

Török, Petra, ed. *Sorsával tetováltan önmaga. Válogatás Lesznai Anna naplójegyzeteiből [Tattooed With Her Fate: Excerpts from Anna Lesznai's Diary]*. Budapest, Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum and Hatvany Lajos Múzeum. 2010. 536 pp., illus. + Appendix.

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Petra Török's carefully edited volume of Anna Lesznai's diary aims to reassess the life, career and *ars poetica* of Anna Lesznai (1885 Budapest – 1966 New York), one of the most gripping Hungarian female artists of the first half of the 20th century. Beyond textual material, the volume includes a rich selection of images, both photographs of Lesznai's friends and family and her childhood residential environment of Hrušov [Hungarian: Körtvélyes], as well as Lesznai's own drawings and illustrations interpreting the relationships between the characters in her diary excerpts.

At first glance, diary does not seem to be a paradoxical genre and can be defined as a textual recollection in which both the author and the reader is the same person, a reduction of the circle of communication to one person which is manifested most clearly in the so-called secret diaries. However, Lesznai's diary, being anything but secretive, can be best characterized as a public diary, which she created by a patchwork technique as she juxtaposed texts of various genres, many of which recorded verbal conversations with her friends with often report-like accuracy. Although traditionally the diary form is the most intimate genre, most of Lesznai's entries are not only impersonal but also collective, as her family and friends, including children, were permitted to read them, add to them, or draw in them, so that on the pages of her diary their comments can be found as they debated and draw inspiration from a given topic. Most of these friends were members of a group of intellectuals, the so-called "Vasárnapi Kör" (The Sunday Circle, VK), who got together regularly after 1915. In her diary, Lesznai recalls elements of and reflects on the debates taking place in the VK intellectual salon. Among the members, who beyond Lesznai included her husband, the radical politician Oszkár Jászi and their artist friends were such later internationally renowned philosophers as György Lukács, founder of sociology of knowledge Karl Mannheim, the art philosopher Arnold Hauser, the art historian Lajos Fülep and Károly Tolnay, the monographer of Michelangelo and Pieter Brueghel. By the analysis on the debates going on in her salon Lesznai demonstrates considerably more writing talent than in her literary works and provides a great contribution to the interpretation of the ideology of the VK circle of great philosophers.

As a consequence of Lesznai's patchwork technique of diary writing she becomes simultaneously a correspondent, a chronicler and a student constantly learning from her peers. She paints a tableau of her friends, their ideology and their works of art, all the time remaining modestly in the corner of the picture, which she does not as some deliberate self-positioning but rather as a precise documentation of her learning process. Because Lesznai lacked a regular education, she developed her philosophical and aesthetic literacy on her own through inspiring conversations and recommended readings from her circle of friends. A learning process clearly visible not only on a theoretical level but also in her literary style.

Lesznai's development both as a writer and artist can be reconstructed through her diary. Her entry into the literary world was made possible by her cousin, Lajos Hatvany, one of the publishers of the European cultural journal, *Nyugat* (West), who regularly published her poems from 1908 and in 1909 also supported the publication of her own volume. However, from that point, the good reception of her writings no longer could be attributed to the influence of her famous cousin, as Lesznai not only continued to be one of the very few women publishing regularly in the journal, but was also accepted as a true poet by Endre Ady

himself, the leading figure of *Nyugat*, who called her “his respected and beloved sister in poetry.” However, despite the good reception and Ady’s welcome, reading how Lesznai constantly engaged on the pages of her diary with the critical remarks of her peers regarding her poems, it seems that she was less satisfied with her poetic achievements than Ady. She discussed in great lengths, for instance, her conversation with Kassák from the 1920s about metaphors and rhymes, explaining why she had not followed Kassák’s inspiring advice despite completely appreciating them. She claimed that she was following a different poetic approach from Kassák, but the real reason behind her avoidance of trying to follow these critical comments might have been that she did not believe in her own ability to raise her poetry to a higher level.

Besides poetry, the other genre close to Lesznai’s heart was the tale, a fashionable genre both in its poetic and prose versions during the nineteenth and twentieth century, renowned primarily through the works of Oscar Wilde. Many of Lesznai’s close friends were also writing tales, of whom Béla Balázs’s *Fából faragott királyfi* (The Wooden Prince) became world-wide famous after Béla Bartók wrote a ballet based on it. However, while the tales of Balázs and other peers can be interpreted as philosophical parables written primarily for adults, Lesznai’s tales are rather nice, yet didactic stories addressed to children. The hero of the *Mese a bútorokról és a kisfiúról* (Tale About the Furniture and the Little Boy) is, for instance, warned by the trees, the figures of nature appearing in human form that he causes pain when he carves on the wooden furniture. The moral of the tale is that the people, plants and animals, as well as the apparently insentient things are all members of a universal brotherhood. Lesznai’s illustrations in this little book also add to the faithful portrayal of the sense of the true pantheism of the tale, with the reader is amazed by the strange, ornamental metamorphoses. The characters of her tales, the monkey woman [Hungarian: majomasszony], the centaur [lóember], the barely-existing-woman [alig-van-asszony], the never-be-man [sohse-lesz-ember], the lonely-man [egyedül-való-ember], the cookie-woman [süteményasszony], the monkey king [majomkirály] and the ring-woman [gyűrűasszony] are all free-born creatures of Lesznai’s unchained visual fantasy. Lesznai dealt in her tales with such questions of fate as the questions of life and death, love, faith and wonder. For Lesznai, her tales were never only by-products like chippings in a yard, not even only gifts of a mother for her children, but something much more, her own mythology and her own explanation of life. She wanted to further elaborate on the model of the redeemed world in a second string of tales and she even laid out their outline in her notes, but in the end she never wrote them because she “no longer believed in them.” This was one of those decisions when Lesznai’s lack of self-confidence paralyzed her creative spirit.

Lesznai’s diary testifies to how through her life she constantly doubted her own talent. Struggling with her lack of confidence in her own talent, she only wrote a few poems and tales here and there after the 1920s and allowed her only novel *Kezdetben volt a kert* (In the Beginning, There Was the Garden) to be published only towards the end of her life and only after extensive work and revisions. In this novel, a *roman a clef*, she talks about the lives of her family, friends and other people around her during her late nineteenth century idyllic childhood, through the First World War and the following revolutions to the complete dissolution of the feudal way of life. Similarly to Lesznai, Lizó, the main protagonist of the novel and her friends managed to adjust to their new world as artists and citizens even though this adjustment was hard and heavy with nostalgia. Considering Lesznai’s struggles with her self-doubts, her fidelity [towards art] may have been the only reason of her finishing her novel at all. She considered herself a witness, and as such felt that talking about the fates of her family, friends and Hungarian society was her [artistic] obligation.

Lesznai’s diary also documents her work in fine arts, as well as the lives of her artist friends. Among her friends were such great artists as József Rippl-Rónai, Róbert Berényi and

Lajos Kassák from whom she learned painting in Budapest, as she also did for a time from other famous painters in Paris. During the 1920s she painted mainly colorful rural scenes in the style of Breughel. Although Lesznai always found great pleasure in painting, just as in the case of her writings she was plagued by constant doubts regarding the quality of her work. In her diary, she criticized her own flat paintings, complaining that she “cannot see and feel the space” and is forced to compensate for their lack of dimensions with “lovely figures.” As Lesznai lacked any superficial vanity, hindered by the limits of her talent and her lack of education, she did not shy away from listening to, even asking for criticism from her highly respected peers and trying to follow their advice. These feelings of inadequacy might have been behind her decision to lay down her brush at the end of the 1920s.

In addition to writing and painting, Lesznai also tried her hand in industrial art, primarily in embroidery. Even though back then, women of all social classes were expected to embroider, Lesznai was not content with the works of her contemporaries and their petite point technique, but rather she was drawn more to the colors and shapes of folk embroidery, whose techniques she had learned from women from Mezőkövesd. During the 1910s, through creating and designing embroidery, many of which were embroidered by peasant women and then sold, Lesznai developed a specific ornamental folk style. Her unique motifs such as the flower-tree, wonder tree and the flowery cup can be found in many of her early works, but from the 1920s her motifs become more simple, abstract and stylized.

In 1939, Lesznai fled Europe and emigrated to New York with her husband, Tibor Gergely. In America, she renewed her art with Mexican, Peruvian and Native American techniques of embroidery. The most important thing for Lesznai remained that her Hungarian peers, with whom she was corresponding regularly even in her emigration, appreciated her most for her industrial art and she met with the greatest success in this area and during the last decades of her life she earned her living by holding industrial arts trainings in the United States.

In the 1910s and ‘20s the diarist Lesznai was most interested in her own intellectual and artistic development. She rarely wrote, if at all, about her own private tragedies, including the deaths of her beloved father, her brother or her son, Ferenc. She rather focused on her own artistic identity, which was anything but uncomplicated. Even though her writings, paintings and embroidery eventually met with success, Lesznai did not consider herself a first-class artist, but felt that her work of art was the overflow of her pantheistic love towards the world, and accordingly, her peers and friends regarded her first of all a good friend and only an enthusiastic amateur. The question that how much Lesznai’s self-doubts regarding her talent and art were justified is hard to answer. Considering the whole corpus of her art we can conclude that even though she was better in fine arts and industrial arts than she ever acknowledged, her literary output was indeed not outstanding. The quality of her literature may be explained by the fact that even though she understood and accepted the criticism of her works, she did not learn from it. When Endre Ady, for instance, commented on the verbosity of Lesznai’s poems and suggested that she needed to leave out unnecessary words and put more work in the poems, instead of following his advice she subsided into silence. At first glance, Lesznai’s attitude can be regarded as noncompliance, but it rather stemmed from a special kind of female self-doubt functioning as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Her sense of subservience also showed itself in her tendency to help others with editing and illustrating their works. Since, due to a large inheritance from her father, she was considered to be a wealthy and generous financial patron to her peers, she could never be sure whether her works were praised for themselves or the appreciations were mere flatteries to the wealthy, influential patron and selfless friend. However, despite her wealth, she worked hard in America, living largely isolated from her Hungarian friends towards the end of her life.

Lesznai was much more headstrong than was accepted for a woman of her time. For example, at the age of seventeen she entered into her first marriage on her own decision but stayed in that marriage only until the birth of her first child. We can get an inkling of her motivation for that marriage from her autobiographical novel, where her brother asks his sister Lizó (Lesznai's alter ego) why she entered into that youthful inappropriate marriage and she replies that it was because she desired him "just as you, boys, desire lovely girls." Like her character Lizó, Lesznai continued to live the rest of her life in sexual freedom, as explained by her second husband, Jászi, in the following terms: "[she is] the forerunner of an as of yet unrealized degree of female development." Lesznai was constantly preoccupied with the questions of female existence and love and worked with her friends, including the Marxist philosopher Lukács, on developing a kind of philosophy or religion of love, which could embody and capture the existence in harmony with the whole world beyond mere attraction between two people. Lesznai experienced love as a completeness that could only be realized with a more perfect being than herself. "I have always been admittedly prone to fall hard in love [...] But I always fell upward and could love only somebody, who is more valuable, more clean and better morally and if not more expansive, but more profound spiritually than me" (416). Lesznai's words demonstrate clearly that she considered herself as a second-class human, a woman, whose mission is to help and support, be the source of inspiration for her beloved. However, when Lesznai wrote in the very first note in her diary that "I realized that a man and a profession are not compatible with each other. Keeping a man's heart is a whole profession in itself" is misleading in so far as it sounds as if Lesznai had entertained an essentialist understanding of women's role. However, her life style was anything but essentialist and traditional, given that she married three times, suffered through numerous passionate love affairs, and managed to be a successful artist in her whole life.

According to Lesznai's diary, love and art, which she called "the two basic forms of miracle," became central notions to her in the end of the 1930s. She wrote about love that "[o]ne has to seek the love that fulfills and not the love that makes one happy. Happiness is just a game, an island, not art; hence [happiness] can only have an indirect role in ethics. Love [that fulfills] can redeem its object, too, if it is intense enough, while the love [that makes one happy] can only redeem (with the help of grace?) the lover and the loved one returning the feeling" (194). Only in the late 1930s did Lesznai's diary become the source of truly profound private events and self-reflections after her admitting that "[a]fter twenty years now I am longing again to have a private diary" (388). At this time in her life, she felt that the balance between love and art was about to be disturbed and that after the love in her marriage had gone cold she needed to reconstruct her identity through the sublimation of her objectless sexual energy, or, as she expressed it: "[...] [S]ince my essence is absolutely erotic, I can only try to return in a new and higher form to the dissolving eroticism of my entire youth and to transform [this eroticism] into a positive, creative and harmonious energy" (488).

In the period between 1920 and 1938 Lesznai's Jewish descent became an important topic in her diary and she wrote about herself that "I became Hungarian with Jewish blood/mingled with Slovak [Hungarian: *tót*]/lied down on their [Hungarians'] land." Examples in her family can be found for both proudly assimilatory and conservative traditional Jewish attitudes. She wrote about her childhood that: "thanks to the coincidences in my upbringing, while in the very beginnings the mature trees of our rural mansion were nodding approvingly above me, I lived among both Christians and Jews and my memories, my feelings and my friends have been recruited from both cultures" (52). Although as a child Lesznai was baptized a Protestant her faith and spiritual attitude cannot be linked to Protestantism or any other Christian denomination as it was rather an identification with a specific kind of moral absolute. During the '20s and '30s, with the advancing anti-Semitism, however, she realized that what she imagined earlier to be an ecumenical process of

experiencing spirituality involving everyone had become impossible to realize. In 1938 she wrote that as far as she was concerned it was the Jews who should do more for overcoming the antagonism between Christians and Jews: “Anyone who proudly undertakes to belong to the Hungarian community has special rights and responsibilities” (478). Her Jewishness was the very reason she was forced to flee Hungary and having to found refuge, along with her ex-husband, Jászi and to some of her friends, in the United States.

The Anna Lesznai one comes to know from her diary has a multiply fragmented identity. She is the child of a Jewish family, yet lives like a member of the Hungarian gentry and at the same time considers herself an artist. However, this multiple identity also means multiple reasons for rejection because her artist friends look at the rich heiress trying her wings in literature and fine arts with slight condescension. Béla Balázs, one of her closest friends, for instance, said about her that “all the artistic talent she had in herself was eaten by love.”

In her diary, poems and drawings Lesznai often depicted Melusine, a figure of Old French legends, who appears either as mermaid or woman, as the representation of her own fragmented identity in her diary, poems and drawings, as well. Melusine’s character represents the contradiction between humans and nature, because she cannot dissolve entirely into Nature, but she cannot become fully human either. However, Lesznai visualized Melusine not as a creature of the waters but as a bird, writing in her poem *Megértő Meluzina* (Sympathetic Melusine) that “Dive into yourself, you gloomy bird”. Such fairy bird-like figures, even Melusine herself appeared also in many of Lesznai’s drawings, often in ornamental surroundings and hidden behind veils. According to another interpretation, Melusine represents the dichotomy of existence and non-existence, the very impossibility of identifying completely with ourselves. In still another reading, Melusine is the symbol of the mythic creature that is unable to devote itself completely (to love). With her many facets, Melusine, thus, can be regarded as the metaphor of Lesznai, the female artist, herself. She is the one who can exist in many places, but she cannot feel truly at home anywhere. She embarks on many things, but precisely because of her trepidation, cannot reach artistic perfection. She shares herself with her friends just like the heroin of one of her tales, the cookie-woman, so as with everyone getting a delicate little piece of her, these pieces never can make a great harmonious whole.

Reading Lesznai’s diary we come to gain an intimate insight into both how in the beginning of the twentieth century in Hungary a woman tried to realize herself as an independent woman, an artist and a human being and what kind of inner struggles and outer forces hampered her in achieving this goal. In Lesznai’s life we can also recognize ourselves and the stranglehold of our own self-doubts as intellectual women.

Translated by Erzsébet László.