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**“An Unpaid Employee of the Hungarian Tourist Board”:  
Norman Jope’s Poems on Hungary<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract.** Norman Jope is one of the few contemporary British poets who have devoted special attention to Hungary. Many of his poems are not only set in Hungary but also employ references to Hungarian culture and history. On the surface, these works might seem like simple travel literature, but the descriptions of Hungary also explore abstract topics. Jope construes Hungary as a heterotopia that holds a mirror up to the UK. Realising that his knowledge of Britain is just as incomplete as his knowledge of Hungary, the speaker becomes alienated from his national identity and expresses a desire to belong to a community that transcends nationalities. This change in the speaker’s identity also entails a heightened awareness of his own mortality.

**Key Words.** Norman Jope; heterotopia; Foucault; international identity.

Norman Jope might not be internationally known, but his works are so international in spirit as to offer a unique version of a phenomenon central to the study of ‘Global Englishes’: the way Anglo-Saxon cultures are influenced by their interaction with other cultures. Since Jope’s primary audience is composed of the literary community of his native Plymouth and the readers of British literary journals he regularly contributes to (such as *Tears in the Fence*), one might

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<sup>1</sup> The quotation is taken from Jope’s foreword to *Gólyák és rétesek [Storks and Strudels]*, a selection of his Hungary-related poems translated into Hungarian. This foreword has been published only in Hungarian translation, but the translator of the volume, Zoltán Tarsay, was kind enough to share the original, English version with me. For the Hungarian translation, see Jope 2018: 11.

expect him to write about either local, strictly British matters or the universal problems of mankind. However, this could not be further from the truth. A significant portion of Jope's lyric and prose poems captures his experiences of traveling abroad and employs references that might be perceived as obscure in an Anglo-Saxon context. This is especially true of his works on Hungary, a country he has visited over thirty times to see his partner, who has been working there since 1996 (Jope 2018: 7). The engagement with Hungarian culture has a profound impact on the speaker of these poems: it shapes his identity and even makes him face his own mortality.

The present paper argues that the way and the reason the speaker's identity changes can be better understood by considering Hungary as a heterotopia. After a brief explanation of Foucault's notion of heterotopia, the extent to which Jope's depiction of Hungary aligns with Foucault's theory will be examined. The first part of the present paper will explore how the strangeness of Hungary teaches the speaker of these poems that national identities are unstable and less important than belonging to an international community (which is sometimes construed as mankind in general, sometimes as specifically Europe). The second part will then inspect how Jope turns encounters with the heterotopia of Hungary into meditations on death.

### **Hungary as a heterotopia**

Foucault defines heterotopias as sites "that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (1986: 24). In other words, heterotopias are opposed to a larger space that is accepted as normal. Heterotopias are embedded in this so-called normal space, but they subvert or challenge its rules and norms. Examples of heterotopias range from institutions such as the prison (the goal of which is to hide from the public eye those individuals who both belong in and are rejected by a given society) to the mirror, an object that acts as a symbolic space. "In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface [...]" (Foucault 1986: 24). Admittedly, if the mirror were only the reflection, that is, only the virtual space, then it would be a clear case of utopia (since utopias can be defined as non-existent places). However, the mirror is also a real, tangible object, not just an impalpable image. What makes the mirror a heterotopia is the tension between these two aspects: a real space/object inside of which there is a different space (in this case, an unreal, virtual space).

Beyond the above-mentioned examples, Foucault also describes six "principles" (or traits) of heterotopias. For our purposes, the fourth and the sixth principles are the most important. The fourth one states that heterotopias allow people to "arrive at a sort of absolute

break with their traditional time” (Foucault 1986: 26). This can be achieved by two types of heterotopias; the one relevant to Jope’s works is called the heterotopia of “indefinitely accumulating time” (Foucault 1986: 26), examples of which include museums and libraries. These institutions attempt to store relics of all eras in a single space; their existence is rooted in the belief that they can capture the essence of every period without being affected by the ravages of time (Foucault 1986: 26). As to the sixth principle, it restates the idea that heterotopias exist in relation to the environment surrounding them. Of the two types of relations between heterotopias and the spaces enclaving them, only the first one will be mentioned in the present paper. According to Foucault, the role of these heterotopias “is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory [...]” (1986: 27).

In Jope’s works, Hungary functions as a heterotopia. This is especially clear in the poem “Superimpositions,” where the speaker takes a train to the Hungarian city Szolnok and, looking out the window, recalls the melody of a four-part song by the British blues-rock band Groundhogs. The Hungarian landscape seen from the train not only resembles the speaker’s home country but also reveals that his knowledge of his own culture is incomplete: “Much of rural Hungary, particularly the east of the Danube, is redolent of what, for me, is the far side of Britain, a terrain I now know even less than that of the *puszta*... so the connection is clear, if only in my mind, and the Groundhogs succeed, this April morning, in blowing Bartók off-stage” (Jope 2010: 62; italics and ellipsis in the original). True to the sixth principle of heterotopias, the *puszta* (a Hungarian ‘plain’) reveals that Britain is no less illusory a site than Hungary: neither can ever be known fully. Both are always waiting to be interpreted and re-interpreted, even by those native to them.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, the speaker does not simply project his own set of cultural referents onto the *puszta*. In other words, he does not evoke the Groundhogs in an attempt to embed the Hungarian landscape into a British context. Rather, he offers an amalgam of two cultures, where British music and Hungarian landscape unite to create a new quality. The effort to make such an amalgam can be witnessed even on a metapoetic level, since Jope inserts a Hungarian word, *puszta*, in the English text.

Earlier in the poem, the speaker mentions that he has not heard the Groundhogs’ song “for at least a decade” (Jope 2010: 62). That it should be the sight of the *puszta* that evokes the band is important for two reasons. First, it reinforces the idea that there is a hidden, mysterious

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<sup>2</sup> Csilla Urbán makes a similar observation in her review of *Gólyák és rétesek* (Urbán 2018: 73-74).

link between the two cultures. Second, it suspends time. In keeping with the fourth principle of heterotopias, the Hungarian landscape functions as a symbolic museum of memories where traditional time loses its meaning. The past decade is treated in spatial rather than temporal terms: the emphasis is not on the passage of time but on the relational dimension of memories, on their being connected to spaces. Moreover, the memory is displaced: what can evoke the song is not the site where the speaker first heard it but an unfamiliar land. Put differently, the memory is to be found where it is not; it can be encountered in a space it is absent from, which recalls Foucault's description of the mirror.

For Jope, then, the *puszta* is far more than a tourist attraction. It allows a glimpse into one's past, brings to the fore questions about the speaker's national identity, and even acts as a springboard to experiences and concerns that transcend national identity. This can also be observed in another prose poem, "A Torn-up Postcard":

The graffiti's twice illegible. Its proto-language, of glyphs and gestures, would need to be translated into Magyar first, then English. It appears on train windows, factory walls and underpasses and makes me feel as though I've suffered a stroke. It calls me back to non-linguistic surfaces, the things inscribed, which I see with clarity impossible in my own land.

My being here is anomalous – I sit in suburban coffee houses, hopefully hard to decipher. Am I tourist, language teacher, multi-national employee or entrepreneur? I love to be where I've no business, simply lurking with map and notebook, with language enough to order refreshments. Exotic anonymity is essential to my task, which is to remove the city from the city but preserve it intact.<sup>3</sup>

In the second paragraph, the speaker first sees himself through the eyes of the staff. Of the roles and vocations, the baristas might be expected to ascribe him, none seems to fit him completely – certainly not the role of the tourist. Having more introspection than the thrill-seeking tourist of stereotypes, the speaker realizes in Hungary that he is not completely at home even in his native land, which recalls not only the poem "Superimpositions" but also the sixth principle of heterotopias. Here, this realization happens because the speaker is more in touch with the nonverbal dimension of life in a country whose language he does not speak (he perceives "non-

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<sup>3</sup> As of 2022, this poem has only been published in Zoltán Tarcsay's Hungarian translation (Jope 2018: 95-96). The English original is cited with the permission of Norman Jope.

linguistic surfaces [...] with clarity impossible in [his] own land”). Thus, he gives himself the task “to remove the city from the city but preserve it intact”, that is, to engage with the city in such a way that he would transcend national identity and find a common human experience. This experience turns out to be the immersion in nonverbal phenomena and, along with it, the relinquishment of the attempt to fully understand the world. After all, if one cannot even understand the graffiti on the nearby walls, then one can hardly claim to have a firm grasp on his or her environment. Accordingly, the poem concludes with the following lines: “After all the incursions and adventures, there is no complete knowledge on offer – just overlapping zones and words, encounters with a phenomenological ghost that will dance with me for as long as my fate allows.”<sup>4</sup> However, the inability to comprehend the secrets of life is not seen in a tragic light. The speaker celebrates the meaningless “surfaces” of things and finds something ethereal and enjoyable about engaging with the undecipherable, which he compares to walking on air: “Sometimes streets and buildings, even the river itself, become invisible so that I walk on air, between strange words, in a vast and arbitrary concrete poem in Babelese inscribed on a void.”

The celebration of the small details of life (its “surfaces”) is a recurring theme in Jope’s body of work, but the emphasis is not always laid on indecipherability. The poem “An Incremental Voyage” has the opposite approach than “A Torn-up Postcard” inasmuch as it praises the (admittedly limited) knowledge that can be acquired by a study of surfaces. The speaker of this poem enumerates the tourist attractions he visited and the meals he had during his latest visit to Hungary, and then concludes: “These, I admit, are all small details – but life’s composed of such details and perhaps, I conclude, it’s as easy to encounter the unfamiliar in the familiar, by way of minor variations such as these, as it is to take it in when one is stunned by the unfamiliar” (Jope 2021: 39).

It should be noted that Jope’s depiction of Hungary differs from the Foucaultian notion of heterotopia in two respects. First, Foucault excludes cafés and trains from this category (1986: 23-24). In Jope’s works, however, the transformative encounter with Hungarian culture often takes place in coffee houses, suggesting that they can act as heterotopias. This is perhaps not a significant deviation from Foucault’s theory, since the second principle of heterotopias is that their function might change through history (1986: 25). If new heterotopias appear and old ones disappear or start to play a different role, then the possibility of a non-heterotopic space transforming into a heterotopia over time should not necessarily be ruled out.

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<sup>4</sup> The unpublished English original is cited with the permission of Norman Jope. For the Hungarian translation, see Jope 2018: 96.

The second and more important difference lies in the extreme singularity of heterotopias. For Foucault, heterotopias are radically different from the space enclaving them. Jope, however, does not construct Hungary as a completely foreign land. Although traveling to Hungary changes the speaker, this change can be viewed more accurately as the surfacing of a latent quality that transcends national identity. As we have seen, Jope's goal is not to demonstrate the incongruity of Hungary and the United Kingdom but to find their common denominators. In this respect, incidentally, he differs from a tradition in British literature Ágnes Harasztos traces back to Bram Stoker. According to Harasztos, British novels as diverse as Stoker's *Dracula*, Bruce Chatwin's *Utz* and Rose Tremain's *The Road Home* all tend to treat East-Central Europe as "a functional heterotopia and a Lacanian Other to the Western, English identity" (2021: 3), i.e., as threats to the British characters. In Jope's works, Hungary might be the site of surprising, unsettling or melancholic realizations, but its challenge to the British identity is never hostile in nature.

The structure of Jope's books of poetry further emphasises the idea that 'home' is an elusive concept. His volumes often have an arc in which the speaker's diction and set of ideas undergo some change, and Hungary acts as a catalysator in this process. Poems on Hungary are usually placed in the first half of the volume, while poems on the speaker's native country are left for the second half, as if the speaker could find a truly personal voice and express his relationship to Plymouth only after having encountered the heterotopia of Hungary.<sup>5</sup>

This is the case in Jope's latest volume, *The Rest of the World*, which is divided into seven numbered units, three of which consist of loosely linked, short, untitled, fragment-like prose poems. The first of these units, "Points of Entry," chronicles Jope's 2012 visit to Hungary. In the fragments of this piece, the Hungarian cities are depicted as open to interpretation and revealing at least as much about the visitor than the land itself: "A walk can arrange a city into myriad patterns. A predictable set of decisions, therefore, creates a predictable city" (Jope 2021: 29). That the speaker changes in some way by looking in the mirror Hungary holds up to him is stressed by the fact that the piece concludes not with the speaker's actual homecoming but his waiting for his return flight at the airport: "Running out of energy to write this journal, of any further desire to leave these shadows on the page, I settle for the anomie of the departure lounge – the ultimate Interzone. In this space, if I look for shadows I see only reflections" (30). Identifying the departure lounge as an international zone (possibly referencing the Tangier International Zone) suggests that the speaker feels most at home in a symbolic in-between space

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<sup>5</sup> Zoltán Tarcsay (2012) argues that Jope's 2010 volume *Dreams of the Caucasus* begins with an impersonal approach that gradually transforms into a personal point of view, partly due to the speaker's visits to Hungary.

that does not completely belong to any country. International zones are allowed to follow border policies that differ from those of the surrounding state (hence Jope's use of the word "anomie"), and they are associated with diversity of culture and higher levels of tolerance. The speaker feels so comfortable in such a space that he is never depicted leaving it and is said to see only reflections of his own international identity as he chronicles what happens in the departure lounge.

The second fragmentary unit in the volume, "On a Dry Sea," is a meditation on the future of Europe through the example of Hungary. Juxtaposing 2012 with 1242 (the end of the Mongol invasion in which the Kingdom of Hungary lost half of its population), the speaker reckons with the continent's loss of central role: "For, as the power and wealth shifts east, the arguments for privileging this peninsula are disappearing" (Jope 2021: 49). Jope perceives Europe to be in a crisis of identity similar to that of the Kingdom of Hungary in 1242. This is an uneasy and ambiguous experience. On the one hand, the speaker declares that his identity "clings" to this continent (Jope 2021: 53), even if he has to admit that he cannot shed certain aspects of his Britishness, for instance his inability to tolerate climates different than that of the United Kingdom: "But I am made of where I am and this climate, this landscape and this temperament fits me... Citizen of the drizzly Atlantic, hunched beside my estuary, sniffing warm tea on a jetstream afternoon as water soaks my windowpane" (Jope 2021: 52-53; ellipsis in the original). On the other hand, the desire to conquer is seen as a constant in history and deeply rooted in human nature: "Pretentious apes, spread out from their original deserts to the cold high lands of the largest continent – seeding concubines and slaves, they repeat themselves in empire after empire and ride their horses over bones with a nonchalant grunt. The pattern repeats itself and is immune to sarcasm" (Jope 2021: 52). To a certain extent, this tension is relieved towards the end of the piece, which offers a vision of a communion transcending all nationalities: "There is no border, only the ideology of a border. There are only apes out of Africa, fanning out in every direction and acquiring slightly-altered skins and a Babel of languages" (Jope 2021: 53).

Jope's native land only takes centre stage in "A Citizen's Diary," the last of the fragmentary units in the volume. This suggests that the speaker would have been unable to write of Plymouth authentically before he explored "the rest of the world" (with special attention to Hungary). In this piece, Plymouth is described as "a city whose centre, as with most other port cities, is at its edge" (Jope 2021: 71). The displacement of the centre recalls the displacement discussed in the poem "Superimpositions" (from an earlier volume of Jope's). Just as the song of the British band found its true place only in the Hungarian landscape, so does Plymouth rely

on the context of its surroundings. Examining a street map of Plymouth, the speaker muses: “I can trace its patterns with my eyes closed, envisaging countless journeys from one suburb to another. That experience means more to me than the ‘identity’ of this place – the civic myths, the alibis with which it tranquilises itself” (Jope 2021: 71). For him, the essence of Plymouth is not its national character but its proximity to other places, its being connected to other destinations. Like Foucault, Jope is interested in the relations between sites.

### **Hungary as a mirror of the speaker’s mortality**

Critical responses to Jope’s works tend to highlight that his topographical poems are at the same time abstract and concrete; they aim to evoke the described land vividly but also interpret it on an abstract, metaphorical plane. Reviewing *Dreams of the Caucasus*, Donald Gardner observes: “As with much travel writing, there is a goal behind the journey. These texts are an attempt to read nature for signs and they also represent a quest for the elemental in himself, a sort of spiritual geology” (2011: 75). In an appreciation of Jope’s poetic output, David Pollard argues: “The descriptions he gives are always detailed and telling but there is a sense of discontinuity. These shifting details merely emphasise the larger impossibility of showing, of the constancy of the vanishing point just beyond the eye where things collide but which we never reach” (2018: 147). While the present paper has so far concentrated on Jope’s portrayal of national identities, there is indeed an even more abstract dimension to these poems. They are also meditations on death.

An aphoristic fragment in “Points of Entry” explicitly links travel and mortality: “The tourist is an idealist, who cannot imagine that the place they are in will exist when they have gone. The traveller is a realist, who knows that the place will outlast them” (Jope 2021: 29). The authentic form of travelling, then, presupposes an awareness of the visitor’s mortality: one should be grateful for getting the chance to experience something more permanent than one’s own life.

Of course, travel has been used as a metaphor for death or associated with mortality in other ways since the earliest days of literature. One could find such instances even in the works of Jope’s direct influences – in the last stanza of Baudelaire’s “Le Voyage,” to name just one example.<sup>6</sup> Arguably, Jope’s poems work best when this association between travel and mortality is further complicated by the addition of comical details. In such cases, he embraces

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<sup>6</sup> In a review of one of Jope’s volumes, Donald Gardner mentions that the prose poem as a form is usually associated with Baudelaire and other continental writers (2011: 75), which supports the claim that Baudelaire is a direct influence of Jope’s.

the humorous aspect of the encounter with the heterotopia of Hungary, and the linking of the amusing setting and the focus on the sombre subject of decease creates a grotesque tone. This is achieved in “Retail Therapy”, whose explanatory subtitle (“*Mammut II, Buda*”) points to a shopping mall in Hungary, thus situating the poem in a very specific place. The second half of the six-stanza work will be quoted here.

We carry our bags to the metro,  
gold against autumnal greyness...  
skaters on history’s surface,  
so light above the trapped cadavers,

mirror-stranded, whatever the city,  
whatever the language, styles or faces...  
ignoring the mammoth’s tooth encased in glass  
at the bright, enamelled entrance.

But death will creep towards us,  
icy as the hand of a store detective,  
sudden as the beep a barcode triggers...  
still bribable, in theory.  
[ellipses in the original]<sup>7</sup>

These lines contain a few references that are essential to understanding the work yet require the reader to be fairly familiar with the shopping mall it describes. The mall’s name itself is an acronym of the English expression “Major Associated Mall Mart and Universal Town” (Sikos and Hoffmann 2004: 111) yet looks identical to the Hungarian word for mammoth (*mamut*) save for an extra M. Accordingly, a mammoth was chosen as the facility’s mascot: not only does it appear on logos, but a mammoth’s tooth is also displayed in a glass case near the entrance, and at another part of the mall, there are a few prehistoric animals made of plastic hanging upside down from the mirrored ceiling. Jope incorporates these commercial objects into his text and attributes a symbolic significance to them.

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<sup>7</sup> As of 2022, this poem has only been published in Zoltán Tarcsay’s Hungarian translation (Jope 2018: 28-29). The English original is cited with the permission of Norman Jope.

As we have seen in “On a Dry Sea,” where the 1242 Mongol Invasion is juxtaposed with modern-day Hungary, Jope sometimes sees Hungary as an accumulation of strata of different historical periods and tries to dig down to older strata. In “Retail Therapy,” the mammoth’s tooth and the plastic animals are portrayed as mementoes of a prehistoric time. Since the mammoth is an extinct species and the plastic animals are referred to as “cadavers”, each memento also acts as a *memento mori*. Unlike the speaker of “On a Dry Sea,” the visitors of the mall actively avoid any contact with the past, “ignoring the mammoth’s tooth encased in glass”. Mere “skaters on history’s surface”, the customers distract themselves from facing their mortality with shopping. If there is a therapeutic element to this behaviour, as the title “Retail Therapy” suggests, then part of Jope’s point is that mundane and perhaps banal activities like shopping might play a part in alleviating anxieties as serious as the fear of death.

Although the poem is written in first-person plural (“we carry our bags”), the visitors form a generalised, faceless crowd at best, and the speaker belongs to it only in a limited sense. The shoppers are described as going about their ways “whatever the city, // whatever the language”, which reveals that the poem is written from the speaker’s personal point of view instead of capturing the collective experience of the crowd: unlike the speaker, Hungarian visitors obviously do not think of cultural and linguistic differences while visiting Mammut. The speaker blends into this crowd only if it is read as a symbol of mankind in its eternal struggle with existential anxieties amid remnants of the past. The abstract tone of the poem supports this reading. The explicit references to the mall and its immediate surroundings (such as the metro stop) are often reinterpreted on a symbolic level.<sup>8</sup> This happens in the lines “We carry our bags to the metro, / gold against autumnal greyness”. The shoppers carrying their bags is a mundane image, but the sight is immediately recontextualised by the association with the colour gold, which not only alludes to the customers’ wealth (if gold is taken as a currency) but is also contrasted with Autumn, a conventional symbol of mortality and ageing, as if the mallgoers were escaping from death.<sup>9</sup> The plastic animals hanging upside down from the mirrored ceiling also have a symbolic significance. The shoppers are imagined stopping under the animals and gazing up at the mirror. Their reflections appear to be standing above the reflections of the animals, hence why the speaker describes the customers as being “so light above the trapped cadavers, / mirror-stranded”. Moreover, it is not immediately obvious that the expression “mirror-stranded” refers to the customers and not the animals, which imitates

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<sup>8</sup> This recalls David Pollard’s aforementioned observation, according to which Jope’s poetry offers vivid details only to announce their inability to directly portray abstract, higher subjects (2018: 147).

<sup>9</sup> For some examples of Jope’s use of colour symbolism in other poems, see Bödecs (2018).

linguistically the sight of the shoppers and the animals appearing together in the mirror. Their occupying the same space suggests that the customers, even if they try to ignore the memento mori, will eventually share the fate of the extinct animals.

Despite its focus on decease, the poem retains a playful quality, which stems from the contrast between the mundane setting and the sombre subject matter. While readers unfamiliar with the real-life Mammut mall may not realize that the extinct animals featured in the text are only commercial reproductions, the playfulness of the last stanza is unmistakable. There, the ominousness of death is reduced (but not neutralized completely) by comparisons with not particularly threatening phenomena: death is “icy as the hand of a store detective” and “sudden as the beep a barcode triggers”. The poem even ends on a hopeful note, suggesting that the customers still have some time to live: the personified death is “still bribable, in theory.”

### Conclusion

As we have seen, Hungary acts a heterotopia in Jope’s poems. Despite its differences from the speaker’s home country, it is similar to Britain in so many respects that the speaker starts perceiving Britain as comparably odd and unknowable. Alienated from both the familiar and the unfamiliar country, the speaker develops an international identity that celebrates common human experiences. This change in the speaker’s identity also entails a heightened awareness of his own mortality. In certain poems, this experience is related in a playful way, embracing the grotesqueness of recognizing signs of death in an emphatically mundane environment. These poems are arguably the finest among Jope’s Hungary-related works.

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