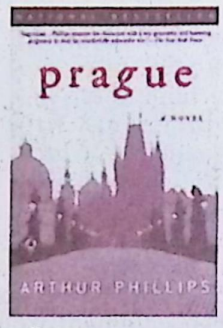
Putting the Pest in Buda

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Prague
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The first thing to be said about Prague is that its author is prodigiously gifted. The second is that it takes place not in Prague (the happening city for young westerners in 1990, the year in which it is set), but in Budapest. The joke glances off Rimbaud's line "life is elsewhere", by way of Kundera's novel of that name; but it also has a touch of Wayne's World about it (as in "Prague ... Not!") and as such is an instance of the novel's mixture of the sophisticated and the entertainingly sophomoric. It was published in America several years ago, to richly deserved acclaim, and the wonder is that it has taken so long to appear here.

The opening scene, one of many beautifully constructed set pieces, gathers its five principals at the Café Gerbeaud on a May afternoon for a game of "Sincerity", in which each player makes true and false statements, the others having to guess which is which. The game's inventor, Charles Gabor, is a cynical young venture capitalist on the prowl for easy pickings in the sell-off of state-owned industries. He has the appearance of "a 1920s dandy: long fingers, measured movements, smooth and gleaming panels of black hair, an audaciously collegiate tie, crisp pleated slacks of a favourite cotton twill, a humorously pointed nose, a sly half-smile, one eyebrow engineered for expressivity". The airy scrupulousness of that description, its hybrid tone (at once mocking and celebratory), its catalogue structure, even its little linkage of present to past, are characteristic of the writing throughout, in which a witty, well-informed intelligence is constantly at play, listing its own irrepressible flow of observations.

Around Charles sit Mark, a gay Canadian postdoctoral student researching a "history of nostalgia"; Emily, an apple-pie Nebraskan whose roommates "invariably declare her to be just the sweetest, most trustable woman in the world, not the boring girl you'd expect when you first meet her" (the ramifying wickedness of that description is also typical); a fascinatingly unpleasant health freak, Scott, who teaches English; and his irrationally loathed younger brother John, who has followed him to Budapest in the forlorn hope of a reconciliation, and fallen madly in love with Emily.

As these expats ponder each other's lies and truths in the venerable Budapest landmark (the locals head next door instead, to sample Hungary's first McDonald's), the scene deftly encrypts the basic thematic DNA of the narrative that follows: authenticity versus invention; irony versus sincerity; nostalgia, desire, the city of Budapest itself.

For the next hundred-odd pages the book simply unfolds these elements, coasting through scenes in bars, jazz clubs, bedrooms, the newspaper office where John lands a job as a columnist, and so on. No great dramatic engine propels things forward: the writing depends purely on its own flair and inventiveness, and watching the author find different ways of rising to the occasion is a part of the pleasure of reading. In keeping with a governing idea of recurrence, two or more time-frames are often spliced together, or one line of thought or action is ingeniously refracted through another. A comic classroom vignette doubles as a variation on the irony/sincerity theme as the pupils grapple with one of John's convolutedly spoofy columns on the cold war. Mark's growing obsession with nostalgia drives him into a breakdown (in one painfully funny scene, he rides a cable car up and down above the city all day in pursuit of an intense but ever-diminishing sense of engagement with the past), while also occasioning several inspired meditations on the treacherous nature of nostalgia itself.

The second part opens with an extended, exhaustive history of a Budapest publishing house. Readers who aren't enticed by such things, however suavely done, may be tempted to jump ship here, but they should resist. The book's forces regroup, this time around a major drama: Charles's attempt to get his hands on this company - a prize repository of Hungarian culture - and strip its assets. Few novelists write well about business, but the devious machinations of this plot, with its intricate financial and moral transactions, are handled expertly.

Immensely skilful as it all is, there is a certain lack of psychological depth. John, the book's central figure, is presented in several different phases of development: lovelorn swain, promiscuous sex-hound, corrupted shill for Charles. The trajectory is plausible enough, but there is little sense of what, in him, permits the changes to occur. Likewise, a couple of older characters - the grand old man at the helm of the publishing company and a stylish lady who plays jazz piano - are granted some complexity, though in the end this comes to little more than an equivocation as to whether they should be regarded as heroes of the authentic life craved by some of the younger characters, or frauds.

But if the depths are sometimes neglected, the surfaces are attended to ravishingly. A cinematic visual receptiveness prevails throughout, the characters moving in a velvety cream of detail reminiscent of Nabokov in the way it spills around the tiniest minutiae: clothes, streetscapes, shifts of light; six gorgeous lines on the effect of time on an old tile floor; dark spaces between buildings "that protected the last of the last season's snow, stubborn and horrible little leftovers precisely the shape of their patron-shadows ..." It is the cumulative force of these light, lovely touches that leaves the deepest impression. They amount to an extraordinarily vibrant picture of a city and a group of people at a moment of delicate, irreversible transition.

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