

Błąd! Nieznany argument przełącznika.

1. (From a review by Tomasz Burek, "A Novel At Last", in "Gazeta Polska", 25.11.1998)

We have become inured to the view that a novel, in order to be a novel, must be, in whole or in part, a poem or a treatise, an experiment, a catalogue, a bore, a drunken rant, a parody of past literary forms, an essay, a box of magic tricks - everything, in short, but itself, that is to say the unfolding of a series of fictional events.

Antoni Libera's *Madame*, the winner of the ZNAK competition for best novel, is the first novel in years that I have read with genuine curiosity, the kind of burning, naive excitement familiar to readers of detective fiction and love stories: I wanted to know what happens next. Who would the mysterious "French teacher" turn out to be in the end: the embodiment of an ideal? a woman of easy virtue - a tart with principles? a victim of the political system? or a plaything in the hands of Fate, a fate of an unusually harsh and perverse kind?

And would the hero and narrator of this story, which is not only a love story, finally be granted full knowledge of the object of his sensual and spiritual enchantment, his disenchantment, and the cause of his suffering? [...] He himself is also an interesting figure: spiritually rich, funny, and likeable - for he is not without some common weaknesses, such as self-love.

The hero-narrator, in the course of his private investigations into Madame's life, investigations taking the form of a series of careful, gradual approaches to the object, like successive "turns of the screw", finds himself entering a complex tangle of the public and the personal, and touching on issues which were still taboo in 1982, when he began writing his story. He is led, for instance, to consider the reasons for the Spanish civil war and its tragic consequences for Max, Madame's father, who fought as a volunteer in the international brigades. Here, quite possibly for the first time in the history of Polish literature, the issue of Spain is presented in a light other than that imposed by the Comintern, whose propaganda has lied about it with impunity for fifty years.

Most importantly, however, the narrator describes what life in the Polish People's Republic was really like, in the 60's and later; how the "province-on-the-Vistula" was transformed by the Soviet Union. Few have brought out so starkly, and with such venom, the contrast between the humiliating weight of slavery borne every day by the man in the street and the light, insouciant, snobbish froth, the carefree elegance, of Western - particularly French - life. Few of those who, like him, dreamed of and longed for the West have been so merciless in condemning its other side: first in the excellent description of the exhibition of Picasso's obscene drawings, and later in the no less exquisite portrayal of a private screening, for the elect few, of Lelouche's film *A Man and a Woman*. Equally striking is his realization of the price one had to pay in those days for one's "ticket" to the "free world".

Madame, the guiding star of his youth [...], leaves and does not return. He is left here, with all the weight of Polish reality on his shoulders, with "Solidarity" and with his dream of other, better worlds. He writes a beautiful novel, an expression of the dilemmas and conflicts, which gnaw at him, and he calls it "Madame". He could also have called it "The Answer".

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2. (From a review by Michał Cichy, "The Construction of Crystal", in "Gazeta Wyborcza", 22-23.5.1999; a presentation of the novel after its nomination for the Nike Prize.)

Madame, the winner of the Znak competition for best novel, heralded by the critics as an "enduring and important point of reference" and a "revelation in contemporary Polish literature", is a late first novel by Antoni Libera, Poland's most distinguished Beckett scholar and the literary director of Warsaw's Dramatic Theatre.

It describes, against the background of the grey, lugubrious Polish People's Republic of the 60's, how a clever schoolboy in his senior year is smitten by love for his French teacher, beautiful and mysterious, elegant and intelligent, the embodiment of all that is Western.

In an interview in "Nowe Książki" Antoni Libera said that the novel was born of an old idea of his, which consisted in "the opposition of two sentences, which were to be respectively the first and the last sentence of a novel. The first was: *For many years I used to think I had been born too late*, and the second, *And then I thought that perhaps I hadn't been born too late, after all.*" And indeed both sentences appear in the book, in only slightly changed form - although the second is not the very last sentence, but the last before the "postscript" which ends the novel.

The "postscript" bears the date 1983, a detail which confused some readers, for it is not the date on which *Madame* was finished, but the date on which the narrator finishes writing his "novel within a novel". [...] The hero of *Madame*, as Libera says, "begins as a dreamer (someone who lives by myths); then he is an inquirer into Life; finally he becomes an Artist (someone who creates myths), and a legend in his own right." Literature, in Libera's view, should not attempt to copy reality, but to become its sublimation - to "create an ideal picture".

3. (From a review by Mirosław Dzien, "The Myth that becomes Word", in "Kwartalnik Artystyczny", Spring 1999)

[...] Libera's book is not easily classified (a fact very much to its credit). It is both the history of an emotion and a description of the birth of an Artist. It also paints an accurate and detailed picture of the stifling grayness of Poland under Gomulka, when anyone who wanted to diverge even the slightest bit from the prevailing norms and way of life was subjected to difficulties hard to imagine in a normally functioning state.

The novel evokes a number of myths that are still present in contemporary culture. Perhaps the most important of these is the Myth of art itself: art as a means towards greater awareness, and also as a magic formula, a spell by means of which the Artist can reveal, with magnificent clarity, things that until now had been hidden from us.[...] By reviving the myth of purity symbolized by mountains, for instance, especially those high, virginal mountains that demand perseverance and sacrifice and test the devotion and purity of intention of those who brave them, [Libera] enlarges the space of myth. This is the dimension of myth that is revealed in Constant's story about his expedition to the Alps with

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Max, Victoria's father. The myth of purity is also connected to the myth of birth and destiny [...].

There are some truths about the victory of the false and mediocre over the genuinely valuable and pure, expounded in Freddy's bitter story of his own past humiliations. Then there is the myth of the intelligent misfit, the superior spirit who stands out from the grayness around him - a figure like Roz Goltz, later to become a professor at Princeton and thus confirm his own notorious claim that Poland always managed to get rid of its best people. And finally there is the story about the Polish Communist Party and the Spanish civil war [...]

If Libera's hero has a fault, it is his singular brand of intellectual purity, the irreproachable logic of his discourse, a discourse which defines the totality of the young Romantic's experience. [...] A Romantic clothed in the garb of logic is not only no longer a Romantic; he also ceases (and this seems much more significant) to be a Positivist, an Analytical Thinker, a person absorbed by a search for all the possible methods of calming the bug that gnaws at his impatient mind. Thus if Libera's aim was to ridicule both the Romantic and the Positivist myth [...], he has succeeded admirably. [...]

But for me there is something more important still in *Madame*, and that is the creation of the Artist: the birth of a creative consciousness as a multi-directional process that raises one above mediocrity but brings with it much bitterness. The hero attempts to reconcile his artistic experiences with the emotions that have invaded him - emotions which, despite his over-developed sense of self-observation, he had not foreseen. The investigations he undertakes [...] not only conflict with his growing conviction that he is destined for "greater things" - for Art; they also bring home to him the existence of that huge, unbridgeable chasm between the imagination and reality (hence, probably, the references to Schopenhauer).

The impenetrable Madame, caught in the coils of a destiny defined by her place of birth and confirmed by Holderlin's prophecy, is not only a femme fatale; she is also the point at which reality and the imagination meet: the point of contact between a thing conceived with growing emotion and a thing which, without that emotion, turns out to be, if not totally different, at least far removed from its imagined prototype. The hero realizes this while watching Racine's *Phaedra*: "... the drama being enacted on stage only provided the elements for the drama unfolding in my head, and my imagination played with them freely. The result was a sort of projection of my unexpressed daydreams."

[...] This is a novel as much about the power of myth as about the power of creating, the power of the Word; the power to create the world through words. [...] The artist, once caught up in the power of the Word, will never again escape from its shadow. For the Word imprisons; it also liberates, but in liberating us it humbles us, it forces us to listen to its subtle and delicate messages, to bend to its will. In the power of the Word the artist exceeds himself, the narrator seems to be saying, and in doing so raises up and ennobles even the bleakest reality. [...]

4. (From a review by Pawel Huelle [author of *Who was David Weisser?*] in "Tygodnik Powszechny", 27.9.1998

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A life outside History, empty and pointless, filled at best by an eccentric hobby - this is the life to which the hero [of this novel] is sentenced, [a hero] whose characteristics, among them his eloquence, his remarkable knowledge of literature and his contempt for mediocrity, further heighten his resemblance to romantic literary prototypes.

Madame will change that life, but the rest of the novel has little to do with the sufferings of the Young Werther. Its patron spirit is rather that of Nabokov, for whom all art should be based on two fundamental principles: disinterestedness and complexity.

[...] Myths, Antoni Libera seems to be saying in this novel, exist because the human soul needs them; and what maintains them, what makes them take root, endure and develop, is the Word.

[The] three layers [of this novel], interwoven with minute precision, with no cracks or visible joins, are indeed a forceful confirmation of that message, presented in a high, eloquent style that owes not a little to the spirit of Thomas Mann. The first layer is an ironic description of the life and mores of the times - the old, forgotten dust of the Polish People's Republic; it will give older readers a peculiar sense of *deja vu*, and younger ones the possibility of a detailed insight into the absurdities of those days. The second layer is historical and philosophical, and bears the message that taking on the demons of history, be it with the best intentions and in the worthiest of causes, can never be innocent, and will always end in disaster - on an individual, social and national level. The third and most universal layer is the transformation of life into myth - without which neither art nor the artist can exist.

5. (From a review by Zbigniew Mentzel in "Tygodnik Powszechny", 15.11.1998)

Antoni Libera's novel *Madame*, winner of the Znak competition for best novel, is not a seasonal thing: not one of those "books of the month", or even of the week, that we forget about as soon as it disappears from the bestseller list; not, in short, one of those literary meteorites whose light shines only for a brief moment before it goes out. It is a work that is multi-layered and rich in meaning, about love, about art, about politics, and above all about language, with which we can create ourselves and the reality around us; and there is a very good chance indeed that it will become an enduring and important point of reference in Polish literature.

6. (From a review by Zbigniew Mentzel in "Polityka", 2.1.1999; nomination for the "Polityka Passport".)

Antoni Libera's *Madame*, perhaps the most interesting "late debut" since Kusniewicz [a distinguished Polish writer, much translated], has a good chance of becoming better-known abroad than at home. Although it is a "local" novel in the sense that it arose from the miseries of life behind the iron curtain, it is thoroughly universal.

I would award Libera the "Passport" for one passage alone - his excellent "treatise on the passport", the monologue of a frustrated intellectual of the old

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school who initiates the high-minded schoolboy into the dirty realities of the Polish People's Republic's "cultural co-operation" with the West.

7. (From a review by Malgorzata Musierowicz [well-known writer, sister of Stanislaw Baranczak] in "Tygodnik Powszechny", 29.11.1998)

I picked up *Madame* at 4 p.m. and finished it at dawn. It's a book you can't put down - another exception in our current literary output. A traditional narrative (what a relief! what a pleasure to read!), it is well constructed and elegantly written. [...] [it is] a complex tangle of puzzles and multi-layered stories, a mystery to which books are the key. Antoni Libera is clearly a bibliophile and a devourer of books, and he communicates with the reader by means of literary references and allusions. The tracks leading to the Mystery take one through successive stages of initiation and a variety of erudite games.

I loved it. And of course, like everyone else, I like stories about love - and that is what this novel, thick and tasty, is about: a great love, unfulfilled - "unrequited", as they say. How imprecise! For what is fulfillment? The young hero of *Madame* is strangely bitter and strangely experienced on the subject:

"... it can't bring the satisfaction you seek. It can only soothe; it can deaden the delusion. But it can't satisfy.[...] In the realm of sweet delusion there can be no fulfillment. [...] Because there is no form in which it could be realized."

And yet the hero's story is a story about a love fulfilled, in the sense that it fulfils our expectations of what love between two people should be: a mystery that is its own solution; a thing thriving on distance but satisfying the need for closeness; at once a complicated strategic game that constantly breaks its own rules and not a strategic game at all, but a reality; at once a reality and a dream; at once a source of strength and a source of constant uncertainty for its victims; a light in the grayness - a warm light that can raise us above that grayness; a light in which at last we are unique - we exist, uniquely and unrepeatably, for ages.

That is the emotion *Madame* is about - and yet it is not a melodrama. On the contrary, the author's detachment saves him from succumbing to an excessive absorption in the emotional. The portrayal of the recent realities of the Polish People's Republic - skeptical, realistic and grotesque, at times irresistibly funny, at others irresistibly pitiful - is an excellent, contrasting backdrop for the subtle and intricate love story.

8. (From a review by Andrzej Rostocki, "Bestsellers", in "Notes Wydawniczy", Autumn 1998)

The announcement of the results of the Znak competition for best novel was a great event. An excellent jury [...] picked out three prizewinners: Antoni Libera's *Madame* (first prize) [...]

[...] [The prize-winning novels] are very interesting, a fact confirmed not only by the immediate and extremely favorable reaction of the critics but also by the reading public. [...] I fell eagerly upon Antoni Libera's *Madame*, and was enchanted not only by his dexterity with the pen and his erudition, which after all was to be expected from a distinguished Beckett scholar and translator, but also,

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and above all, by his literary imagination and his ability to build up an extraordinary emotional atmosphere. Reading a book like this is pure pleasure - pure pleasure. It might well become a bestseller.

9. (From a review by Kazimiera Szczuka, "Form and a Boy", in "ResPublica Nowa", Jan./Feb. 1999.)

The novelistic models on which Antoni Libera draws are in general eighteenth-century ones, although it would be hard to single out any particular master of the art of the novel as the main influence. The work contains a well-nigh unimaginable number of literary references and allusions, clues, traces, borrowings, quotations, transformations, pastiches, etc., but all these serve to create the complex layer of symbolism that runs through the novel, not to point to the origins of the fictional structure, which is that of the *Bildungsroman*. For a *Bildungsroman* is unquestionably what *Madame* is - insofar as it is a story about the coming-of-age of a high school boy of subtle qualities of mind, desperately in love with his beautiful French teacher. It will be an invaluable, albeit perhaps somewhat startling, aid to the novel's interpretation to situate it with respect to the "Mother-work", the Original - Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* novels. [...] Although Libera leaves, on the face of it, no direct evidence of his familiarity with this Mother-work, his very traditional, intricate and elegant construction contains a number of Goethean - mostly Faustian - traces, as well as references to German romanticism, which inherited the Enlightenment tradition of the educational novel. Indeed, *Madame* may be read as a repetition and transformation of that stage in the development of the novel when eighteenth century narrative models endured in romanticism. This does not, of course, exhaust the interpretative possibilities, for we are led in many different directions: towards Gombrowicz, along a path marked out by Libera himself by his reading of Gombrowicz's *Cosmos*; towards Conrad, a path clearly indicated within the novel itself; and finally towards meanings rooted in psychoanalysis and the interpretation of myth, to name just a few.

[...] Antoni Libera's novel might equally come under the heading of an *Erziehungsroman*, for the whole thing, apart from the "Postscript", is set in a school, and the complex influence of the "master" or teacher, in other words Madame la Directrice, is decisive in the hero's spiritual and artistic development. As an *Erziehungsroman*, Libera's novel abandons the theme of wandering that contributes to making up the world of Goethe's *Bildungsroman*. In *Madame*, education and initiation take the form of something that resembles a criminal investigation, of which Madame is the object; clues are collected and reality is decoded, according to rules which sometimes resemble the rules for moving about in a maze, and sometimes the moves on a chessboard. [...] At the same time, Libera draws on the poetry of Heine and Holderlin to weave into the novel the romantic symbolism of the sources of the Rhine, and this, juxtaposed with images of snow-covered Alps, builds yet another metaphor for coming to self-knowledge: a penetration of Nature in the style of Novalis, a "descent into the depths" of the earth that is at the same time a descent, by a mysterious path, into oneself, into the dark chasms of one's soul - but also to the unconscious and, in this case, to the terrors of sexuality. [...]

And yet the theme of wandering, Goethe's "Wandern", is clearly present in Libera's novel - as lack, impossibility, a kind of crippling of the story. For it is

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Madame herself who is the romantic *wanderer*, come from the snow-covered alpine peaks, from Paris, and marked by the curse of a war in faraway Spain. Victoria is the "North Star", and she is also the Rhine, unsubdued and unbowed, a symbol of freedom seized and enslaved by a band of "Red pygmies". [...] One of the chapters of the novel is entitled "Onwards! Westward Ho!"; but Madame's plan of escape to France becomes a bitterly ironic transformation of the theme of the romantic journey, rendered impossible or at least strictly controlled by the bureaucratic and political organs of the Polish People's Republic in the 60's.

10. (From a review by Jakub Winiarski, "The Polish Goncourts", in "Magazyn Literacki", Autumn 1998)

[...] In France people like books about France and Russia. French culture and Russia - equally great and ever mysterious - are the elements that lay behind the success of Andrei Makine. On the one hand we have Proust and Flaubert, on the other the frozen steppe and Russian poverty, so exotic for the French [...] I believe that the fact that this particular novel won the prize is significant. My belief was strengthened when I read Antoni Libera's *Madame*, the winner of the first prize in the competition for best novel organized by the Znak publishing house. I doubt that the jury was influenced by the results of the French competition, but I nevertheless believe that the award of first prize to Libera's book reflects something more than the fact that it is, quite simply, the best of the three; for it, too, is full of references to French culture, and in a sense also to Russia. [...]

Makine's book is a good one, and so is Libera's. Indeed I think Libera's book is the more interesting, and worth translating into several languages, including French.