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The Last Supper

Pawel Huelle
Antonia Lloyd-Jones, translator
Serpent's Tail (Sep 29, 2010)
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The Last Supper is, happily, one of the growing number of novels translated into English and published in the US. The Polish novelist Pawel Huelle has given us a wonderfully sublime and engaging meditation on the fallacies and foibles of contemporary “avant-garde” art, religious faith, and the effect of post-World War II socialism on the lives of the characters who populate the novel.

A doctor, a wealthy entrepreneur, a *bon vivant* cum scholar, and the narrator (named Pawel) have been, among others, chosen to sit for a photograph for their artist friend in the fashion of “The Last Supper,” which the artist will then use as a model for a painting. Adrift in their lives, the only present purpose of these men is to make it to the photo shoot in Gdansk, where they will be reunited for the first time in fifteen years. The old maxim that the journey is more important than the destination seems to be Huelle’s mantra, and this journey is potentially fraught with danger, as the activities of an unknown bomber have led to a police crackdown on the city. As the men travel, we catch glimpses into their past and present lives, and see how they have been touched by Eastern European politics, the economy, the arts, and most importantly, religion and spirituality.

In a mildly experimental fashion, the narrative is decidedly non-linear; reminiscences within reminiscences come unexpectedly, forcing the reader to keep track of the “now” versus the “then,” versus the “then” twice removed. Huelle jumps ahead to the end of the story almost as frequently as he jumps backward in time. To Huelle’s credit, he draws readers into the story with such subtle grace that they will relish taking on what puzzles there are to solve. Still, Huelle, a renowned satirist, has things to say in *The Last Supper* about religion and society that might go over the heads of readers who lack a good grasp of the current state of affairs in Poland.

The book hinges on ancient and modern interpretations of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, and Huelle is keen on exploring the mystical sides of these faiths. Also central to the book is the debate over whether “new” art diminishes “old” art. While the conversations are at times weighty, they are also rich and playful. The novel is playful too, full of satire and a touch of magical realism. Fans of John Crowley’s Aegypt series will enjoy this for the plethora of historical references, and Roberto Bolaño fans will appreciate Huelle’s way of making the absurd seem matter-of-fact. Perhaps the highest praise of *The Last Supper* is that readers will end the book wanting to spend more time with its characters.

DAN COFFEY (December 16, 2009)

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