték*, pp. 291-361. The page references are in the text.