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THE POETICS OF COLLECTION
COLLECTING AND MUSEALIZATION IN OTTÓ TOLNAI'S WORK
(THESES)

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I. INITIAL SUPPOSITIONS AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF THE PAPER

In April 2012, Orhan Pamuk opened the museum which was the subject of his 2008 novel *Museum of Innocence*. Given are a fictional story, a real museum and the novel “legitimising” the fictional story, which contains a ticket to the museum, found on page 648 of the Hungarian edition. Although the museum has its own catalogue for the exhibition, the novel can be considered as a catalogue as well. The novel contains 83 chapters, a number that corresponds to the museum’s 83 display cases. Kemal gives strict guidelines to complete the construction of the text and that of the museum to the Orhan Pamuk of the novel, whose task it is to write Kemal’s story. The novel resembles both a script for an exhibition and a catalogue; it is constructed consciously, the collection and the text formed and built parallel to each other, taking inspiration from one another.

I will not open my own museum, like Pamuk has done, but I will undertake a similar task, as I will attempt to create a fictional exhibition in this textual space, centred around the oeuvre of Ottó Tolnai. While the novel’s text legitimises the real museum’s fictional story, the fictional exhibition is built by the real opus here, and it is the fictional exhibition that needs legitimising. The formula of *The Museum of Innocence* is modified in the following manner: given are the Tolnai texts with the collections formed inside them, the museums, a fictional museum, the subject of which is the Tolnai oeuvre and the dissertation functioning as the script or catalogue for the exhibition. Writing texts and organising an exhibition are not so different, as both activities select and build from the fragments of culture. Apart from selection, arrangement is also very important, whether it is connected with the museum or with the text itself. The intertwining of the arrangement and the story is especially important in Pamuk’s novel, since the first-person narrator dictates exactly which objects should be included in a chapter, or rather, in the appropriate display case. I avoid creating an exact guideline, opting instead to focus on the introduction of the exhibition script and on the outline of the basic idea, the main concept, the conjectures and associations. I can take no responsibility for a final version of the arrangement. Instead of definiteness, I strive to achieve a fluid organisation, characteristic of the Tolnai opus, while leaving space for associations.

The dissertation is an experiment which examines whether the Tolnai oeuvre, or, further, its subjective interpretation, can be shown using literary museological tools in an exhibition framework which considers and makes practical use of the intellectuality of Tolnai’s texts, while keeping the above-mentioned criteria in mind. Although the secondary

literature considering the author's more than fifty-year writing career only marginally (if at all) uses an approach that places collecting and museology at its centre, in my opinion this approach fits with and extends from the inner-logic of the Tolnai texts. Collecting and taking inventories are defining acts in the author's texts and can be found both as themes and as text-organizing procedures. From scavengers to art critics blessed with excellent taste, very precise portraits of various types of collectors emerge in the works. Tolnai's narrator-collector branches out, collecting works of art, everyday items, scavenged junk, animals, strange maniacs, etc. The author's lexicon-writing activities can also be listed here, since the creation of the missing entries for *Tolnai's World Lexicon* is a type of collecting. One of the dissertation's aims, beyond mapping the motifs of collecting and musealization, is to show how the activities of collecting and musealization organize the Tolnai works poetically. I do not want to consider the psychological reasons of collecting (hoarding) extensively, but would rather examine how the acts of collecting, selecting, arranging and inventory-making work in Tolnai's texts, while highlighting the forms the archive, the library and the museum take and determining how the collections formed in the texts can be described and interpreted.

The dissertation is interdisciplinary as it considers discourse from the history of literature and literary theory, with viewpoints from museum theory, art theory, rubbish theory and a theoretical approach of the archive (Walter Benjamin, André Malraux, Michel Foucault, Ernst Gombrich, Jaques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Horst Bredekamp, Andreas Huyssen, Boris Groys, Michael Thompson, Wolfgang Ernst, Arthur C. Danto, Péter György, Géza Pernecky, Gábor Ébli, Zsófia Frazon).

II. THESES AND CHAPTERS OF THE PAPER

It is not difficult to imagine that the fictional Tolnai-*Kunstkammer* visitor would encounter a rubbish-heap right at the entrance, where reified forms of Tolnai-motifs would be placed. From this pile, the visitor would scavenge whatever items she considered as the essentials of the Tolnai texts, placing them in a vulcanized-fibre suitcase and taking them into a chosen area of the exhibition space, removing them from the worn case and arranging them to create not only her own Tolnai exhibition based on her associations, but also her own cohesive story with the chosen items, thereby forming visual connections between texts, motifs, objects and herself. The visitor would leave satisfied, having experienced the "joy of playful creation" (Horst Bredekamp). This idea points to some important characteristics of my vision(s) of

exhibition: the dynamic nature of the connecting points, the mobility of the interpretations and the viewers' desire for an active role.

Literature and the museum are connected by many threads – aside from literary texts with the museum as their topic and museums that introduce literature, the museological-theoretical approach to literature and the literary-theoretical approach to museums are both equally productive. The introduction of the dissertation aims to present a few of these theories, while placing the concepts of literary museology (1.), collecting, the museum, musealization, the archive and archiving into an historical and a theoretical context (2.).

The collections constructed in the Tolnai texts are considered in the continuation of the dissertation. The order is simultaneously dictated by the historical development of collection-forming and the self-identification of the first-person narrator. We progress from chaos toward order and from scavenger to art-critic (3.).

The act of collecting, the conscious or subconscious tendency of establishing galleries or various collections is present in Ottó Tolnai's work from the start. The oeuvre is built in concentric circles using an associative technique and it expands and enriches its own collections in concentric circles, using associative logic, but it should not escape our attention that the gestures of selecting and cleaning are also present in the works. During the process of self-identification, a portrait gallery has been developing since the beginning of the 1960s. The multifaceted speaker with his many personality traits is surrounded with a colourful group of people in the texts, and the various figures form a heterogeneous gallery from the beginning to today. We can find constant figures, but the appearance and disappearance of certain types, persons and personalities – like those of the guerrilla or the *Gastarbeiter* – can also be observed.

Items and creatures of everyday life reappear again and again in the texts as the oeuvre's poetic categories and as important motifs. Tolnai's opus is a unique collection of motifs that are sometimes closely and sometimes loosely connected. It resembles a *Wunderkammer* and the logic of its arrangement can be found in associations.

The artefacts collected from various places are raised to the status of museum artefacts in Ottó Tolnai's texts; the worn, old stool is transformed into a museum object quite naturally. This admiration of old objects can be described using both Éva Hózsá's "Pompeii effect" and Andreas Huyssen's concept of "musealization." While the first refers to finding objects and unearthing them from the ashes and shows the extreme sensitivity of the narrator, musealization concerns the item at the following level, its placement into literature, as it

becomes a poetic category and a part of the “imaginary museum,” based on Malraux’s term of the same name.

The “Pompeii effect” is more closely linked to the scavenger-figure and musealization is the collector-turned-creator’s activity. Ottó Tolnai highlights these two levels of collecting, relating more closely with the scavenger and skipping over the collector level to reach the next phase, that of the art collector or art critic. He identifies himself as the *custos* of the *Sandcastle*’s tower.

Paul Valéry’s *Notebooks* are a great influence on Ottó Tolnai’s work and, just as the French writer fills notebooks with his writing, so does the first-person narrator and writer in Tolnai’s work. These notebooks, which exist in reality and which can also be found in the texts, form a separate collection. The lyrical speaker of the *Gyökérrágó* writes his daily observations in such a notebook, the female narrator of *Briliáns* also wants to write about her beautiful Christmas in a notebook, the narrator’s younger sister of *Valami koppant* (Something knocked) uses a lined notebook as her diary, *Boleró*’s narrator fills “a bagful of small, black-covered notebooks” with descriptions of the colour pink found in Chardin’s still lifes, the author-narrator of *Költő disznósírból* admits that his first stroll in a new place takes him to a stationer’s, where he buys notebooks. These notebooks show both the lexicon-writer and the archiver.

I divide the collections into three categories, examining and differentiating between collections of every-day items, collections of art and textual collections. While the first category of collections includes animals, commonplace personal articles (4.), thrown-out scraps (5.), the second is made of the art-works of literature about imaginary museums (6.). The third category is more difficult to pinpoint than the previous two, even its name had been difficult to conceive, and I cannot claim to have found the most fitting term for it. It combines several different collections which are all connected to literature. The unique, maniacal Tolnai-figures, Tolnai-doubles, along with other (authors’ stories, texts, Tolnai’s own recycled texts, stories and the pieces of the imaginary bookshelves of Tolnai’s oeuvre all belong to this category (7.). Lexicography is closely connected to the last-mentioned item of the third category, but I discuss this topic separately (8.).

Of course, not everything can fit into this typology - it is like a temporary exhibition, we are showing these works at the moment, but the treasures in the archives should not be forgotten (9.). Although I examine the collections separately from each other, it is important to note that in Tolnai’s oeuvre, they are not separate; in the universe of texts, where everything is connected, one thing plays into another.

III. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE PAPER

Neither the dissertation nor a fictional exhibition can show the complete picture, since every line of poetry opens a gate toward a new universe. Selection is always arbitrary and it is accompanied by the burning pain of an absence. The discussed collections can be imagined as the exhibition space, and all the themes, motifs, texts and interpretations that have been left out form the museum's storage. This enlarges the museum; the true treasures are in storage "collecting dust" (a term museologists would most certainly object to), the exhibition space is filled with only a portion of the available pieces and not necessarily the most valuable ones. The dust preserves them. Even the narrator of *Polgár baba és a függőleges fakir* campaigns for the introduction of the category of "the dusty picture" and dust appears as a marker of the quality of the museum and as an aesthetic category.

To attempt to show the entire Tolnai oeuvre would mean the organization of a long series of temporary exhibitions, and gaps would certainly remain even after this long process has taken place. The collection is kept alive by a "lack," and it is this lack that organizes it and prompts us to re-imagine and re-organize the collection. Since I did not follow the most obvious points of departure, the Adriatic Sea, the empire of the azure, the collection organized around the colour blue, the archive of water, the Venetian mirror and its desecration have been left out. Based on the model of *Képzelt lények könyve*, my list of missing items could contain the catalogue of imagined literary works or the literary history of the dust of the Hungarian Plains. The topics of the great-grandmother's cabinet, the vulcanized-fibre suitcase, the first-person narrator and the counterpart stamp-arrangers, Barnabás's broom and the Russian cleaning-lady's feather-duster would certainly deserve more serious and deep study.

The subject of Tolnai's texts can be described using the expression "the passionate collector." The author-I's relationship with the world of items in the texts includes touching, appropriation, personalization and the act of *intimpistáskodás*, (the act of forming an intimate connection with something) a term the author invented. Like a spider, the narrator weaves a complex, branching web of personal connections for himself, for each topic, and he reacts to every small tremor in the web.

The pieces are organized by the invisible logic of the *Kunst- und Wunderkammer*. The equivalent of Lautréamont's infamous dissection table can be found in great-grandmother's green cabinet drawers, whose collected and varied items are tightly connected in multiple

ways. Each object refers to one or more other object, within or outside of the collection, establishing alternative personal canons.

From beneath the ashes or from out of the garbage, the narrator digs out or scavenges the elevated poetic categories, metaphors, the vulcanized-fibre suitcase, the stool of mythical proportions, statues of Tito, an azure syphon or the decayed shoe-tree. This object-world is completed with significant and forgotten works of the art-world and the appropriated figures and works from the history of poetry. Tolnai's opus treats the transfiguration of rubbish as an important topic and the works become an entropic museal space, which Boris Groys considers to be the only and the most significant art-work of modernism. As long as it remains open full of winding paths, changes dynamically, asks questions, incites discussion, does not exclude and is not peremptory, an exhibition maintaining the oeuvre's internal logic is perfectly suitable to introduce this museal space, along with the operations that take place within that space.

IV. PUBLICATIONS OF THE THESIS

PARTS OF BOOKS:

1. *Tolnai-bestiárium. [Tolnai-bestiar]* In: konTEXTUS. Összehasonlító irodalomtudományi tanulmányok. Bölcsészettudományi Kar – Vajdasági Magyar Felsőoktatási Kollégium, Újvidék, 2007, 87–116.
2. *A hattyú színeváltozása. A hattyú motívuma Tolnai Ottó művészetében. [The changing of the motives of Swan – The motive of swan in Ottó Tolnai's works]* In: jelHÁLÓ. Összehasonlító irodalomtudományi, nyelvészeti és médiaközi kutatások. Bölcsészettudományi Kar – Vajdasági Magyar Felsőoktatási Kollégium, Újvidék, 2008, 65–82.
3. „egy dublőr, aki a mi esetünkben az első szereposztást viszi...” (Néhány megjegyzés Tolnai Ottó alakmásairól). [“A stand-in who is in our case, one of the first cast members...” A few remark on Ottó Tolnai's doubles] In: Alteredegő. Bölcsészettudományi Kar – Vajdasági Magyar Felsőoktatási Kollégium, Újvidék, 2010. 47–55.
4. *Kikristályosodó hulladék. [Crystallizing waste]* In: A VMTDK tíz éve. Vajdasági Magyar Tudományos Diákköri Konferencia. Vajdasági Magyar Felsőoktatási Kollégium, Újvidék, 2011, 337–340.
5. *A szemétdombtól a képzeletbeli múzeumig. Gyűjtőszenvedély Tolnai Ottó műveiben. [From midden to museum – The mania of collecting in Ottó Tolnai's oeuvre]* In: Habitus. Irodalom- és nyelvtudományi, pszicholingvisztikai, művészetelméleti és interdiszciplináris kutatások. Bölcsészettudományi Kar – Vajdasági Magyar Felsőoktatási Kollégium, Újvidék, 2012, 39-48.
6. „az ember ugyanis mindig önmagát gyűjti” Gyűjtőszenvedély Tolnai Ottó műveiben. [“a man always collect himself” a passion for collecting is Tolnai Ottó's oeuvre] In: Átmenet és különbözőség. Magyarságtudományok kelet-közép-európai kontextusban. Szerk: Fenyvesi Kristóf. Nemzetközi Magyarságtudományi Társaság, Budapest, 2012, 259-264.
7. *A tér hitelesítő ereje. [Authentication strength of space]* In: A tér értelmezései- az értelmezés terei szerk. Pieldner Judit-Tapodi Zsuzsa, Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület–Kolozsvár, Státus Kiadó, Csíkszereda, 2012, 216-221.
8. *Érzelmes utazások a múzeumban. [Emotional journeys in the museum]* In: KonTextus 7. Bölcsészettudományi Kar – Vajdasági Magyar Felsőoktatási Kollégium, Újvidék, 2013.

JOURNAL PAPERS:

1. *A Tolnai-világ lexikona. [The lexicon of the Tolnai-world]* In: Tiszatáj. 2010/4, 15–19.
2. *Fiktív többszerzőjűség Tolnai Ottó újabb prózájában. [Fictitious multi-authorship in Ottó Tolnai's newer prose]* In: Létünk, 2010/4, 141–147.
3. *Tolnai Ottó Imaginárius Múzeuma. [Ottó Tolnai's imaginary museum]* In: Létünk, 2012/3.