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Landscapes of the Mind in Tamas Dobozy's *Ghost Geographies*

Paysages de l'esprit dans *Ghost Geographies*
de Tamas Dobozy

Éva Zsizsmann

Abstract

This paper traces the concept of utopia as it appears in Tamas Dobozy's latest short story collection, *Ghost Geographies* (2021). Utopia, most often considered a place, a no-place or a beautiful, idealistic place is rather conceived here as a process, a way of operating. An important aspect of these stories is the relationship between story and history, the individual and the collective. History haunts characters' lives in these short stories, but information about the past remains elusive. Dobozy experiments with the idea of nations, borders, hegemony and control. Following an analysis of the main features of the collection, the article addresses the issue of utopian worlds in "The Hobo and the Archivist," the first short story. This is followed by an examination of uncertain identities, impersonation, and multiple copies of identities in "The New Improved Oscar Teleki."

Keywords: Tamas Dobozy, *Ghost Geographies*, utopia, story and history, uncertain identities

Résumé

Cet article examine le concept d'utopie tel qu'il apparaît dans *Ghost Geographies* (2021) de Tamas Dobozy, sa dernière collection de nouvelles. L'utopie, souvent considérée comme un lieu, un non-lieu ou un beau lieu idéaliste, est plutôt conçue ici comme un processus, une manière de fonctionner. Un aspect important de ces nouvelles est la relation entre récit et histoire (story et history), entre l'individuel et le collectif. L'histoire hante la vie des personnages dans ces nouvelles, mais les informations sur le passé restent insaisissables. Dobozy expérimente l'idée de nations, de frontières, d'hégémonie et de contrôle. Après une analyse des principales caractéristiques de *Ghost Geographies*, l'article aborde la question des mondes utopiques dans « The Hobo and the Archivist », la première nouvelle. Ceci est suivi d'un examen des identités incertaines, de l'usurpation d'identité et des multiples versions des identités dans « The New Improved Oscar Teleki ».

Mots-clés : Tamas Dobozy, *Ghost Geographies*, utopie, récit et histoire, identités incertaines



Introduction

The short stories in Tamas Dobozy's latest collection, *Ghost Geographies* (2021), trace the concept of utopia. Most often considered a place, a no-place or a beautiful, idealistic place, utopia is rather conceived here as a process, a way of operating. The relationship between story and history, the individual and the collective is another aspect these texts explore. History haunts characters' lives in the short stories. However, information about the past remains elusive. Dobozy experiments with the idea of nations, borders, hegemony and control.

The stories in the collection do not follow the Chekhovian pattern (short stories as a slice of life) but are a mixture of various other forms: the essay, travelogue, memoir. Writing short stories seems to be here an obsessive-compulsive behaviour of sticking to a tiny piece of a world. Music and meaning as well as playing with form go hand in hand in creating this world. Dobozy's long sentences are controlled and musical, the music of the sentence being as important as the meaning.

The characters inhabiting the texts are mostly Hungarian-Canadians, living in an in-between world, haunted by memories of the war and communism. Most of them are immigrants who seem to follow a trajectory of decline and fall. "The Glory Days of Donkey Kong" shows the alienation of a judge who emigrated to Canada and lives in a backroom in his sister's house in Kitchener, playing video games with kids who have no appreciation of Hungarian history. As a judge who presided over show trials he was quite influential and much needed by his relatives back in Hungary. However, in Canada he was a *persona non grata* for them, "his presence like black mold across their stories," "a reminder of a history they'd not been able to leave as easily as the country itself" ("GDDK," 139).¹

In "Ray Electric," a macho sportsman who defects from Hungary ends up as a show wrestler, a loser, finally battling a bear. In other cases – "The Hobo and the Archivist," and "The Rise and Rise and Rise of Thomas Sargis" – academics travel in the other direction: they give up an easy life in Canada to face misery in Budapest, trying to save remnants of what they left behind; Sargis trades a life of "spoiled students and endless marking and department meetings over whether to use one or two adjectives to describe the program" for what he imagines will be a life of "influence, fame, passion" (147; 148).

Dobozy is masterful in offering psychological explanations, exploring the human side of historical events. The sarcastic, ironic tone, the wisdom of disillusionment is coupled to the effort to understand human behaviour, the nuances of character. The old man in "Crosswords" is an example of a fully-rounded, lifelike character: he is in a constant fight with a Canadian veteran, unable to go beyond his simple-sided

1) All quotations are from *Ghost Geographies*.



narrative about the Second World War. He even reproaches him for turns in his personal life:

“Canada is my prison!” said Feri, his tone light, relaxed, slipping into the old argument like a pair of slippers. “Canada is the place you forced me to live in. The place filled with my dead wife. The place I keep coming back to whenever I visit Hungary and realize I don’t belong there anymore, the country went on without me, when you people forced me out you forced me out forever!” (“C,” 275)

Plurivocality is a recurrent feature of these short stories. “Lester’s Exit” is a case in point, as official records, photos, videos, multiple characters’ confessions replace a unified, first person narration. Dobozy plays with agency: there are numerous references to sources of information in his stories. He makes the reader wonder about the verisimilitude or plausibility of narratives. Uncertain identities also show the power of plurivocality, as in “The New Improved Oscar Teleki,” up to the point where identity spreads like a virus.

Reconstructing life-stories of fragments, bits and pieces is a leitmotif of the collection. Card catalogues, maps, photos, conflicting stories and other memorabilia create our knowledge of significant dates, people and places, Dobozy suggests. It is up to us how we assemble our colourful ghost geographies.

Utopian worlds in “The Hobo and the Archivist”

As Kent Kosack writes in his review of *Ghost Geographies*, “Dobozy follows ruined countries, ruined ideologies, and shattered people shambling through the ruins of what they’ve built, dwelling in the collapse of their imagined utopias. His displaced, disoriented characters, who have lived through wars, upheavals, revolutions, and state failures, stand at the end of history and speak to our own turbulent times” (Kosack).

“The Hobo and the Archivist” is like absurd theatre, staging the encounter of Eastern and Western Europe, throwing a candid light on characters. Adelbert Wuyts, a file clerk from Brussels, “receives[s] a personal letter from General Secretary János Kádár inviting him to come to Budapest,” (“HaA,” 3) and the narrative is mostly the enactment of the experiences of this clown figure or holy fool. He expects to see the flourishing of the communist ideals in Eastern Europe, but his hopes are soon dashed: he is stripped of his Belgian passport at the border, and instead of being greeted by Kádár in a limo, he has to walk along the grimy, smelly streets of Budapest to a dumpy apartment where he meets with fellow utopianists. They are not a fraternity of like-minded communists, as he would expect, but monomaniacs for their own utopias,



as it turns out later. His greatest regret, however, is that he left behind his neatly polished wooden card catalogue that contains everything that has ever been known about the cities of the world:

Wuyts thought the cards beautiful, works of art, not only for the exactness of the cataloging system he'd devised, but because of what they promised when his project was finally complete: a city free of the mistakes that had ruined every city in the past. He was like so many of those other utopianists born into fin-de-siècle Europe, so woefully ordinary, camouflaged in middle management suits and overcoats, indistinguishable from the other file clerks along the sidewalk, even as their brains clacked and whirred with the gears of intricate dreams. ("HaA," 4)

The music of the sentences, the unusually long, diverging passages, repetition ("sorting files"), the rhythm of the subordinate clauses creates a melody that enhances meaning-making.² A subsequent sentence begins "When Wuyts wasn't sorting files in the ministry where he worked he was sorting files in his cabinet, and when he wasn't sorting files in the cabinet he was publishing articles: pamphlets, broadsides, chapbooks..." (HaA, 4). The sentence goes on for half a page, lulling the reader until he gets stuck at *'pályaudvar'*, a foreign body in the text, Hungarian for railway station. Dobozy makes fun of Wuyts' efforts to learn this language. It is also hilarious how Wuyts received a new Hungarian ID card, unable to pronounce his own name turned into Villó ('a fairy of the springtime').

When Wuyts innocently recites the merits of a true communist state to his fellow utopianists, they greet him with barely suppressed laughter. Then they take turns in presenting their own ideas of a perfect world: Gyuri is a libertarian, an adept of a free market, Gábor a monarchist, Ernyő a racist, while Katalin imagines a utopia with no other women, only men and herself. Ironically, it is Szép, an ugly, filthy hobo of the Eastern bloc, who helps Wuyts get back his beloved cabinet of curiosities. As the years pass, he smuggles it piece by piece through the border. By the time the cabinet is complete, communism collapses. Wuyts suddenly realizes that he is no longer attached to the cabinet, he has lost interest in it. Longing for an ideal seems to be more important than actually attaining a goal, or, as Szép formulates it, the moment before perfection is perhaps the most valuable: "In my perfect world everyone will know they're going to get what they want – and they'll be stuck in that moment, before it actually arrives, forever. [...] And *that* is utopia" (HuA, 26).

2) "Utopian" here means a disposition, an attitude in the midst of decrepitude, as Dobozy himself refers to it in an interview given at the 2021 Wild Writers' Literary Festival.



Uncertain identities and impersonation in “The New and Improved Oscar Teleki”

Oscar Teleki is one of Dobozy's de-situated individuals: there is no place where these individuals feel at home, where they belong. The short story starts with a quest for a missing person, Teleki, who disappears from Happy Meadows, an elderly people's home. Strangely enough his neighbour, Joseph Fisk, also disappears, though he is found within days at the Grand River. Fisk claims Teleki's identity and the police try to find evidence to prove or disprove him.

We get to know Teleki's sketchy biography, as told by Fisk, who impersonates him:

...born and educated in Budapest during the 1920s and '30s; his brief and absurd directorship of the Budapest Zoo; surviving the siege of the city 1944-45, when he was captured by fascist forces while trying to flee west from the advancing Red Army, pressed into military service, captured again this time by the Soviets, pressed into their service working for the secret police; finally escaping Hungary in 1956 and settling in Canada in return for providing information to NATO.” (“NIOT,” 211)

However, the narrator instantly adds that the old man's face, his DNA and the witnesses all said he was Joseph Fisk, a retired account manager. Teleki's former favourite student at the University of Toronto, Varga, is asked to clarify his identity. Seemingly detached, he gives tongue-in-cheek answers to the investigators: “Other than the fact that he looks totally different, that man's Oszkár Teleki. No question” (213). But after meeting Fisk several times, he gets confused and caught in the vertiginous game of impersonation, finally sharing in Teleki's memories, becoming one of those individuals who remember other's memories: “After that day, I felt like I'd been there, where he'd been, in the siege. He needed someone to know” (224).

Varga is scared when realizing that situations and events multiply themselves: “... well, he'd been infected, breathed into by Joseph Fisk, and now everything in the world was becoming interchangeable, sameness replicating as a virus might, making ever more copies of itself” (219). Can we trace back the game of impersonation to its origins?

The narrator gives a psychological explanation of Joseph Fisk impersonating Teleki – Oscar lived through the Siege of Budapest and bears the burden of the past; he would like to share it, to get rid of it:

Teleki would have been overjoyed to have someone else remember it, to spend the last years of his life in Key West, or wherever, no longer frightened of staying in one place – watching sunsets, eating fresh crab, for an extra twist of lime – an amnesiac, for all intents and



purposes, cradled in the pleasures of the instant. If Teleki could have expelled his memories [...] then he would have done so, Varga was sure of it, and to the first person who came to hand: a student, an ex-wife, his next door neighbour at Happy Meadows. (226)

This is what Teleki does – he expels his memories, he spreads and divides them among his acquaintances, and he ‘orphans’ them, as he explains in his article entitled “The War’s Orphaned Memories.”

But who is Oscar Teleki, after all? The short story is an endless quest, we cannot get hold of the real Teleki. We only get to know him through reverberations of a Chinese box world of narrator, Varga, and Joseph Fisk.

Fisk, Teleki’s double, though he initially looks completely different from him, later bears his facial expression (a curl of the lip) and his gestures (the way he sits in the hotel lobby with his arms extended along the back of an armchair) and plays the piano effortlessly, just like the professor.

The double becomes multiple, identity spreads like a virus. However, this is not just copying an individual, but more like multiplying ways of thinking, systems of ideology. It resembles Jean Baudrillard’s theory about the fall of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, as exposed in *The Illusion of the End*. He claims that these regimes have not collapsed, but went viral and spread towards Western Europe: “Shattered, destabilized communism will pass into the veins of the West in metabolic, surreptitious form, and destabilize it in its turn. This will no longer be the violence of the Idea, but the virus of de-immunization. A communism which dissolves itself is a successful communism” (Baudrillard, 40).

Teleki’s doubles appear across gender and age. Eva, Teleki’s ex-wife, is first only a voice on the phone, impersonating Teleki’s thoughts about Horthy’s supporters like a ventriloquist:

So there I was, note in hand, thinking these thoughts and wondering, Who were these men loyal to, really? The Hungarian monarchy? No. The Hungarian people? Only those that agreed with them. To their allies? Nope. Their children? Obviously not. I’ll tell you who they were loyal to: themselves. Only themselves. And the second I realized this I threw away that note, and headed west, away from the Russians . . . (“NIOT,” 218)

The idea of loyalty as the utmost value is recurrent in the short story: Teleki’s father was loyal to Horthy; Varga, Teleki’s student, was loyal to the professor, though probably for selfish reasons. He realised that he had more to gain by remaining Teleki’s friend and collaborator than exposing his wrongdoings. Teleki’s distorted utopia, as the narrator himself calls it, is the lack of allegiance to any ideology, faith or love. As if opposing his father’s ideal of loyalty, he uses betrayal to save himself, throughout his life.



The doubles hear and utter each other's thoughts – as if a stream of consciousness connected Fisk, Varga and Teleki. We witness a meditation on the course of history, pondering whether loyalty, allegiance, belonging or, on the contrary, freedom, isolation, and being non-attached would pay off in the end:

Fisk turned to Varga, his hands still moving, and Varga finished it for him, what Teleki had thought, what had gone through his mind, receiving that note from Boldizsár, sitting in the zoo thinking of where all that loyalty had gotten them – not just his father, but Washington and Berlin, and Moscow, London, Tokyo, Salò, Vichy – and as he stuffed the money from the zoo's safe into a suitcase he wondered what would have happened if they'd just broken faith, all of them, just like that, from whatever allegiances they'd sworn: to nation, to race, to family. Would it have silenced the guns thundering to the east? Would it have stopped the flood of refugees – the orphans, the wounded, the homeless? Or was it in fact the logic of loyalty, its outcome followed through, to produce its opposite: migration, suicide, desertion? (222)

This lengthy passage shows the way Dobozy weaves together thoughts on world history (the names of cities evoke historical events) and ironic remarks that point to the level of individual lives, their petty selfishness. Teleki appears here as a petty thief, stealing money from the zoo where he became director only because his father was rewarded for his loyalty to Horthy. As to the names of cities, Salò was the capital of the Italian Social Republic of Benito Mussolini (also known as the fascist Republic of Salò), during the Second World War, whereas Vichy stands for the authoritarian French government led by Marshal Pétain between 1940-1945. The enumeration of cities makes us wonder about the question of loyalty, allegiance and opposition in the context of the Second World War, the collaboration with fascists.

The inheritance of burdensome memories, the legacy of the siege, and the way they persist in future generations is a recurrent thought in the short story. Seemingly distant, detached in time and space from the locus of the tragic events, these generations preserve and live amidst the memories, it is “all of it in their heads in photographic detail though they'd not been there, not seen any of it” (227).

Varga consents, he listens to Fisk's stories as if he had no other choice. Memory appears as an intangible though still material substance. Future generations resemble Aeolian harps voicing seemingly long-lost memories:

Yet they remembered, as if the memories of the dead had nothing to do with the firing of neurons, with what stirs only in the sealed rooms of an individual psyche, buried with the bones and heart and what else, as if there might be a material trace of what these people experienced – though nothing for you to hold – tangible as air, a breeze that somehow



blows against the spin of the weathervane and enters you, and settles there, until you speak all that it needs you to, all that must be told. (227)

The narrator of the short story is also part of this endless chain of impersonations: he feels compelled to voice memories of the war and the siege.

The ironic title, “The New and Improved Oscar Teleki,” refers to the fact that Teleki tried to beautify his past: “I didn’t want anyone, especially her, to know what I’d done back there – betraying my father, working for the secret police. All I said was that I’d fought to get out, and then dedicated the rest of my life to toppling the regime” (228).

On the other hand, Fisk is a new, improved version of Teleki: while impersonating him, he also adds value to his personality. He is not content to echo the professor, but proves that “you could have gone through what he did, and still come out of it believing in something other than the inevitability of ruin” (232). He manages to attain a turning point in the story, as if engineering redemption, the happiness of all four characters. The shadow of doubt persists, though, as Varga remains suspicious of Teleki’s ghost laughing and lurking behind them.

Nostalgia has a bad reputation in literature nowadays, as Dobozy remarks in an interview given at The Word on the Street Festival (Word on the Street). However, he applies it in various forms in *Ghost Geographies*. Sometimes it appears as a joke, or a poison, or a longing for something that has never happened (as utopia), a sedative, an escape, a tool to uncover something. It can be both a malaise or a remedy.

In “The Hobo and the Archivist” characters long for their various utopias, different world orders, materialised in an unusual card catalogue in the case of Wuyts. Nostalgia in “The New and Improved Oscar Teleki” is a remedy, a sedative, allowing Teleki (and others living through wars and collapsing regimes) to forget their troublesome memories.

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