Parallel Stories: A Book Review for the Jewish Quarterly

In his day, Milan Kundera proved that there was quite a bit of leg hiding behind the Iron Curtain. If two recent high-profile book releases are any indication, Central European literature has much more skin waiting in the wings now that the curtain has been fully drawn open. Book publishers seem eager to align these erotically charged works with certain best-selling zeitgeists by dressing them in sultry black and white photos. A Fifty Shades of Grey jacket may be enough to get an invite to the party, but in finding space at the bar, there appear to be two divergent strategies: bully past the regulars by sheer size and gravitas like Péter Nádas's Parallel Stories, or shimmy gamily between friendly, like-minded types, à la Grazyna Plebanek's Illegal Liaisons.

Hungarian literature has recently experienced a vogue in English-speaking countries, where it is increasingly looked to as an antidote to facile slender volumes that are so easily breezed through on an iPad or Kindle. Péter Nádas, an elven-faced septuagenarian, who has been a literary icon for decades in his home country, was minted as a cultural handshake in English-speaking countries when Susan Sontag called his Book of Memories "the greatest novel written in our time, and one of the great books of the century."

But his life work is Parallel Stories, the 1180 page tome issued in three volumes in Hungary, and as one massive doorstop of a book in English, heroically translated by Imre Goldstein. Upon its release, a great hullabaloo was made of its experimentalism and virtuosity. This may all be true, but by the same token there are few novels around that will bring your insecurities or shortcomings as a reader into sharper relief than Parallel Stories.

Like a literary anarchist, Nádas shrugs off any notion of wanting to be liked or easily understood. Nádas etherizes you with words and images. With more than a whiff of erudition and somatic obsessiveness, Parallel Stories is a huge gaseous bubble rising from the murky swamp of twentieth century Central European history, populated by so many characters and traces of narrative that it almost feels like it was skimmed from the collective consciousness of the epoch. Reviewers have frustratingly compared it to War and Peace, I guess because it takes place in and around a war and is very long, but Nádas appears far less concerned with sculpting an epic than indulging in a deep, serious, collective look inward. The novel could be read as an interior monologue of Central Europe itself. As such it exempts itself from erecting clarifying signposts regarding whose story is being told and what connection it has to

the overall piece of work. And don't expect quotation marks, it's a 'bring your own' affair.

Parallel Stories is huge, bloated, surely untouched by an editor's pencil, though there are oases of electrifying writing amidst the chore: "It would be impossible to tell which of their worlds was more uninviting or more vulgar−the world admitted by their faces, mutually blinded by their wide-eyed proximity, a nearby world that alternately brings the twilight-colored walls closer and moves them farther away; or the world that sternly conjures up, in minute detail from head to toe, the impersonal acts of male-female copulation and mercilessly compels them to perform them." The writing manages to remain firmly aligned with the 'new' in its inventive structure and anarchistic style as it simultaneously communicates its scope through both personal narratives and historical events. The lengthier chapters of Parallel Stories concern the families of the Lippy-Lehrs and the Dohrings, and their associations with Nazis and Communists alike. Other episodes take us on homosexual romps on Budapest's Margit Island, the dissection tables of Buchenwald, and the breadlines and bathhouses of Kádár-era Hungary. The plot is not experienced as a series of points but rather as a passage of time: ethereal and difficult to pin down. Along with the only vaguely relatable narratives of the main characters, the lives of others frequently overtake the writer's attention, the minor characters come to the fore seemingly without reason and without warning – only returning us to the already amorphous plot tens or hundreds of pages later.

The novel begins with the discovery of a murder. Don't be fooled, it is but a tease, or really just a telegraphed message that this book will remind you page after page that you are human, all too human, and your time on this earth is determined by the durability of your bodily vessel. You get the sense, as the novel plods along, that Nádas has served up a dead body not to initiate a mystery, but to give himself the opportunity to poke around orifices and generally scrutinize an uncomplaining corpse. All these odors, sticky secretions, and mortified skin are but evidence of our own mortality, that we are expending our very selves as we putter though time and space. Like the novel's curious detective Kienast, the author himself might have been gifted at forensics for all the attention he gives to the entire human specimen.

More than the book's characters, Nádas himself seems enraptured by the commonalities of the human body and its needs and appetites. Over the course of the novel it feels like Nádas is a performing an autopsy on our corporal, human condition. Ultimately, the reader participates in their own parallel story, having had this mirror held up to them through so many pages. "Kovach exuded rough goodness, and somehow it was also his nature greedily to collect all bodily pleasures, to hoard them senselessly, as if one could store enough warmth of female and male bodies or scents of male and female pubic hair and stockpile them for leaner times." The book is one such stockpile, a catalog of bodily smells and excretions. You half expect the pages to stick together.

So forget War and Peace. Parallel Stories is really more concerned with the epic narrative told by human anatomy. Bodily odors waft across the page like cooking smells in an Anthony Bourdain memoir. Like Proust's madeleine, the fragrance of genitalia, excrement, and ejaculate become an entrée into the characters and their stories: a Remembrance of Things *Pest*. No nook or cranny is left unexamined.

Having tired himself of plum-like penis heads and muscular anuses, even the waxy-orifice of the ear undergoes scrutiny. In a sense, all this drawing attention to the body's constant need for replenishment and evacuation keeps the novel at a very human level; a reminder that ideas are born from cellular matter, that even though we strive for the divine, we whip up a quite a smelly sweat in doing so. It is similar to Michael Houellebecq's The Elementary Particles in its utterly clinical look at the human beast and all that is mortal in our disposable bodies, so constantly in need of maintenance and disguise. It is our mortality that ties us one and all, not just to each other, but to the Earth itself. As one character states, "The way your heart beats, that's personal. But your blood is not, blood is impersonal." Or, I *stink*, therefore I am.

As the novel progresses and, I imagine, as does Nádas in age, there appears to be a shift in appetite, and food displaces sex. It is important to keep in mind here that he wrote the novel over a period of 18 years, beginning not long after the tide of Soviet Socialism receded. Is it possible that the early rapturous bedroom scenes were what occupied the thoughts of a much younger writer? After the opening 300 pages, I was convinced Nádas had written the most subversive erotic novel ever, in that it resists easy consumption or even satisfying the reader with what might be called a narrative climax. By the closing pages, I wasn't sure what I had read, and felt I needed to ponder my own shortcomings as a reader while taking a cleansing bath. In the writing you can see Béla Hamvas, William Gaddis, and Samuel Beckett, but Nádas, in his tiny Hungarian village is all his own. I doubt there would be room on your shelf for two.

Were you to excerpt all the naughty parts – and I am including scatology and intense observation of all forms of human excretions here – you might get a volume about as long as Illegal Liaisons, though the narrative and bedroom scenes in this more svelte Polish novel are both related with significantly less mess.

Whereas Nádas looks pre-Perestroika, the author of Illegal Liaisons has her gaze fixed firmly on 'new Europe.' Those pesky wars and revolutions are something of the past, a memory of ancestors and childhoods. Protagonist Jonathan won't even allow used furniture in his house, preferring a quick trip to Ikea to antique hunting. The characters may strive for the new, but the tale they tell is anything but. The book relates the story of a Polish married couple, Jonathan and Megi, who are making lives for themselves in the seat of the European Union, Brussels. When Jonathan takes another expatriate as a lover, his presumptions about gender, and happiness are challenged. He feels torn by fidelity to his family as he reaches out towards the glamour and seductive erotic power of Andrea, who is scaling the apparatus of the EU bureaucracy with the help of her older husband, Simon.

Illegal Liaisons sells itself as thinking-person's erotica, but it's really a character study with some juicy parts thrown in: a deeper shade in the 50 Shades palate. The novel, a bestseller in its home country, marks Polish author's Graznya Plebanek's debut in English, with a translation by Danusia Stok.

Where Nádas's bedroom scenes and preoccupation with human sexuality seem designed to tie its characters to their corporal human condition, the erotic episodes in Illegal Liaisons serve as an escape from the characters' routines of family and career. Sex elevates them past the daily concerns of what to bring home for dinner and who is

getting ahead in what commission. This novel indulges in modern, twenty-first century sex: Illegal Liaisons may be the first book I've read that fully utilizes the mobile phone as an instrument of flirtation, if not sexuality. Jonathan is tied to his mobile as though it is some sensitive bodily extension, engorged with text messages from his lover. Jonathan texts Andrea so much that by the middle of the book you just kind of want him to make the bold decision of actually *calling* the girl. This is an indicator of a kind of effeteness Plebanek endows her protagonist with. Jonathan writes children's books, he is fond of quotes by Anaïs Nin, and is comfortable caring for his kids. This is truly a 'new' European man, less marked by Eastern European machismo than by a desire to conveniently fit into the lives and schedules of the women around him. Jonathan is a character who not only throws off history, but outdated, old-world gender roles as well. But this is not always to his credit, for in his willingness to adapt to a new role, he is also able to rationalize that his wife has become just a friend to him – which is acceptable, if not modern – and she is therefore worth keeping around as he carries on with Andrea.

It is Andrea who is the true player here: a femme fatale in the body of a Czech/Swede transplant, and whose sexual appetites expand beyond her husband and even Jonathan. Megi, on the other hand, grapples with her ambitions as a lawyer and careerist (it is because of her career, not his, that they have moved to Brussels). She is the breadwinner, and she sees women's independence as their highest calling.

Jonathan's dilemma is ably controlled by the female forces in his life. Where he is tormented by guilt and desire, Andrea happily carries on with her prodigious love life. Even Megi harbors a secret, off-stage affair, and rues its passing. It is a man's world no longer, and Brussels is just the right place for the lovers to luxuriate in their new roles: As Andrea puts it: "I love it. I'm happy here, everything's all mixed up. Brussels is a huge pot of languages. Here the gender of a man's cock is feminine, *une verge*. A vagina is masculine, *un vagin*. I don't want to leave."

Pebanek makes a point of planting her characters in the sophisticated word of diplomats and EU bureaucrats, where the couple's native Polish is only spoken in private and with a bit of shame, and where the home country is thought of with nostalgia rather than homesickness. Poland is forever bound to the old, while Brussels is associated with the new. Where their parents were revolutionaries, Jonathan is spoiled with a cushy job as a writing instructor, and puzzles of appropriate party conversation.

Like Ikea to antiques, new is not necessarily better. Each character in the novel seems to be looking forward into some orgiastic future, be it extra-marital affairs, job prospects, children, or artistic achievement. Nobody is wholly satisfied or comfortable with their fluid roles in this brave new world. The characters in Pebanek's novel are kept conscious of moving through time, of aging, of their place in the universe. "And although the fireworks of being with his lover outshone daily routine, the basis of his life endured, the main current flowed persistently, linked the past to the future, waited until it could overflow and embrace the present again." The novel resolves itself nicely, but without truly punishing those who have lived so untethered to their pasts. Ultimately, it is only those who are tied to the past whom are made to suffer, while those who look to the future are allowed to find some sort of reconciliation.

Reading Illegal Liaisons after Parallel Lives leaves one with the curious sensation of having been rushed through time; of having taken a kaleidoscopic look at lives that, even when their stories cross, are somehow utterly separate, peopled with characters tied together by common history, urgent desires, and all-too-human mortality. The body is a crucible that bears us away into the future, suffering wear and tear as it goes, never fully awake to the present; at once waste-making, if not waste itself. Or, as a character in Parallel Stories puts it, “We are empty my Lojzi, we’ve been drained of our blood. We take nothing with us but our emptiness.”