

From Imaginary to Real Museums

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University of Szeged, Szeged, Hungary

uneco84@gmail.com

The museum “*one of the uncanny places of all cultural institutions*” (Binni, 1986:9) plays a crucial role in Ottó Tolnai's writings. The essayist is a frequent visitor of galleries and museums with the intention to observe and discover hidden details of artworks that remain cryptic to profane eyes, for instance “*a pearly handle of a knife in a Still Life of a Dutch Master*” (Tolnai, 2004:256).

A museum, based on the theory of time – heterotopia by Foucault is a synonym for infinite accumulations (Foucault, 2000:152), is a viable solution for Tolnai's works, or even premises and instruments for temporal and special journeys. In both cases, the scope of observation remains within the notion of Foucault's heterotopia, perceiving such a distinctive space as primarily significant, a place which „*represents anti-construction of fulfilled utopia, confronting and creating doubts in inner structural places of the culture*” (Foucault, 2000:147). How does a museum become a temporal home, and how can we travel within - throughout it? Tolnai's opus, within the tome called “*Grenadier March*” could provide answers to both questions. In the third of the “*Four Litterula*” titled “*On the Train*” the I narrator finds himself on a train – „*the train which represents extraordinary relations focused to one point that we traverse moving from one point to another, after which the point itself moves*” (Foucault, 2000:149) – telling his fellow traveller that he once lived in the building of the Agricultural Museum in Vajdahunyad Castle, particularly in one of its guest rooms: “*Here, things got a bit more complicated, [...] since our placement was possible only after we had received the keys of the museum. We used to arrive home in the middle of the nights, to this enormous building of the Agricultural Museum which was our temporal home. We would rumble around in the Harvest and Piggery rooms of the Agricultural Museum, admittedly sometimes a bit on or entirely drunk*” (Tolnai, 2008:301). Possessing the keys of the labyrinthine museum, the guests could feel comfortable as at home. Though for a regular visit inconvenient, their exploration of the building shed new perspectives and opportunity to establish deeper connections with the artefacts. The I narrator in Tolnai's works seems to have established a closer connection with museums, acting as if each time he paid friendly visits. A description in the memoir from Berlin reveals the following: “*The visit of MoMA to Berlin allowed me to frequent one of the most important paintings throughout the whole year: Balthus' Street. I had the opportunity to take a closer look to it many times in New York; however the fact that after a personal encounter with Balthus, I was able to survey and re-visit it on daily bases was a marvellous and thrilling gift*” (Tolnai, 2008:386). The author, during a visit to an exhibition in Berlin, suddenly finds himself in Senta, on the bank of Tisa, at a place where he as a schoolboy at Grammar School was pervaded with poetry guiding him into the whelm of the Creator. All occurring in front of Gerhard Richter's painting the “*Venedig*” and lasting into perpetuity to clarify in the narrator's mind what had happened: „Even though, until that day I thought, despite the belief in hyper reality or Vermeer's perfection, that there has to be a difference between a painting and reality. Truly, I found no

difference here, the borderline was blurred. I knew certainly. Following the footsteps of a Chinese Master, who leaped into a painting and with hands wrapped behind his back walked away, I ascended and sat down. Even Richter might not have known about it. That is, I succeeded. There was no news of him. That someone, a frail child, a frail mayday dared sitting up to his painting only to soak up into its glittering realm (Tolnai, 2008:392).

This fictitious travel has conducted us into the sphere of the imaginary, to the primary field of the current thesis. It aims at following an unrolling line-yarn spiral from an imaginary spool, which is attached to the graphic arts of Tihamér Dobó (Tolnai, 2009). This thread of Ariadne's imaginary escapade stands for the indulgence into a painting, a handhold, whose help might not conduct us to the exit of the labyrinth but even help us be irrevocably ravelled into it. (We should be aware of the importance of the appearance of explicit exhibition routes, a milestone in the history of the institution, which allowed for acknowledging Paolo Giovio's "*The Temple of Fame*", a museographically significant piece (Binni, 1986:25-27).)

Tolnai is not only a visitor of real galleries, but also a creator of an Imaginary Museum. The author in a number of his works emphasises that the faith of museums in our region is left to decay. Contrarily, he continuously prompts for collecting graphic art works, establishing galleries, and going into a quest for forgotten artists and artworks. On one hand, he acts against oblivion and decay by trimming and building an Imaginary Museum, on the other, he urges for a foundation of a canon.

Tolnai originates his own imaginary institution from André Malraux, who started to jot down his ideas in 1947, an outline of an imaginary museum which points to the shortcomings and barriers of real museums. According to Malraux "*the museum is a series of lucky coincidences*" (Malraux, 1997:123), which cannot be ever complete because a part might be constantly missing. Contrarily, the Imaginary Museum is capable of achieving completeness with the help of replications by the printing press. The world's entire artwork can meet at one place, at least their picture; though it infers a certain amount of loss, as paintings forfeit materials, dimensions, and proportions, they gain richness by a style of expression (Malraux, 1997:124-125). "*An artistic work that loses its character during reproduction, its objective, cultic function, – according to Malraux – becomes only the proof of the artistic talent, a pure work of art. It could be stated without exaggeration: it turns into an artistic moment. As such, it is saturated and a whole.*" (Malraux, 1997:127) The major characteristics of the museums of reproduction is that they bring up scattered works of art, independently of their whereabouts, since it is needless to possess originals (Malraux, 1997:127-128).

By rethinking Malraux's ideas, we could conclude that Ottó Tolnai establishes the Imaginary Museum on some of the principles taken from the French writer's texts, as its name, the opportunity of free choice, the tight binding of the works. The author from Vojvodina, however, does not collect pictures of artistic works, but places side by side apparent works from his surrounding, from galleries in our region, and even from private collections. Besides, he attempts to integrate works, preserved in his recollection, into the circulation of the world's artistic life. The stake of such an Imaginary Museum is, indeed, is to prove the existence of fine arts in the Province of Vojvodina. He creates alternative canons by reviving forgotten painters and paintings, but also by moving them into the focus point of Vojvodina's artistic life. In a writing titled "*A face striking and stiff drawing*", he develops the idea that his work is only to put paintings side by side, to form a frame around them by his words, and to publish them. His activity may remind us of Danilo Kiš's - *The Encyclopaedia of the*

Dead, a collection of novels, in which homage is paid to those characters who were forgotten and excluded from other lexicons. Tolnai has been occupied with those artists who have been neglected by Belgrade and Budapest. (Valéria Balázs-Arth provides a collection under the title *The Hungarian Lexicon of Arts in the Southern Ends* changing the void in this field, though the essays under current observation had mostly been written before the apparition of this publication.) The relation between Kiš's Encyclopaedia and the Imaginary Museum is strengthened by an ars poetic definition fitting into the chosen topic: "*In those times, I wrote about it only to argument on Károly Tolnai's standpoint – it is worthy to pay attention only to the best – against my view and attraction to the marginal and nameless rural painters, a reconnaissance that in the purifying fire of the region, deprived of gallerists, fashion, and critics, only real artists could remain artists*" (Tolnai, 1992:45).

In Tolnai's Imaginary Gallery every artwork has its exact place bound together along their most important attribute, the precisely outlined relationship with other works, be it visual or a textual product. In the complex nests of paintings and sculptures, some texts found their distinctive place, as well: "*I am murmuring texts maniacally; I am trying to cover and fit them on drawings as hats*" (Tolnai, 1992:171). Erzsébet Mezei's painting prompted the author to utter a single-line from Sándor Weörös the Eggshell (Tojáséj), while during the description of the painting, he bethought of another one, the "*Szárnysötét*".

Such a meticulously choreographed Imaginary Museum by Tolnai reflects true textual dimensions, a space full of local aspects "intimacy", personal relevancies, expropriations, anecdotes gradually turning to stories: "*I am mostly concerned with those pictures that I solved, cracked open, translated to myself, that I transposed into the lines of my stories, that I enclosed with cultural and literary information*" (Tolnai, 1992:66).

No wonder how exciting adventure is to model the textual space of museums by imagining their transposition to reality. The Hungarian Lexicon of Arts by Valéria Balázs-Arth is one of the possible materialisations of such a museum. In the foreword to the publication, Gábor Bacsa highlights the connection between the Imaginary Museum and the Lexicon (Ottó Tolnai: The Pink Mud): "*The notion of the building of the Museum as a plastic material shaped by the mould of the imagination of its visitors might not sound entirely new to those who have seen Aleksander Sokurov's film the Russian Ark. The revived Lexicon into the Imaginary Museum exhibits only life- works in certain dialogues, revealing such a theatre in which the visitors are merely actors with the task to mediate in an article-libretto between the exhibition hall and the play. Accordingly, Tolnai's narrator wonders through the halls of the imaginary museum as Custine marquis, deciding arbitrary on the direction of his observations, his behaviour in the labyrinth of opportunities represented by the halls*" (Bacsa, 2008:123). Bacsa along with Boris Groys draws attention to very important moments of the museums' plasticity and theatricality. The Russian museum theoretician claims that the main aspect of the museums nowadays is their loss of status of representing peace and calm. They turned into unstable and changing places. Permanent collections are replaced by temporal exhibitions leaving only catalogues or videos as proof of their existence. "*Nowadays, we are dealing with a kind of a voluptuous museum, a cultural archive that flows apart, soaking up identities making them unsure. In such circumstances, it is necessary to constantly redefine cultural identities.*" The source of the museums' theatricality for Groys is derived from the performance arts stressing the eventfulness of collections (Groys, 1997:77-79).

By taking a distant standpoint to define Ottó Tolnai's museum conception along the ideas of Malraux, we find ourselves on a straight route to virtual space. According to Antonio M. Battro, the astonishing product of the evolution of the imaginary museums are the appearance of virtual museums by centralizing junctions, nullifying the traditional hierarchical system with the many centred digital network, a metaphoric Dactylia with infinite number of fingers. Battro is of opinion that the closest to the French writer's imaginary museum is a nonchalant virtual museum visit during which works can be explored, turned around, and brought closer; by moving along in the virtual space we are allowed to supplement torsos, to reveal the invisible, to create works that are still under construction, all this by the developed digital technology (Battro, 1999). The Imaginary Museum, though existing in a form of a project could be vivified in the virtual space. Though, not as a standard collection but as one that mirrors hyper textuality – a form of expression that cannot be excluded from the virtual network, since the author not only strings together paintings but also texts. A click on parts of a painting would screen all those works that (visual or textual) live in the author's mind and writings. Battro draws attention to a special on-line service of the Ermitage that is a distant reminder of Tolnai's conceptions. The QBIC – Query by Image Contest (<http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/cgi-bin/db2www/qbicSearch.mac/qbic?selLang=English>) is a game with visual associations. After providing optional colours and forms, the program gathers all those paintings in the Ermitage that suit the criteria of the search (Battro, 1999). The idea is brilliant, however the technical realization needs improvement. Google Art Project hosts a collection of meticulously refined paintings (<http://www.googleartproject.com/>). It is a project that bids a creation of personal collections. The giant corporation co-operates with more than 40 countries and 151 well-known art institutions around the world creating a special on-line portal for unique experience and teaching purposes. A collection providing the illusion of plenitude, allows us to rally favourite works and organise them into a personal collection.

How attractive the cyber space might seem with its multi-centred qualities, connection points, infinite upgrade opportunities, and high degree of freedom, in my view, such a virtual space is not the proper platform to construct the Imaginary Museum, since for Tolnai, on one hand, the materiality of the works is immensely important, qualities that are all deprived on the internet. On the other hand, the author emphasises that works should not be torn out of their locations, but they should be analysed where they are; though at one place, he contradicts to this idea: „*these pictures will land in a gallery somewhere in Magyarokiszsa to be subjects of observation for people all around the world. A gallery would also function as a school of fine arts, maybe an academy in the future, where I might once tell stories during whole semesters*” (Tolnai, 2004:207). Which paintings he thinks of is not entirely clear, however according to my view, he means all those works that were important for him, which point to the creation of an Imaginary Museum. The quote draws attention to an important characteristic of the collection, which is the need for a constant presence of commentary and the indispensability of a guide. The entire Tolnai opus could be accepted as a guideline of orientation, yet personal conversation and real-life presence is more effective.

The only remaining question to ask is what type of a building could accommodate Tolnai's Imaginary Museum. Rosalinda E. Krauss draws attention to a noticeable fact according to which Malraux's expression *musée imaginaire* was translated to English as *museums without walls*, the ideal space of the imaginary and cognition

transformed to a paradoxical physical space. Krauss points to two forms of space in the series of rooms in the museum that were developed around the apparition of Malraux's book. One is Mies van der Rohe's universal space, which neglects walls, and the other, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright's spiral form (Krauss, 2005:241-242).

Géza Pernecky is of opinion that beside skyscrapers the museums are "*the most interesting and most besieged architectural challenges of our times*" (Pernecky, 1994:167). The potentials in spacial expansion create defiance of placement of the constantly growing collections. Arata Isozaki found a solution to present Tadanori Yokoo's oeuvres by connecting museum rooms into a line resembling railway wagons. "*The entire structure suggests wagons that are pulled by a columned portico, a locomotive that not only serves as an entrance, but also as a symbol recalling with its appearance classicist reminiscence, the embodied museum idea. Such a museum is a linearly growing building with potentials of constant expansion, providing Tadanori Yokoo pursues a long life*" (Pernecky 1994:182). We have already mentioned Le Corbusier's spirally growing building conception and draft called Musée de Croissance Illimité from 1939, a constantly expanding museum. Frank Lloyd Wright finally realized the ideas by building the Guggenheim Museum in New York in the fifties, though the plans had already been ready in 1943. "*The architecture of the Guggenheim Museum kept its well-known structure following Le Corbusier's idea on spiral structure, though Wright did not enlarge the sides of the building but winded them up spirally skyward, putting obstacle to further course of development. Thus, the Guggenheim Museum stands only as a symbolic sculpture of the constantly expanding space*" (Pernecky, 1994:181-182). Pernecky reports on various „institutions founded mostly in the outside parkland" that also fulfil expansion requirements. Kröller-Müller Museum in the Netherlands is one of his examples whose pavilions were expanded to incorporate more instalments (Pernecky, 1994:182). Another instalment that resembles to Centre Pompidu are super hangars which albeit not expandable, their size arouse the illusion of being empty. One of their important characteristics is that their interior space can be rearranged in couple of hours, "*walls that divide exhibitions in an hour, while a firewall of a section of the museum can be set up in a day*" (Pernecky, 1994:183). The current state of arts in Vojvodina reflects dispersed small galleries mainly in the possession of the writer-essayist's friends, which are only side rooms of important galleries. The Imaginary Museum in its current state resembles to the pavilions in the Netherlands; though it is still in too sparse to constitute a joint collection. A building showing the characteristics of the super hangars of Centre Pompidou, on small scale would, serve the purpose of a gallery with its effective re-building capability. I could only conceive the Imaginary Museum as a piece of art described by Umberto Eco at the University of Caracas "*the school that is daily re-invented*", in which "*the lecture halls are constructed by moveable panels. Lecturers and students would be able to observe the currently important architectural and urban problems in appropriate learning environment by the rearrangement of the inner structure of the building*" (Eco, 1998:87-88). Partly, facile moveability and reconstruction would mainly characterise such a Museum; partly, routes in the exhibition rooms that are crucially different from the traditional ones: "*I have found this horizontal [...] or some certain surface of a painting, deatiles, to which I myself can glue my disc, so that by biting the cord, I could freely sail, to happily get attached to new surfaces, or in fear of heights, shivering of hidden pain, convulsively grabbing over the just reappearing swamps*" (Tolnai, 2007:5). The suction-cap (gossamer, spider web, or red sailing rope, that

was bought to be a guide for the writer-author on Mátyás Street in Pest) of the thread would stick to the works' void details, and by following this thread the relations of the works would appear. A space of tangled spider web would emerge that visitors would try to unravel, to explore multilevel junctions by starting off on which ever line and reaching a random end with the guide of the exhibitions. The act of moving forward would be hardened by the jungle of threads making the adventure more exciting, forcing people to get through the web or to stick close to the painting. The places of connections that visualize the web would turn to rhizomes, rhizoming with each other. The rhizome is the only shape that does not interfere with Ottó Tolnai's ideas on the Imaginary Museum. The rhizome, "a multiple space" with multitude of inner lines would entwine re-constructing and giving reason to itself. Legion of threads would appear with escape and breakpoints dislocating, muting, eroding, and eloping orderly territories and sections (Gyimesi, 2008:23). The escape lines of the rhizome are the key to the openness and infinite expansion of the Imaginary Museum, despite the fact that the reason of existence of such a gallery is not to seize wholeness, as devised by Malraux, but to show up Personal within the Integral. According to Arthur C. Donato, it is a method to externalise a world-view, to express the inner state of a cultural era and to offer itself a mirror "to understand the thoughts of our excellences" (Danto, 1996:201).

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