

Pawel Huelle
The Last Supper

The story is set in a large city in the north of Poland, which may be identified as Gdańsk. The action takes place in the “near future”, roughly ten years from now, though frequent flashbacks go back to the early twenty-first and late twentieth centuries – the era of Solidarity and the transition to democracy.

Bored with the endless experimentation of his avantgarde colleagues, and also with incessant nonsense about “the end of art”, Mateusz, a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, decides to prove that it is still possible nowadays to paint a large-scale picture on a religious theme, figurative rather than abstract, that will appeal to people who are responsive to art and who expect it to offer them something more lasting than just media hype. After much deliberation he chooses the topic of the Last Supper. Following the example of the Renaissance old masters, he decides that the models for the twelve apostles will be his own contemporaries, people who are famous in the city for their cultural achievements. He draws up a list, and one day invites the twelve men to his studio, where a professional photographer will take pictures of them all together at a long table, as well as individually. One chair, where Christ would be sitting, remains empty.

Naturally, the reader does not find all this out at once. Quite the opposite – as he or she accompanies these characters through the events of an entire day leading up to the moment when they will all meet at the studio that evening, he or she will not immediately guess why some of their behaviour, dreams, thoughts and memories are common to all of them. Only from the critical turning point in the narrative – which is a terrorist attack on the city – do we find out exactly where the characters are heading and why. Their present intrigues and some flashbacks to key moments in their lives come together to form the realistic level of the novel – the collective portrait of a generation whose youth coincided with the final decades of communism, who were adults in the years of transition, and whose autumn years are approaching in what is by now a completely different country.

However, for each of the characters on his way to the photographic session, the most important question involves his own, very personal attitude to the event the painting will depict. What was the Last Supper? Was it made up by the Evangelists, or was it a real event that established the Eucharist? Who in fact was Jesus Christ? These questions

entail others: which Apostle will I be in the painting? And could it by any chance be me that is represented as Judas? Each of the characters has a betrayal in his past. In the course of the day described in the novel, some will have painful memories of it, while others will wipe it from their minds. However, it is not this fragmentary process of self-examination that provides the fundamental, philosophical theme of the story, but the questions it prompts about Christianity in a Europe that on the one hand is becoming more and more secularised, and on the other more and more Islamised.

Paweł Huelle (born 1957) writes novels, short stories, newspaper columns and radio plays. In the early 1980s he worked as a press officer for the Solidarity trade union. He was recently appointed director of the Gdańsk-based Wybrzeże Theatre. His highly acclaimed debut novel, *Who Was David Weiser?* (1989) was translated into fifteen foreign languages, won several major literary awards and was made into a successful feature film. His other publications include three collections of short stories and two novels, *Mercedes-Benz* (2001) and *Castorp* (2004), all of which have appeared in foreign editions.

The noise of the electric train came rattling through the open windows of the old German villa. Mateusz was standing in the kitchen alcove trying to find a corkscrew, while the Engineer stared about him with a look on his face implying that all the oils, sketches, drawings, water colours and gouaches filled him with total disgust. He went up to the easel, then the wall, almost pressing his nose against the canvas as if he were very short-sighted, then turned towards us wearing a grimace and lisped: “Dweadful, tewible, howendous!”

“What’s your point?” asked Mateusz as the cork finally popped from the bottle of Bulgarian wine and he poured it into some thick, tea-stained glasses. “Maybe you could paint it better yourself?”

The Engineer made a face that implied extreme irritation with a dash of contempt.

“The point is not whether something is well or badly painted,” he drawled. “The point is whether it’s painted at all. Fuckin’ ’ell, can’t you understand that?”

“To be honest, no, I can’t really,” I said, looking the Engineer straight in the eye. “This man, nailed to the earth’s sphere,” I went on, pointing at the canvas, “is screaming so loud he can be heard in every galaxy. But God is not there.”

“Fuckin’ ’ell,” said the Engineer, clutching his head and looking at our host, “who’ve you got here? A virgin incowupt?”

“This is his,” said Mateusz, holding up a copy of my first book, which admittedly was at that point just a typescript in cardboard covers, “but you wouldn’t understand it all the same.”

“What an arsehole,” snarled the Engineer, “a writer on art is a piece of shit.”

Mateusz nodded indulgently, implying that he’d heard it all a hundred times before and did not necessarily agree with the Engineer, who had now gone entirely on the offensive; hopping about like a boxer, he was running up to each canvas and board in turn shouting: “And what the fuck is this? Fucking litewature! Paint is just dwied-up blood! It’s ancient dwied-up sperm! Painting is kaput! It’s over. Can’t you see that?”

Suddenly he took a razor out of his pocket, which, as I can see now, hadn’t got there by accident, went up to the painting I’d just mentioned, “Ecce Homo”, and slowly, without a word, with long strokes of the blade, ripped it into narrow strips. Mateusz was astonished, maybe even mesmerised at the sight of this destruction: the point being that it

was planned, deliberately performed before his eyes, so patently and brazenly that it took your breath away.

“This is diwect action,” said the Engineer, stepping back with a satisfied air from the canvas, which now resembled wallpaper, or a honeycomb – “new age art, and you can give that”, he said, ripping off a strip of canvas and tossing it on the paint-spattered floorboards, “to the whores at the Beehive for sanitawy towels!” And he burst into nervous laughter, so loud that it briefly drowned out the clatter of the trains.

Mateusz didn’t move an inch. But as soon as the Engineer went up to the next canvas he blocked his path, and for a while they grappled in complete silence. This was the first debate on the subject of modern art I ever took part in. In those days the Engineer, of whom you will hear a lot more, was assistant to Professor Śledź at the Academy, and the story of his final exam had passed into school legend – twenty-five canvases painted red and slashed with a razor, given top marks by the committee. So there I stood next to them, and to tell the truth I was horrified. Mateusz finally seized the razor from the Engineer’s hand, put the blade to his neck and hissed: “You can cut off your own dick for all I care, but keep your hands off my stuff!”

Only then did the real fight begin. It would be too long and tedious to describe – I’ll just tell you they gave each other a real beating, hitting hard and falling to the floor a few times. Luckily the razor fell on the ground too, and I got the chance to pick it up and hide it in my pocket. The two adversaries knocked over just about everything in the room: the easel, chairs, bedside table, lamp, cabinet and stool. The end was equally impressive. Mateusz picked up the Engineer like a heavy beam of wood and hurled him at the Venetian window. Can you imagine the commotion? It wasn’t just the advocate of revolution that went sailing onto the lawn from the first floor, but the window frame and a thousand slivers of glass went flying down there too.

A draught came gusting through the studio, and dozens of sheets of paper were caught up by the wind, whirling between the walls and ceiling before finally coming to land on the floor like a flock of gulls.

“Should someone who calls themselves an engineer be preaching on the subject of art?” Mateusz was standing at the basin, washing the blood from his face. “I know it’s a sign of the times: the city, the machine, the proletariat, but does it have to go that far?”

I was listening to him and not listening all at once. I was holding a sheet of paper on which a system of circles and parallel lines formed something shaped like a Christmas tree.

“Oh, that’s the Kabbalah!” said Mateusz, distinctly cheering up. “At the top you’ve got the Crown, and at the very bottom the Kingdom!”

He opened another bottle of wine and as if nothing had happened gave me an introduction to this secret knowledge.

“The column of balance is the most important one,” he said, “but even more curious is the fact that before He made the world God must have had to shrink Himself for there to be enough room. You see? For there to be enough room! But why did you tell the Engineer God isn’t there? Don’t you believe in Him? Maybe you’re an atheist?”

The conversation would probably have proved extremely interesting, if it weren’t for the fact that just then three policemen entered the studio. Who called them? Mr and Mrs Zielenko, of course. They lived underneath the studio, and their crude, secretive nature was unspeakably offended by having to live next door to artists. Resettled here straight from the countryside, they only had one hobby: more or less once a week, whenever they heard anything louder than the patter of mice or saw something that surpassed their imagination, they called the police.

“Citizen,” began the sergeant, “what’s going on in here? Making noise again?”