

The INTERVIEW

by Ágnes
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Media guru, Marshall McLuhan, once suggested that Canadians are lucky because theirs is the only nation without an identity: "We are the only people in the world who know how to live without an identity." Identity and nationhood are born from violence. Inside and outside of their borders, Hungarians have wrestled with the questions of identity and nation for centuries. And for good or bad, these questions are not going to go away in the foreseeable future. Lest we give these issues a different perspective, we will keep on having crises and existential dilemmas in the midst of trying to engage the postmodern tumult of the 21st century. Tamás Dobozsy's book "Last Notes and Other Stories" is a refreshing spin on these age-old problems. I was curious about how Tamás, a second-generation Hungarian-Canadian writer and scholar, captures his observations and ideas on identity. Tamás kindly agreed to answer my questions during an email interview in July 2007.*

You dedicate your book "for all [your] second homes." Could you explain what these homes are like and who are the people you list there?

These are all relatives of mine. Most of them are aunts and uncles, and some grandparents. I spent a lot of time with the people at the top of the list when I was young, and they were very much second homes to me, places where I felt I belonged, or was connected to. The extended family has always been a big part of my life, as my mother's brothers and sisters, and by extension my cousins and me, are a very tight-knit group. There aren't as many boundaries between the immediate and extended family as there usually tend to be. Almost all of them live in Hungary, which is my "second country," so to speak. We have been going back there every two years, sometimes more, since I was born, and I lived there for two years between 1993 and 1995. I know my way around Budapest, and have visited most of the other major cities

in Hungary. Home is an odd concept, of course, for someone in my situation, because I never felt as if I fit very well into either country - Hungary or Canada. I think that's a metaphor for a lot of things in my writing, and maybe even for the writing itself, which flits between various genres, and which doesn't really have an easy set of allegiances or connections to other traditions of writing, but tends to borrow from all over the place.



TAMÁS DOBOZSY

Also, the ten short stories have different voices/narrators, some of them with Hungarian names (Hungarians?) others with English (Canadian?) names or background? How much of each of these stories draw on your personal experiences or those of your close family's experiences?

All the stories are fiction, from start to finish. When I first sent them out to magazines many editors thought they were non-fiction pieces, since they have that non-fictional or essayistic tone, which was done on purpose, a way of heightening the intimacy with the reader, and also

making the writing sound more believable. But I was born in 1969, so many of the experiences presented in the book are not my own, nor could they be. My father was not a painter. I never had three uncles of the sort described in that story.

There are bits and pieces that come "from life," if you like, mainly those dealing with cultural dislocation, or an inability to accept Canada as a country, as well as certain right-wing points of view that I encountered as a child and as an adult from various relatives, but the plots and characters are all invented. It's interesting that so many critics want to focus on these stories as "Hungarian," or to see my writing in that light, even though such stories are in the minority in the collection as a whole. I think it gives them a way of speaking about me, which critics need, and that's fine, though misleading. I write things as they come, and sometimes those things deal with my cultural background, and sometimes not. I think Hungary has an exotic appeal to many North American readers, so they're interested in that, and I think the marketing and publicity people at the various presses that publish my work have fastened on to that, as have I in many ways, in order to connect with a readership and create a profile for myself and then hopefully sell books. That being said, I definitely see my work as being far more in touch with a European than a North American aesthetic. There's an overt intellectualism to European writing that is either lampooned in North American writing or excised altogether. But I must say that Hungary tends to serve my writing, rather than my writing serving Hungary, if that makes any sense.

It sounds exploitative, and it is, but I'd be a fool not to use every resource that's available to me. Writing is a funny thing that way, since it wants to do something good, to have an effect in the world, but at the same time it's greedy - it wants a good story and very often doesn't care where it gets it. So the writing impulse is somehow both very moral and completely amoral at the same time.

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Would some of the essays be stories you have heard from friends, relatives or strangers? Could you elaborate on the sources and inspirational sites of the stories?

None of the stories came from friends or relatives, not that I can recall. Usually, my work begins with a reverie or day-dream, and then it either begins generating material or not. For instance, "Tales of Hungarian Resistance" started with me thinking about how I'd bear up under torture, and only after that initial idea came to me did I decide to set the story in wartime Hungary, since it seemed a place where something like that might have happened, as well as being a moment in history I knew something about (though I learned a lot more while writing about it). The "Four Uncles" story began as a result of me trying to negotiate an emotional attachment to people whose politics are problematic or abhorrent. So, there's an idea or situation that needs to be explored, and if I'm lucky it starts me writing; very often, it doesn't, and the whole thing fizzles. Needless to say, a lot of material ends up in the garbage. When the story works the idea becomes so particularized that it's no longer an idea in the abstract, but a drama peculiar to the characters and the situation, but the idea is often (though not always) where I start.

You mentioned earlier that you have never felt as if you fit very well into either country - Hungary or Canada. Could you explain it?

I was at a conference a while back, sitting on a panel with a number of other writers designated "émigrés" by the conference organizers. I was the odd one out there, because I'm not an émigré, my parents are. Anyhow, someone asked us this very question, regarding home, where it was to be found. And it's a question that goes right to the heart of what much of my work, and certainly much of my personal life, is concerned with: this sense that Canada wasn't really where I was rooted, nor was Hungary.

I remember as a kid going back to Hungary and being able to speak the language, and there were all these people there I was connected to (and it was a genuine connection, on an emotional level), and yet the place was still alien, odd, even at times bewilderingly hostile. And so no matter where you are you always have your head turned, in one direction or another, thinking that something from "over there" is missing "here" in order for you to feel at home.

After a while, you realize that home is really an impossible concept, and you have to make peace with or accept the distance between yourself and what's around you, and find ways to feel good about it, or replace it with other attachments, such as to people. There is much in the Hungarian mindset that makes no sense at all to me - try as I might to understand it - but the same is true of many Canadians I meet.

The notion of "home" seems to be an important theme for you. Was there a defining moment in your life that caused you to question the idea of "home"?

I think it starts right away with your name, or my name, which was never pronounced properly, and still isn't. It's an odd thing to be exiled from your name. I've given up on it altogether: people pronounce it "Tam-is," or "Tan-is" (when they don't see it spelled), or "Tam-ah-sh," or "Thomas," and there's even some who call me "Tom" (which was the name my father went with, though his name was Tamás as well). Once your

name no longer fits, then the rest just kind of follows from there. The experience is a bit of a cliché, actually, but being a cliché doesn't make it any less real. Anyhow, there's nothing more tedious than someone asking you to repeat the pronunciation of your name over and over so they can get it right; I'd just as soon they settle on their own personal version and stick to it.

You teach English Literature at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario, and have just come back from New York where you were the inaugural Fulbright Visiting Chair in Creative Writing. How do you separate, if at all, academia from the arts?

There is little separation, at least for me. Again, it's a very North American obsession, this need to separate intellectualism from artistry. I remember being at the Faulkner Bookstore once in New Orleans, where I got into a conversation with the owner who asked me what I did. When I told him that I was in New Orleans for an academic conference and I was also a fiction writer, he shook his head and said something like, "You can't do both." He went on to say that because I was still young I could somehow pull it off, but that sooner or later I'd have to choose whether to live an intellectual life or a creative one, that the two were somehow incompatible, that theory messed up the visceral responses you need to write successfully, blah, blah, blah.

I've encountered this way of thinking before and it always makes me laugh. I think it's a cliché borrowed from Hemingway or something: where you have to be a man or woman of action, by which is meant in touch with immediate reality, by which is meant emotionally alive to the world, or you just can't write. Well, it's bullshit. Borges, Sebald, Magris, Gallant, Carson, Bulgakov, Auster, Bolano, Nooteboom, Konrád, Nádas, Proust, James, etc. The list of writers who were heavily invested in intellectual work, and whose intellectualism and scholarly activity is openly manifested in their writing, goes on and on and on. It always amazes me when there are these prescriptive approaches to writing that foreclose on this or that experience of being human. I always want to say, "Look, we think *and* feel, and these things are connected, so why leave one of them out?"

Writing is hard enough without denying yourself certain tools. My advice is always inclusive: Use everything, all of it, every single thing you can get your hands on - don't reject a single aspect. There is no division between the brain and the heart, not for me. Logic is the passion of the mind. Passion is the logic of the body. So, all this to answer a very simple question: No, my work as an academic inspires my writing, and my work writing informs my academic work, and a loss of one would be a loss for the other.

Do you teach or include Hungarian literature in your syllabus?

Unfortunately not. I was hired to teach 20th century American literature, and I've never had a chance to teach anything else. But, you know, it's best to teach what you don't love, because teaching the same books year after year tends to drain them of magic. You have to be on guard against that as a writer.

On the other hand, you do get to know these books incredibly well, which is also quite useful. I have, however, advised people in comparative literature to teach more Hungarian, and have offered suggestions, so I do what I can to spread the word!

In your opinion how do Hungarians/Hungary fare now, than let's say 20 years ago, in the eyes of Canadians and Americans?

Wow, that's a really tough question to answer. I'm not sure how they fared in general. I've never really met a Canadian or American who knew much about Hungary, much less cared about it. I think there's a stereotype they have of the Hungarian man, which crops up now and again. I recently had a review in the States which was full of this stereotypical thinking. It was a good review, so I shouldn't complain too much, but there was this reference to me "working like an ox" in connection to my Hungarian background, and all these other subtle references to a sort of rustic worker type.

But I am happy, these days, to see a lot more Hungarian work being translated: there's the whole Marai thing, which is becoming a mini-industry; Kertész won the Nobel (though of course there are many in Hungary who don't consider him Hungarian, for the usual reasons); Nádas has an increasingly large profile (I can't wait for this latest huge book to be translated, though I should really take a crack at it in Hungarian); and there's Eszterházy as well, among others. There's also a lot of Hungarian filmmaking coming over here, so that's good, too. Anyhow, I think that all this is slowly breaking down the stereotype - as good art tends to - and making Hungary even more accessible, by which I mean that non-Hungarians are being afforded a glimpse beyond their preconceptions.

Does a Hungarian identity in Canada or North America in general carry a caché more now than before? Could you elaborate?

Well, I don't think it has the caché of being Central American, or French, or Italian, at least in the literary world. The problem is, in fact, that being Canadian doesn't have much caché. I think Canadian lit. is certainly cooler now than it was thirty years ago, but it's still pretty secondary to that of other nations. Take a look at what is probably the most visionary (and hip) press around: New Directions. I don't think they have a single Canadian on their list.

I was recently at a reading in New York with a young Canadian author, and she got up to the microphone and said she wished she hadn't been introduced to the audience as a Canadian writer. "Let's pretend I'm from Texas," she said, or something like it. I was amused. I guess she didn't think Canada was sexy. Maybe that's changing, ever so slowly. And maybe this is why my American and French publishers like to play up my Hungarian-ness in their publicity, because as low on the sexiness-meter as Hungary is, it's still above Canada. Or is it? I don't actually know, but I've certainly had this conversation with at least one of my publishers, so there must be some perception of this out there.

In the end, though, all of this is a waste of time to think about, since your writing is limited by your imagination only (as opposed to what publishers have to deal with, the economics of that business are pretty confining, especially when it comes to promotion and publicity) and so you're always casting off from received opinion into what is yet to be received, or stated, or thought of. So I don't really think about how Canada or Hungary are perceived; I think about how they might be perceived, and of course I think about a lot of other things as well, which includes many other countries. I think there's a new term, "international writing," that I've seen recently in newspa-

pers and journals, and I like this, as it fits with my sense of floating between specific boundaries and specific affiliations and specific experiences. I'm not trying to escape labels - I am a Canadian writer - but I think they're most useful when they open on experience rather than reduce it. This seems to me the general task of the writer: to create openings, places of uncertainty, ruptures in knowledge.

You have been visiting Hungary since your childhood. What are some of the most shocking (good and bad) changes you have observed in Hungary and among Hungarians throughout the years?

Well, their inability to deal with change might be a good place to start! I think an inability or unwillingness to confront change is probably one of the most disturbing aspects of Hungary I've seen, either on the left or the right, where there's always this desire to return to some previous mode of thought, or moment in History. That's scary in many ways.

Nostalgia and sentimentality are a disease that's particularly virulent in Hungary, from what I've seen. But then I'm also a nostalgic and sentimental person, so I'm in the ward, too! The political situation over there, at the moment, is appalling, and it's one that North Americans - and certainly the North American media - have no means of coping with or understanding, so it's almost always misrepresented in news reports. In fact, most of the time I'm so bewildered by Hungarian politics when I'm over there that I lapse into silence; I can't think of a single thing to say in response to the situation. It always seems Hungary's dilemma: to have a choice between two equally unappealing options (probably most manifest at the end of World War II, where you could side either with Hitler or with Stalin). But it's worrisome to see the country being driven into the ground, and to have the people who are doing it openly admit that that's what they've been doing, and then not to resign! Crazy.

It has been considered that a more conscientious nurturing of the relations between Hungarians in Hungary and Hungarians (be it many generations) outside its borders could help reach a better mutual understanding. How do you envision such nurturing?

I don't know. I really don't. I have a hard enough time figuring out what I should be doing. Here I am, writing about Hungary in English, my books don't even appear in Hungary, and yet I'm invested in it. It seems paradoxical, and not a little opportunistic, I'm sure. But it's what I want to be doing, and it's where I feel I can make my greatest contribution, and Hungarian is not my native language, not really, and so what can I do?

I'm also not as conscientious with raising my kids in Hungarian as I could be, especially now that I live in Southern Ontario, where there are all kinds of options for Hungarian immersion. But at some point you have to make choices, and life shouldn't be all work all the time. There's also only so much you can ram down a reluctant person's throat before you have to ask yourself where good ends and bad begins. So, all I can say is that my Hungarian-ness is a great gift - one I came to appreciate almost too late - and that there is an increasing sense of wonder and gratitude on my part to have this resource, this whole other country, to be part of, even in a minor or negligible way, and that the onus is on me to make the most of that.