

The Khanenko Museum as Noble Double-wounded

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Abstract

In this article, I consider the Khanenko Museum as noble and double-wounded, a concept that emerges from two trains of thought. The first pertains to the attack on Kyiv on 10 October 2022, which destroyed the Khanenko Museum, famous for owning one of the largest collections of global art in Ukraine. The second stream of thought is related to theories of wounding as a specific condition, an aesthetic mode, a way of experiencing time and space. These theories allow us to conceive of the grief and pain caused by destruction, but not necessarily to surmount it.

Keywords: Russia's war on Ukraine, woundedness, noble, touch

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On 10 October 2022, almost eight months after Russia invaded Ukraine, the number of Russian war crimes against Ukrainian cultural heritage increased dramatically. More than 80 missiles were launched toward multiple cities, causing wanton destruction and numerous deaths. The Khanenko Museum (formally known as the Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko National Museum of Arts), situated in the heart of Kyiv, was among the cultural institutions that were damaged.

Most cultural workers have had the good fortune never to experience such horror. After a brief introduction to the museum, I will therefore offer short, diary-like remarks to illustrate what the attack was like. Afterward, I propose a possible conceptualization, drawing on theoretical interpretations of woundedness. I refer in particular to the multidisciplinary research of Arthur W. Frank (1995), which encompasses literary studies, narrative theory, and medicine. In addition, I draw on work by Ian Fleishman on filmic and literary wounds and how different characters 'respond' to wounds (Fleishman 2018) and even 'carry' them. Fleishman developed the concept of the narrative wound, which is both a trauma *of* the narrative and a trauma caused *by* the narrative itself.

The specific 'wounding' of Ukrainian museums and cultural institutions as opposed to the destruction of sites such as bridges, railroads, or government buildings, which might be considered strategic military targets, appears to be part of Russia's campaign of urbicide and domicile – the wanton destruction of cities and homes (Porteous and Smith 2001). This is in part because museums in Kyiv are mainly located in crowded places, where important urban infrastructure, places of recreation, and entertainment venues are concentrated. Moreover, many museums began as private mansions of prominent figures and are located in historic buildings. The Khanenko Museum is no exception.

The museum preserves one of the largest collections of world art in Ukraine. The holdings comprise more than 25,000 items of Western European, Asian, and ancient art. The core of the Khanenko Museum is the private collection of arts and antiquities gathered by Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko. These important Ukrainian collectors lived in Kyiv in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. The

aristocratic Khanenko family possessed great wealth, engaged in numerous philanthropic projects, and had a clear understanding of the role of culture. The Khanenko mansion and the neighboring house (which belonged to close relatives) have become landmarks of city architecture. The homes' interiors presented the art with decor 'in the spirit' of particular historical eras, as seen in almost every room on the ground and first floors of the building. The museum is known not only for these impressive interiors and the rich art collection but also for its temporary exhibitions. The last exhibition before the invasion was dedicated to the 550th anniversary of the birth of the famous German painter and graphic artist Albrecht Dürer. The museum displayed the great master's prints, receiving numerous positive comments from visitors and art history experts. The museum led a peaceful life.

When the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine began, the collection was secured so it could be preserved. However, the walls of the museum did not remain empty: temporary exhibitions as well as events for adults and children continued. As staff, we took advantage of the comparatively quiet situation in Kyiv to continue our activities.

On that terrible day in October, a missile left a deep crater in the park next to the museum, destroying half of the playground. The shock wave caused by the explosion left considerable damage. Wooden elements of the roof were broken, and multiple cracks appeared in the walls and other structures. All the glass lighting in both buildings was smashed into pieces, with shards falling on the staircase. Instead of windows, there were streams of fresh autumn air. Fragments of glass were stuck in the window frames and did not fall out, creating additional hazards. When I entered the building, the museum's new appearance was as striking as a change in a person you know intimately; or, to put it another way, the destruction resembled an exhibition the museum had prepared for us without our participation.

People in the park observed my colleagues taking the jagged pieces of glass out of the window frames, and many of them offered to help. Indeed, all the decisions made by museum staff that day were aimed at providing first aid to the building, doing whatever was most necessary with great respect and attention before addressing extensive repairs and renovations. The destruction had happened to our beloved domicile, which held thousands of art objects from all over the world. Our feelings coincided with Porteous and Smith's assertion: 'the destruction of a loved home can thus be one of the deepest wounds to one's identity and self-esteem as they reside in part in objects and structures that we cherish' (Porteous and Smith 2001: 5). In addition to visible injuries (deep cracks, scratches on the floor, holes in the fabric wallcovering, and worse), an emotional wound had been inflicted. We had lost our sense of security and hopes for the future. Some of us continued examining the bleak aftermath of the attack even when we were warned of more air raids (in the current war, these usually appear in mobile applications rather than as sirens).

Ukrainian museums and their staff are under constant threat in the current situation. But the reality of destruction is wrenching and hard to process. Speaking for myself, I can only comprehend this heartbreaking event in a semi-metaphorical way: the museum was wounded that day. However, as I will point out, it has long been wounded and will remain so.

According to Frank (1995) and Fleishman (2018), wounds and wounding carry multiple meanings in literature and can be understood in various cultural and historical contexts. If there is a wound or an act of wounding in a story, it contributes to the violence. It may seem odd or melodramatic that I call the museum wounded in my responses to journalists, passersby, authorities, visitors, and acquaintances. Language only partially hides the wounds, bandaging them with words that can never fully comprehend our feelings. We might say that personal pain, perhaps caused by something minor, rarely rises to the level of collective pain. But this is the insidious effect of language: it categorizes the significance of wounds, creating hierarchies such as the one separating personal and collective pain. It is language that makes the shattered windows throughout the museum more significant than the broken window handle in my office. We cannot conceive of the museum's wounds from a psychoanalytic or medical perspective. Language is an imperfect tool but allows us to approach the pain through narratives with a strong affective component.

The idea of the institution as noble and double or twice wounded, which I cling to, initially related to the dismantling of the exhibition, its absence the first wound to the museum in the

Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. To explain: Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko are perceived locally as philanthropic individuals with noble minds and souls. By extension, the museum is noble in its graceful architecture as well as in its service to the city. The museum's nobility is not social; rather, it reflects affection and admiration for the site. Perhaps the museum's nobility could be ascribed to a kind of chivalry, in the spirit of the heroes of antiquity, medievalism, and romanticism, as well as to its decor. One of its halls, as conceived by the Khanenkos, is in fact dedicated to the literary character Don Quixote, who believed that wounds never diminish the honor of the wounded, but rather add to it. In my view, our museum is nobly wounded, and it has its own aesthetic response to what is happening. With repairs, it could be considered akin to a healing wound in the physical sense. Yet as Fleishman aptly points out, this approach to wounds and stories carries a risk of derealization (Fleishman 2018: 13). My use of metaphor might be perceived as a blatant aestheticization of the museum's narrative, but it seems to be the only possible way to talk and write about recent traumatic experiences.

Wounds raise questions about the ability to be opened and healed; aiding a wounded museum requires trust on both sides, as building and workers experience a kind of fragility and intimacy. Helping our noble wounded museum, we experienced the role of servants or squires, not in a humiliating way, but rather in a privileged way. After the attack, the museum, this inanimate being, this broken structure, touched each team member, but at the same time remained somewhat distant, like a truly noble representative with a certain superiority to its 'servants' who were conducting triage and assessing the need for extensive repairs.

It is noteworthy that several people who literally were servants of the Khanenkos stayed in the museum during World War II. Museum woundedness in 1941 was, perhaps, truly the first wounding, and the damage I witnessed, the second embodiment of wounding. A report drawn up on 20 September 1941 by the museum's acting director includes an image from the museum's archives which has dwelt in our minds since the beginning of the 2022 invasion. It indicates that during the night between 18 and 19 September, shells hit the museum directly. Other explosives caused destruction when they landed in the garden opposite the museum. Objects in exhibits were badly damaged, among them paintings, furniture, porcelain, and faience (in our time, early evacuation of the collection prevented damage to the exhibits, while in World War II this process took place in gradual steps, leaving items to be damaged). As carers for the museum, we try regularly to comprehend this dramatic repetition of destruction. Dolphijn (2021: 93) claims that wounds surface, cause pain, disappear unnoticed, and come back when they choose. Their happening is usually 'with the present' and not only on a personal basis. This notion offers one way of interpreting the repeated destruction, but other ways remain possible and doubtlessly necessary.

Many twenty-first century museums are devoid of sensory engagement other than through the eyes, though a new trend involves increasing sensory opportunities in museums. But woundedness changes the tangibility and culture of touch in the museum space. Since 10 October, touching walls just out of sentiment does not look strange to our museum team. Along with cracked windows and gashed walls, the inviolability of the museum was fractured; we touch not only for technical purposes but out of compassion as well. Our touch allows us to feel that we are tending to the museum's helplessness and vulnerability, even as we experience those very emotions ourselves. We come to know our museum in a new way.

At the same time, the wounds make us define, reflect, and reconstitute ourselves and our predecessors on the museum's staff. Even after the devastating incident, we continue to bring to our audiences the idea of the museum as a home. This concept of home is extremely important because the building's status as an estate or private Venetian-style palazzo is central to its history. During a new guided tour, 'The Shadows and the Walls', dedicated to the museum's key narratives and breathtaking stories, we try to present the museum first and foremost as a home. With these tours and other events, we and our visitors are becoming convinced that narratives present a way through pain: 'The wound is a source of stories, as it opens both in and out: in, in order to hear the story of the other's suffering, and out, in order to tell its own story' (Frank 1995: 183).

Yet beyond these activities, we still lack strategies for reintegration and reclamation of woundedness experienced psychically and emotionally. As the conflict continues, we do not even have enough time to grieve for demolished places of inspiration, resilience, and

intellectual or emotional fulfillment. Since a new, unjust war broke out, we have not developed tactics for coping with the pain and grief caused by the demise of beloved museums and monuments. Artworks in the Kherson Fine Arts Museum were brutally stolen by the Russian invaders. The empty places left there are also wounds. After the shelling of 7 May 2022, the National Literary Memorial Museum, named after Hryhoriy Skovoroda, became a ruin, a site of pain. The attack on the Kupyansk Museum resulted in the deaths of museum workers and terrible destruction of the museum's building. Every death of a museum professional is a wound in the body of our culture.

This hideous and terrible war creates its own wounds and reopens those of previous wars. Our metaphors, while helpful, do not suffice. We will need more conceptualizations and conceptual frameworks for each case as we try to comprehend the full significance of museums and memorials to our cultural, psychological, and affective lives.

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