CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Péter Nádas

A Book of Memories

Emlékiratok könyve

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Emlékiratok Könyve is political precisely because of its focus on the ‘private’, the ‘inti-mate’, because of its proximity to the body. It depicts how ‘politics’ – in this case, the authoritarian system of actually existing socialism – distorts the deepest instincts and de-sires of human beings. This historical-philosophical theses unfolds in the narrative space between long, detailed, static close-ups of bodily actions or conversations and dynamic images of significant historical events such as the the 1956 Hungarian Revolution or the 1953 German uprising. These events are set against the backdrop of three historical peri-ods: a ‘Mannian’ bourgeois turn-of-the-century era; the Stalinist era of actually existing socialism in Hungary; and the 1970s GDR.

As the title suggests, the process of coming to terms with the terror and brutality of history is mediated through the memoir (the Hungarian title literally means ‘*Book of Memoirs*’, not ‘Mem-ories’). The complex structure of three – or rather four – embedded narrative levels presents a dark tableau of the 20th century, in which the development of a ‘mature’, free individuality was violently hindered.

An unnamed first-person narrator, a Hungarian aged 33, begins writing a memoir of his time in East Berlin in the 1970s. Although the narrative focuses on the love triangle involving him, an eccentric older actress and a young man named Melchior, the political dimension and Nádas’ critique of socialism are evident throughout. This becomes particularly clear in the scenic de-scriptions of East Berlin – a strange monster of a city, with the Wall looming over every district, inaccessible underground lines rushing past beneath without stopping, and a new kitsch repre-senting the new social order. The narrator’s conflict with a ‘68er Marxist, who praises the social-ist project while moving freely between ‘East’ and ‘West’, is a key scene for understanding the political situation, in which even meaningful relationships are necessarily doomed.

The second storyline features the fictional character of the unnamed narrator from the first one: Thomas Thoenissen, a Thomas Mann innuendo. He leaves his fiancée behind and travels to Heiligendamm, a ‘fin de siècle’ spa town, to write a novel. But what he is actually fleeing is the unfreedom and repression of the petty bourgeois life. There, he confronts childhood traumas, caused by his father, who could not overcome his violent sexual desires so he raped and killed a young girl. He also confronts his bisexuality. In an essay, Nádas mentions that he wanted to write the untold story of the young Mann's homosexual love affair, which Mann himself could not tell because of the cultural repression that made non-heterosexual relationships taboo (Nádas 963). The novel’s treatment of homosexuality and bisexuality – while not entirely absent from the arts of the period, still a subversive theme – can also be read as a politically emancipatory ges-ture in the conservative cultural climate of 1980s Hungary.

The third storyline describes the unnamed narrator's childhood in the 1950s, during the most dictatorial period of socialism. The children imitate their parents' political actions (spying on them, looking through their papers) and sexual behaviour (replicating love triangles, infidelity and violence). They cannot completely understand the political system in which they are living, nor its impact on the adults, but they share a sense of impending doom – whether during school gatherings or walking past the closely watched villa of Rákosi, the General Secretary of the Par-ty and de facto leader of the country.

It is common in these storylines for real closure to be impossible. The third narrative ends with a scenic depiction of the 1956 revolution, with images of the 1953 uprising in Berlin dissolv-ing into them. It is only at this point that the narrative situation in which the unnamed narrator and Melchior share their childhood memories is unveiled, and the figure of the narrator is identified with the figure of the child. The other two storylines end with their main characters fleeing: Thomas flees his bourgeois life and the police, Melchior flees the GDR. The collection of memoirs ends abruptly. A friend named Krisztián, who plays an important role in the childhood memories, takes over the narration, and informs the reader of the brutal death of the unnamed narrator. He also corrects some facts from the manuscript, calling into question the reliability of the original storyteller.

With its hundreds of pages and exceptional level of detail, the book is internationally rec-ognised as a canonical example of post-socialist Hungarian literature. Apart from the aforemen-tioned political themes, the novel also has a close intertextual relationship with the 20th-century European literary tradition. Through its (staged) open-endedness, and through the death of the (fictional) author, Nádas radicalises the modernist gesture of self-reflection. Often compared to modernists such as Proust or Musil, he goes one step further in questioning the possibility of narrating history and the very concept of storytelling, of literary fiction (Balassa 260). Having lived through the historical events of the 20th century, Nádas is likely to be even more sceptical of rounded narratives that present history as a reasonable historical development.

Emlékiratok Könyve was published at a time when the collapse of the socialist systems was already on the horizon, and postmodernism – a critical reaction to the doctrines of Marxism-Leninism – was becoming a defining influence in the theoretical discussions of the political oppo-sition, to which Nádas culturally belonged. However, it would be a mistake to restrict the novel's critical potential to an abstract rejection of socialism. Like many of his forerunners (e.g. Mann) and contemporaries, Nádas confronts the contradictions of 'Western' culture in general. In his monumental work, he engages with – remembers and questions – the history of this tradition, which gave rise to ancient Greek art (there is an extensive interpretation of an ancient wall im-age), Beethoven (a visit to the Staatsoper in Berlin to see his Fidelio is a pivotal scene in the novel) and Mann, but also to the rigid, repressive morals of the petty bourgeoisie, fascism and Stalinism.

LANGUAGE: Hungarian/Magyar nyelv

This title was not censored before publishing