

REVIEWS

Jerzy Pilch, Bill Johnston (Translator). *The Mighty Angel*.
Open Letter Books; University of Nebraska Press;
First U. S. Edition (April 1, 2009). 155 pp.

To some readers, intellectual appeal may be the deciding quality of a book. To others, emotional content, whether entertaining or moving, may contribute to the cathartic experiences they cherish in literature. Others yet will seek realistic reflections on society and its ills and challenges, on human relations and interactions. And others may look for a way to sever ties between the real and the unreal, to immerse themselves in an other-worldly setting removed from their own personal experiences. For gourmets, linguistic mastery, a higher, finer skill at wielding the primary tools of human communication, is what bestows true reading pleasure.

Not to forget the option 'all of the above.'

Nike award winner Jerzy Pilch's 2000 novel *The Mighty Angel* fits all those categories. On a formal level, it delights with virtuoso use of language. Humorous non-sequiturs, contrarian attitudes, tongue-in-cheek reinterpretations of folk wisdom and of common sayings ("It's impossible to rub your face in the same snow twice. It's impossible, but maybe, goddammit, it *is* possible!" (p. 130)), and, above all, the self-deprecating humor of a frighteningly witty, not to mention delightfully bright narrator — all this has readers chuckle as they, spellbound, turn page after page in a literary hurry to indulge in more. Reading flows easily as the author plays adroitly with language in brilliantly cascading coloraturas of sophistry, arguing the lost case for addiction with as much verve as he advocates for his similarly indefensible views on controversial periods in the nation's political history.

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In other passages, especially those reflecting profound nostalgia for the good old days, atmospheric descriptions immerse the reader in images of pre-war society, including the snow-covered scenery witnessing the slow descent of Mr. J.'s grandfather into alcohol-induced madness. Dreams and the surreal are intricately woven together into reality here under the artful pretext of delirium, and the borders between them become thoroughly blurred, leaving the reader scrambling to piece together the story on a level thoroughly marred by temporal dislocations, amnesia, and distortions. Plot is replaced by descriptions. It takes second seat to the job of portraying life as it is — or at least as it appears to be many a time from a minority perspective. By giving a voice to the large yet marginalized population of addicts, Pilch argues that the points these people make are just as valid as those of the rest of society. Passage of time is marked by a sequence of regime changes for a generation that saw reversals of more than just one political fortune wreak havoc on their lives.

It is not too surprising, then, that matters of language play a central role in *The Mighty Angel*: the protagonist himself is an avowed writer, striving to turn his manifold thoughts, reflections and experiences into written words. The time he spends at the detox program is dedicated to writing, and the extensive use of metatext reflects Mr. J.'s self-conscious nature and his creative process, revealing postmodernist esthetics in its use of intertextuality of prose.

But the use of language is by far not all there is to Pilch's writing. His iconoclastic protagonist knows no restraint, his vibrant rants are a caustic satire on the prevailing political discourse, especially the one relating to the numerous vicissitudes of post-socialist transformation. In that, Mr. J. takes no prisoners; he heartily mocks all the icons of modern Poland: Solidarity, Lech Wałęsa, John Paul II, the fall of the Berlin Wall, even God and Satan themselves, whilst whimsically praising the communist status quo and, well, the glory of alcohol above all else. The free market economy is Mr. J.'s enemy since it appears deserving of blame for thwarting

his chances of meeting and marrying the presumed woman of his life whose faint glimpse he manages to catch at a distant ATM. Biblical elements are readily abused in the parable on All the Washing Machines in the World, quotes from psalms and philosophers alike are used liberally to glorify inebriating libations in the dedicated chapter on “Passages,” and God’s whimsical conversation with a patient nicknamed Simon Pure Goodness, just like the other one between the devil and Mr. J., remind the reader of Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita*. Conversely, drinking is for Mr. J. as legitimate an imperative as all the other values accepted by the world as socially proper. “I drink because I drink” (p. 60) is a central point of the protagonist’s philosophy: a self-evident truth that requires no apologetic heroics.

The Mighty Angel uses post-grotesque quite liberally. Pompous nicknames invented by the protagonist for fellow patients at the detox ward (Hero of Socialist Labor, Queen of Kent, Don Juan the Rib) only add to the silliness and hollow insignificance of those characters, especially when contrasted with a physical description of these prematurely aged human wrecks. Irony helps Mr. J. to distance himself from his own weaknesses as well as from his self-conscious creative side as he emphatically praises the virtues of a mind keenly aware of its own limitations. The use of rituals (solemn laundering and formalized preparations for another session of binge drinking) conveys a sense of structure in the chaos of an alcoholic’s life. This need for order and sobriety takes on obsessive dimensions when Mr. J. justifies breaking up with an otherwise perfect woman, Joanna Catastrophe, over her utter inability to keep keys in their place, because one of his major philosophical tenets always was that “keys should be where they’re supposed to be” (p. 24). Similarly, patient Christopher Columbus the Explorer solemnly declares that “there is no philosophy of drinking, there’s only the technique of drinking” (p. 34), a statement so abundantly quoted by the protagonist that it assumes the aura of his very personal philosophy, and may well be construed to apply equally to the other major preoccupation in Mr. J.’s life — the literary writing process.

The author's contrarian attitude is reflected in the subject of the novel itself: by tackling the social taboo of addiction and presenting it without any paternalistic condemnation, he puts a human face on the many thousands if not millions condemned by public opprobrium to an invisible life in the shadows of social marginalization. In the context of a culture where intoxication by inebriation is a social norm and where stories of one's own and other people's drunken excesses at parties are a perfectly valid topic of entertaining banter, it appears easier than it would otherwise be to cross the not even all that fine line dividing social drinking from habit and addiction. And yet, the subject matter of addiction usually continues to be hushed over in a kind of uneasy denial. Polish literature largely ignores topics such as clinical detoxification and alcoholic rehabilitation programs. By ironically arguing a person's right to an alcoholic lifestyle, Pilch sends a message to society at large, seeking to expose the true national scale of the problem and also its ubiquity across all classes and backgrounds, spanning from truck drivers to pharmacists to tenured professors and indeed virtually anyone at all.

Is it a novel worth reading for its message based on realistic social analysis, or for its entertainment value making sense for a majority of the trials and tribulations of an addictive personality? Both reasons are entirely valid, and both taken together explain the appeal of Pilch's thoroughly post-modern wisdom about a part of human nature as old as social and individual dependency itself.

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