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THE TOUCH OF MEMORY

The last chapter of *Women's Literary Tradition*, titled "Museum, Cult, Memory: Closed in the Canon" discusses Anna Lesznai, a well known writer, painter and textile artist in the first part of the 20th century in Hungary. The chapter deals with the issue of how museums influence remembrance when they become dysfunctional due to bureaucratic and financial reasons and thus shut off their subjects from public memory confining them to their archives (as it happens in the case of the Lesznai-collection of the Hatvany Museum in the small town of Hatvan in Hungary). The chapter goes on to examine how cult and admiration as research attitudes can also confine a subject to a certain role and thus exclude the possibility of dialogue from interpretation (even if the research results in expertly written books and expertly organised exhibitions, as it happens in the case the Petöfi Museum of Literature in Budapest). Anna Lesznai is appreciated in these latter instances very highly as "a spellbinding personality, a superb artist, a marvellous woman",ⁱ and considered to be belonging to, or even owned by a community of admirers. She thus in a way loses her subjectivity as the cult incorporates her: "Anna Lesznai, everyone's Máli [Lesznai's nickname] would be a hundred and twenty-five years old this year."ⁱⁱ

Anna Lesznai migrated several times during her lifetime, and none of the times had it been her voluntary choice. She experienced becoming migrant without moving when the territory on which her family's estate lay was annexed to Czechoslovakia in 1920. She lived in emigration in Vienna in the 1920s, at that time working with the lively group of contemporary writers, thinkers and artists called "Sunday Circle". From the Nazi Europe she escaped to the United States in 1939, and lived there permanently. She visited Hungary in 1966 shortly before her death.

In the second part of the chapter I analyse how Anna Lesznai developed her own concept of memory in her novel *In the Beginning There Was the Garden* (1966), in her diaries and artwork. She had kept a diary throughout her life until 1944, the year when her son, who stayed behind in Hungary, died. Her diaries bear witness to the times when she hadn't lost contact with her home country, when she was able to use Hungarian language for writing about her personal and professional life. After 1945 for some time she focused on art, learning native American and American piecing and patchwork techniques as well as contemporary painting techniques. After this period she continued writing the novel which she had started then ceased to write in the 1930s in Hungary. This was the time when she formed her concept of memory that can perhaps be best described as the patchwork of memory. The autobiographical and historical novel *In the Beginning There Was the Garden* is the story of the writer's family from the 1840s till the 1930s, offering a panoramic picture of Hungarian society from the female point of view. The extraordinary feature of the novel is that – because of the linguistic separation of the emigrant writer – it keeps intact the literary language and traditions of the 1930s, and at same time uses the

modern art and textile techniques of the 1960s, translating them into narrative structures that organise memory in an innovative way. The combination of the technique of patchwork with the seemingly outdated literary language results in a unique example of women's writing that has not yet been acknowledged as such by literary history and canons.

The following excerpt is the very end of my book, the account of the journey I made with my family to the place where Lesznai's family estate lay. They had a lovely cottage and a garden which was a popular meeting place for contemporary artists and writers. It had been painted many times by different artists and served as the main motif in Lesznai's novel. It was a symbol of beauty and art and safety. This building still exists in a completely deteriorated state in a small village in Slovakia. This is the real "place" of amnesia, containing all the memories of 20th art and women's literature.

THE TOUCH OF MEMORY: NIŽNÝ HRUŠOV

I didn't go back to the Hatvany Museum, I took a much longer journey. It's about a mile to the main road from where you can see the alley that hides the river. The Ondava. That's where they used to go to swim. That's where Anna Lesznai's son used to ride in the 1910s. A small Slovakian village. We take two cars, four children, four adults. Grandchildren and grandparents accompany me. A nice outing, only fifty miles from Pálháza, let's go and see it. Anna Lesznai used to live here. Her guests used to come here in the summer, all the well-known writers, intellectuals and artists of her era, Béla Balázs, György Lukács, Margit Kaffka, and Lesznai's second husband, Oszkár Jászi. We will see the beautiful house, the terrace, the steps leading down to the garden.

There is no trace of it at all in the village. There isn't a museum here. I find the church easily, you can see it in the distance from the main road. I have seen photos of it, Anna Lesznai is walking down the street at the side of the church, it is summertime, the sun is shining. This is exactly where we are walking now. But it takes too long. The house is not there. The children are bored. The grown-ups are worn out. It took two hours to get here, we got lost twice, the roads are bad. My son was sick in the car. I feel the pressure coming from my family, I have spoilt their day, dragging them about the countryside, across borders. I am pacing quickly, pretending to know where I am heading to. But we reach the end of the street, this is the cemetery. There is nothing here, not even a pub. We turn back. We see children playing football next to the church, it seems interesting to our children for a minute, but no, it's not interesting after all, let's go home. And at the last moment I find the house. I run up the small hill at the other side of the church, look around, and here it is. It's there, exactly at the spot where the pictures show. But one should not look for a big house and a park. It is a ruin, hidden, derelict. I go up the broken steps. My son and father accompany me, my husband, my father's wife, my nieces and nephew don't, although I shout to let them know we have found it.

At some point there must have been a kindergarten in the backyard, today it is awfully dirty, run down. You could perhaps call it a playground. I go round the house. Which is the front? The wind is blowing, a part of the roof is giving out a shrieking

noise. There is another house built right in front of it. I have never come across such a strange sight. Why did they keep it? Why didn't they knock it down? It's walled up, a ruin, an inclusion. One would walk down the steps seen so many times in the pictures and paintings, down to the beautiful fairy garden. There is a grey concrete wall a few metres from the last step. On the other side of it there is a courtyard, some buildings, shops or offices, community house, driveway. You can drive in at the other end of the terrace. This can't be it. Yet this is it. I am going closer, looking in through the dim window. It's empty, only the gappy, ugly floorboard, rubbish, grey walls. Outside there is a memorial tablet on the wall, 1945, the Soviet Council, the village was freed. The walls are shabby pink. The plasterwork moults. Nothing remembers Anna Lesznai here.

Nižný Hrušov, my son keeps saying it, when he wants to emphasize what strange places I take him sometimes. And I keep forgetting the name of the village, don't want to remember it. What a tour-maniac freak I am, he looks at me with a smile, a writer used to live there, no doubt, for sure, a woman writer. A writerin. The one you are writing about. And we are driving in the country for hours into nothingness, because you are a writer as well. A woman writer. He is laughing at me, a bit annoyed, a bit proud of me, and of himself because he knows it all. And his knowledge embarrasses him.

'What happened to her house? Why does no one live there? Where does she live now?' he asked in the car on the way home.

I explained. Rationed history, careful about the dosage. I was talking about traumas to a small child, tried to do it carefully: not to hurt, yet not to leave untouched. My son was trying hard to take it in. He was surprised.

The writer is dead, I said. This used to be her house in the old times. Where you can see the grey brick wall now, there were steps leading to the beautiful garden. They went down to swim in the river. But a war came. The borders were moved. The village was given another name. The house stayed where it was, but it wasn't Hungary any more. She couldn't come here for a long time, lived elsewhere. Later she could come again, but another war came. She was Jewish. Jews were hurt and killed at that time by the others. She and her husband escaped so as not to be hurt. They went to America, two of her sons had lived there for some time, they met again. But her oldest son died here in the war. She died in America, at an old age, I add, to sooth him, because he is sensitive, he may start to fantasize, taking such stories on himself. He might think that perhaps our house can be taken away. Not without foundation, though, since this is what had happened to his grandfather, to my father, when he was a small boy: their house in the town Kassa suddenly wasn't in Hungary anymore. It became Slovakia. They never went back.

'And her house?' my son asks. 'Did she get it back?'

'No. It belongs to nobody. The people from the village used it, but they didn't take care of it. It is empty now.'

'They have spoilt her garden,' he says.

He is upset, deep in his thoughts. I stop talking. It was enough. His father is telling me off, telling me to stop it. He is right. He puts a CD in, a Hungarian folk tale. King Matthias and the shepherd. Reassuring orderliness. Smart people get justice. There is a king to award them. They can win.

But we have seen the house. What I told him is not a tale. It is history when we notice it, because it touches us.

My son brought the subject up several weeks later. He asked:

'Why did we go there?'

‘To see what the house is like now. To remember it. To talk about it. Anna Lesznai used to live there. We should not forget about her. Because I am writing about her.’

The explanation seemed satisfactory. So I showed him Anna Lesznai’s picture of the pear tree. And we read one of her tales. Perhaps something is going to happen. A small boy asked some questions.

NOTES

ⁱ Török, Petra, “Mindenképp úgy érzem, ez lenne a fő könyv. Lesznai Anna naplójegyzeteiről.” *Sorsával tetováltan önmaga. Válogatás Lesznai Anna naplójegyzeteiből.* Ed. Török, Petra, Budapest–Hatvan, PIM–Hatvany Lajos Múzeum, 2010, 6–65, 15.

ⁱⁱ Fodor, Tünde, “Nemeperszemnyi.” *Spanyolnátha*, Summer 2010, <http://www.spanyolnatha.hu/archivum/2010-nyar/32/lesznai-anna-125/bevezeto/2493>