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## Missing Names in Hungarian Literary History

Women's Literary Tradition and Twentieth-Century Hungarian Writers : Renée Erdős, Ágnes Nemes Nagy, Minka Czóbel, Ilona Harnos Kosztolányi, Anna Lesznai/ Anna Menyhért; translated by Anna Bentley. – Series *Women Writers in History*, Volume 3. – Leiden: Koninklijke Brill Nv, 2020 (Leiden; Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 2020). – 290 pp. ISBN 978-90-04-41738-0

According to the literary tradition in Europe at the time, literature in nineteenth-century Hungary was predominantly written by men. In effect, even twentieth-century women were still not accepted in the literary canon, and though they were not taking over literature yet, women were slowly emerging from anonymity by pushing the boundaries of social norms. Within a thriving literary culture involving women writers, none of the twentieth-century authors were established in literary history. Exceptions are two women: Margit Kaffka and Ágnes Nemes Nagy who still live in the memory of the posterity. Anna Menyhért's book aims to acquaint the reader with the life and work of five twentieth-century Hungarian female writers. The chapters are dedicated to each distinct author without being arranged in chronological order, followed by an appendix containing a list of poems with translations and a bibliography. The volume concludes with an index of subjects and an index of names and places.

The author analyses a diversity of texts written by five female authors<sup>1</sup> forgotten by literary history with an aim of rediscovering and preserving their work for posterity. In spite of being distinct, the texts share similar characteristics and represent a specific intimate, self-reflective style of writing (13). The first chapter, *Tradition of One's Own*, introduces the reader with the author's overview of literature textbooks which are used in Hungarian grammar schools. Her goal was to search for women writers taught in schools through formal education, but found very few of them. Following on concepts of Assmann's cultural theory, Anna Menyhért associates the condition of absence of women in literature with collective amnesia. 'Women writers don't make it into the Hungarian literary canon. They don't form our identity. We don't read them. We don't talk about them. We don't teach them', concludes

the author (2). The contemporaries at the beginning of the twentieth century and also later on welcomed the emerging women writers with great enthusiasm, expectations and hope that these female authors would be received and would remain in the literary canon. The book intends to explore the subject matter of the argument aiming to change the literary tradition and expectations. In order to do so, the author suggests it is not enough to solely talk about women writers, but that the way of depicting them also needs to change. In doing so, it is crucial not to diminish their work and importance. Menyhért believes that through rediscovering twentieth-century women writers – starting from the works in the journal *Nyugat* (*West*) and returning the true value to the marginalised literary forms, such as diary, memoir, autobiography – Hungarian literary history would be significantly enriched.

Chapter two explores the life and work of Renée Erdős (1879–1956), a praised and prominent poet and novelist of the period whose writing Anna Menyhért discovered in a manuscript archive as a hidden treasure of Hungarian legacy. The chapter is a discussion of Erdős' life and work emphasising her experiences as a writer. It also examines the reception of her literature, her provocative, mystic, erotic poems, themes on race, sexuality, male and female relationships appearing in her brave, daring, yet in later years not completely norm-breaking literature. The chapter explores the transformation of Erdős' lyric poetry and prose, following inherited societal expectations. After converting to Catholicism, her work shifts from erotic to traditional depiction of conservative women's roles. This contradiction, as Menyhért suggests, was perhaps not an intentional technique, but a means of balancing the challenging, silent questions no-one dared to ask, with the manner of writing to which her readers could relate to. In her later autobiographical novel she portrayed traditional gender roles, family hierarchy and women's intimacy. Menyhért discovers that 'no one else in twentieth-century Hungarian literature has written as much and as expressively about women's sexual problems as Renée Erdős' (25). She was among the best-selling authors in the 1920s, appreciated by prominent men, celebrated scientists and renowned writers at the time, a smart businesswoman who knew how to take care of her publications, yet today erased from literary history. 'We don't even know what her secret was', underlines Menyhért (24). In the course of several decades, a poet 'of the new age' (29), a productive well-known writer became a forgotten name. The critics described her books as 'vulgar' and 'kitsch', irresponsible for the demands and expectations of the literary canon. She was not judged by her own merits but rather by her affairs with celebrated men, like the poet Sándor Bródy, and was even publicly accused of being guilty for his suicide. Menyhért discovered in Bródy's diary that the real reason for taking his life was in fact a way to escape the

detrimental effects of his illness. Anna Menyhért aims to alter the criteria of literary reception claiming that the case of Renée Erdős is ‘the proof that canonical rank is [...] not the result of some ‘pure’ aesthetic value pertaining to the literary text’ (26). The author furthermore reflects upon the way cultural institutions relate to the female writer in question, such as the local history museum placed in Renée Erdős’ former house in Rákoshegy in which only one room is dedicated to her life work. This is how the posterity remembers her, giving her space in one room within a local history museum and thus in the cultural memory. The contemporaries judged her decisions and misinterpreted her literary goals as harmful and odd, and later with the change of themes in her work, she was criticised for choosing the path of ‘a cowardly retreat into patriarchal discourse in order to succeed in the market place’ (39). Menyhért justifies this compromise as her path towards becoming approved by the publishing industry. Contemporary writers and poets like Mihály Babits, Árpád Tóth, Zoltán Somlyó, Géza Laczkó, all praised her work; on the other hand, in a majority of reviews she was underappreciated and her poetry was labelled as ‘overly erotic’ (51). This image of Renée Erdős remains the same even today. Nándor Várkonyi underlines that her works ‘are not the business of literary history’ (53). Menyhért points out that it is necessary to understand the reasons why she is not being canonised by literary history in order to move further and be able to ‘successfully establish [...] a tradition of women’s writing’ (55). She concludes that the critics’ recognition of Renée Erdős’ poetic style was indeed the foundation of modern Hungarian poetry and in this regard a crucial influence on Endre Ady’s work. However, it did not shift her place within the canon (54). In the final pages of the chapter, the author is taking the reader on a walk through Renée Erdős House trying to connect with the past, while expecting ‘something like the Ady Museum in Budapest, or Tolstoy’s house in Moscow’, but only finds out that she has already been forgotten (67).

The third chapter is dedicated to Ágnes Nemes Nagy (1922–1991), one of the few canonised female poets who ‘turns up in every textbook series’ (1) in literature curriculum in Hungarian secondary schools. Literary history made its judgement based on her published poems which she fashioned to meet the norms of the masculine manner of expression. Howbeit, her complete work includes also the ‘posthumous poems [that had] remained in storage’ (75), the ones which Menyhért was yet to discover. The publication of her collected poems in 1995 consisted of her earlier works combined with those originating from her notebook which was found by the editor and literary critic, Balázs Lengyel, who was also Nemes Nagy’s husband. The poems that were discovered are subjective, written in the first person and were not meant to come to light. The reason behind the sensitive, intimate voice

of her poetry, as Lengyel wrote, was to be found in her ‘mental constitution [...] her frayed nerves, her psychological wounds’ (77). Menyhért argues that a new canon was being forged, yet literary history stayed silent, paying very little attention to the different direction of Nemes Nagy’s poetic method, stretching from a masculine, objective, conscious, disciplined, intellectual, powerful poetry to feminine, subjective, intuitive, sensitive one, as contemporary critics interpreted the two antipodes. Menyhért argues that the main issue with this kind of stereotypical model of ‘gender-based opposition’ (82) is that every weakness in the poems is attributed to femininity, which is why Nemes Nagy Ágnes weeps when the critics call her a ‘poetess’ (83). After being established in literary history as an objective poet who fashioned a poetic language in which there was no place for the feminine, the posthumously emerged poetry was not received well, ‘it became first a taboo topic, then one of no interest’ (87), points out Menyhért.

Chapter four focuses on Minka Czóbel (1855-1947), the forerunner of modern Hungarian poetry and the *Nyugat* (*West*) movement, who was a prolific novelist, playwright and author of short stories. Her symbolic poetry was well received by the contemporary writers, but from the 1970s her work was re-evaluated by Péter Pót and she was excluded from the canon due to being an ‘eccentric, pathetic, inhibited, ugly old maid’ (112). Menyhért investigates the reasons for harsh criticism which, as it seems, was not based on aesthetic values but on ideological constraints as a result of not fitting into the traditional Marxist norms (118). She questions whether the evaluation criteria of her poems based on the ‘biographical narrative’ would change if it turned out that ‘Minka Czóbel, the allegedly ugly, lonely old maid lived with a woman who behaved in a masculine way’ (120). Regardless of her sexual orientation, Menyhért draws attention to the fact that the manner of portraying Minka Czóbel by literary history determined the reception of her literary work. Menyhért argues that her poetic efforts were canonically recognised only ‘at the price of reducing her femininity’ (123). The unjustly neglected norm-breaking writing of Minka Czóbel is a complex construction of symbolic, decadent, shocking, morbid topics and themes against women’s traditional roles in marriage and motherhood. Her allegorical, ethereal, song-like poems with various mythological, female beings of fairy-tale quality, the witch, the fairy, the princess, and the simple childish and complex surreal poems rich in image-forming are ‘considered valuable only as a precursor to Sándor Weöres’ (140). Menyhért argues that her visual poems and stories with morbid visions, images of death, dark, tragic plots, philosophical and pre-Freudian poems, her gothic prose genre with scenes of blood and horror ‘can be regarded as being also a precursor of trauma discourse in the twentieth-century

(Hungarian) (women's) literary tradition' (163), yet she still stays distant and 'we still haven't learned how to read her' (168).

Chapter five deals with the question of literary reception of a writer's wife, Ilona Harnos Kosztolányi (1885-1967). It addresses the way her status influenced the evaluation of her work. Menyhért recommends excerpts from Harnos' memoirs *Born with a Caul* to be included as compulsory reading in secondary school as a depiction of a girl's identity formation (180). Anna Menyhért further gives an account of Harnos' portraits of fellow writers' wives in a 'mirror-autobiography', an outspoken waspish text, an illustration of other wives in which she is searching for the 'essence of her own identity as a writer's wife' (188). Discussing the literature of women's autobiographies, Menyhért points out that 'the defining characteristics of these autobiographies are: the formation of identity in relation to others [...]' (14). When recalling the traumatic wartime experiences in her memoirs, the persecution of Jews in 1944–1945, Ilona Harnos reflects on the way people's relationships change in catastrophic circumstances after their roles and sides change. Anna Menyhért questions whether this is personal or collective responsibility (214). She argues that Harnos' position in the canon is not expected to change due to the fact that the 'genres she represents count as less valuable than those of 'serious' male literature' (191). She points out that even though ten thousand copies of Ilona Harnos's memoirs were printed in the early 2000s, her case is yet another example of how the quality of a work itself is not of crucial importance as a criterion for evaluating the value of literature. To this day, she has been identified as the wife of a famous writer, 'a writer worthy of her husband' (205). In her analysis Anna Menyhért begins with Elaine Showalter's gynocritical framework and goes further following the more recent trends in feminist thought that question the canonical means of aesthetic judgement which devalue women's personalities or their work. She suggests that new analytical criteria must be constructed in order to alter the literary canon (192), just as the 'writer's wife' has to travel away, far from the memories, to reinvent herself in a new place where she could write freely (193).

Chapter six explores the life and work of Anna Lesznai (Amália Moscovitz, 1885–1966), a poet, a writer and an artist whose situation was more favourable compared to other female writers. Albeit she emigrated to America in hope of escaping Nazi prosecution, she did achieve success as a well-known woman writer and an independent visual and applied artist. Lesznai was appreciated by contemporaries and revived in the 2000s with almost 'cultish adoration' (238). She was acknowledged for her poetry, her fairy tales, paintings, and embroidery designs inspired by Hungarian folk art, embellished with secessionist ornaments,

myth-like motifs, butterflies and fairies. Menyhért gives a description of an exhibition set up to celebrate Anna Lesznai's work, which displayed illustrations, photographs depicting manuscripts of her poems and fairy tales, the famous Ady cushion, as well as Ady's verses dedicated to the writer and her husband Oszkár Jászi in handwriting, to name only a few. (241). She feels that Lesznai is becoming a 'common property', 'the property of a cult' (240) which will 'close off Anna Lesznai's position in the canon [...] to the sphere of the long-ago' (238). Menyhért argues that the only work which has not received positive acclaim from the critics was her autobiographical novel *In the Beginning Was the Garden*, published in 1966. Whether it was for ideological reasons, claiming it 'cannot be regarded as a quality Hungarian social novel' (246), or because it was labelled as a 'Hungarian Jewish family saga' (247), or possibly because of its length and the temporal distance, the fact remains that the 1300-page novel that took the author thirty years to write (1935–1965) has not received positive critical recognition (248). Menyhért explains that the novel uses a reminiscent point of view, however, it is more than just a family saga and is more of a historical novel (248). She argues that the work is not lacking structure, as the critics remarked, and is a novel about hierarchy. From Lizó's (Anna Lesznai's alter ego) point of view, the author is constructing a new norm-breaking value system where a girl gets permission from her father to live by the rules which are different from those followed by other women. His little 'mustang' is allowed freedom to divorce and to write. Anna Lesznai's novel was written in emigration, thus influenced by a different culture, as her embroidery was, therefore its innovative features could well be the reason for not being accepted in Hungary.

Anna Menyhért is reinterpreting and re-evaluating the literary works of five women writers who did meet the criteria of excellence in their time, aiming to give back their well-deserved status. She identifies herself with all the writers portrayed in the book in certain aspects of their work, personal experience or character trait. Her book can be read from different perspectives, as a literary criticism, literary history, collection of essays, and a personal diary written in a unique manner, in an intimate reflexive style, sharing her personal experience and her observation on her quest. Menyhért questions the authority of elitist literary criticism aiming to find the answer to the question why the female authors are still being marginalised. She is well aware that conditions of acceptance are often to be found outside the text and not in the aesthetic force. The overly erotic lady author, the weeping poetess, the ugly, old maid, the writer's wife, are the examples which demonstrate the way literary reception was based on different standards for female and male writers. Examples from the book illustrate that the inherited sexist prejudices determine the women's position in

the canon despite the original and creative qualities of their text. By writing about her ‘foremothers’, Anna Menyhért gives them a deserved place in literary history in hope of renewing their status in the continuity of the Hungarian literary tradition that will serve as an inspiration for present-day writers and the ones still to come.

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<sup>1</sup>Anna Menyhért uses the terms “women’s literature and women’s literary tradition”, marking women writers and their literary work with a specific female style and features (13).

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## **Заборављена имена у мађарској књижевној историји**