The built space of almost any city is a palimpsest in terms of temporal layers of architecture, as one period of architectural construction gives way to another. Given that cities are increasingly defined by mobile populations, their inhabitants may often live within a palimpsestic relation between one language and another. Hungarian-born Ágnes Lehóczky explores these aspects simultaneously in her two collections of poems written in English, *Budapest to Babel* (2008) and *Rememberer* (2011b). Her decision to switch from her first language, Hungarian, as a medium for poetry raises questions that might be seen by some as troubling in terms of the future of poetry in Europe’s smaller languages, but it has resulted in two collections that bring a distinctively central European aesthetic into English. Both are dominated by the prose poem, a form that Lehóczky has adapted through an often strongly visual approach in which dense clusters of verbal images are packed into justified columns or pages of text. Lehóczky’s work has an important precursor in the Hungarian prose poems of Ágnes Nemes Nagy, on whom she has written critically, though within her adopted culture her work is more difficult to place, and its obsessions with place and placing within the context of the city become a means of eliding straightforward national or aesthetic identifications. Like several other UK poets of her generation (she was born in 1976), she responds to an environment in which the distinction between ‘mainstream’ and ‘experimental’ writing is increasingly complex. She feels a certain ‘solidarity’ with fellow-Hungarian George Szirtes, Nemes Nagy’s translator and a prominent figure within the mainstream of UK poetry (Lehóczky, 5

Ágnes Lehóczky and the Palimpsestic City

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2010). At the same time, her dialogic and phenomenological approaches have similarities with the experimental poetic strategies of Denise Riley, who like Szirtes taught her at the UEA. Lehóczky’s use of the prose poem to uncover historical layers within urban sites has a resonance with the work of Geraldine Monk discussed in the previous chapter; among other current writers she has also discovered affinities with Alan Halsey and Brian Catling (Lehóczky, 2010).

In foreign cities

Lehóczky makes the point that ‘Writing in a new language is very much like discovering a new city’ (Lehóczky, 2010) and her work often creates the sense that she is doing both at the same time. In this, it has a connection with some early modernist approaches to the city, for example Hope Mirrlees’ ‘Paris’, discussed in the Introduction (Mirrlees, 2011). The perspective of the foreigner or visitor to a city is often connected with tourism – with having the means to travel. The tourist brings a certain set of expectations to new cultures in which observation is heightened through unfamiliarity, but at the same time the observing self is separated from its environment and mythologized in the process, while place is commodified. Lehóczky’s poems describe London and Venice as well as her home city of Budapest, yet the processes of estrangement in the writing do not allow the distance of perspective that would reduce the cities to the singularity of their branded images. Part of this has to do with time, and the process of reading the prose poems, particularly in Rememberer; reading is slowed and broken; rather than ‘taking in’ images (a phrase which suggests the consumption of tourism) reading instead consists of an absorption in textures of language that make it difficult to stand back and comprehend the whole. This happens in different ways in different poems. The effect of a whole page of unbroken text is to create a sense of lostness; it resists the eye’s instinct to scan and latch on to visual markers in the same way that, scanning an urban landscape, one might orientate oneself through tall buildings and landmarks. As the text cannot easily be 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 (Certeau, 1984, p. 93).