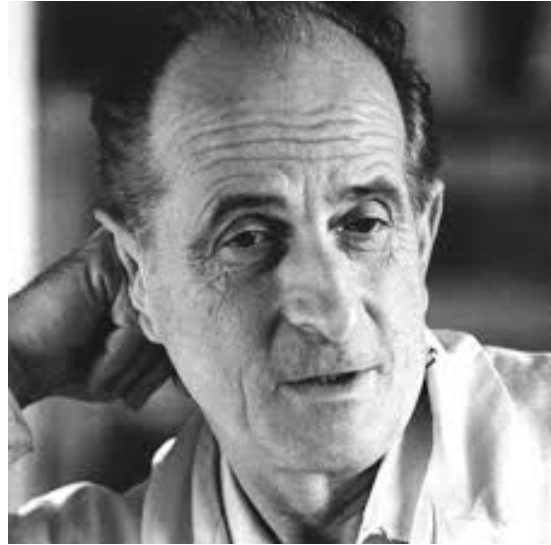


23 MIROSLAV HOLUB (MAY 2020)

Who better to stir/steer our thoughts in these sorry times than an immunologist? One who was also a poet.

Miroslav Holub, the Czech poet and scientist (or scientist and poet?) was born in western Bohemia in 1923, but he was not able to go to university until the end of the war as the Nazis closed down Czech universities during the occupation. He studied medicine at Prague and began publishing poems until he was silenced by the communist coup of 1948. Although Holub was able to continue his studies after the coup (in 1954 he joined the Institute of Biology at the Academy of Sciences) he didn't publish poetry again until the "thaw" of the late 1950s.



I must have come across some of his poems around 1976 or 77, perhaps in one of the *Touchstones* anthologies, I can't now remember where. But I was immediately hooked and curious.

Teaching in South London, I had managed to borrow from the ILEA a short film of him reading his verse. I was feeling rather proud of myself at the time because I had just been awarded my "ILEA Projection Certificate", enabling me to borrow and show films that were delivered once a week in big fat zinc tins the size of bicycle wheels, to be shown on an old-fashioned cinema-style projector, feeding filmstrip intricately over and under steel clamps and spiky cogs. This was to go alongside the textual work I was doing with pupils, who stared at my wrestling matches with winding spools of celluloid with sympathetic insouciance (teenagers are capable of this oxymoron). I felt that I was at the 'cutting edge' of modern teaching! It also meant I had to plan lessons weeks in advance (something I was not used to doing), as well as remembering to book the Projection Room.

One of the first short films I ordered was of this scientist-poet, reading (amongst others) his poem "The Corporal who killed Archimedes". The poem is a very short piece and it was read first by someone in English and then by Holub in Czech. It's *really* all about the clumsy, senseless violence inflicted by totalitarian mind-sets and you can see why it might have caused raised eyebrows in Husak's police state after the Soviet invasion in August 1968. I remember Holub reciting it off by heart with vivid pauses, and at the end with a telling, sinister note in his voice, as he pronounced the words, "Raz, dva...raz, dva...raz... **DVA!**... **raz... DVA!**" I've since looked for it on YouTube but with, as yet, no success.

(In reply Natalya Krasnova, a friend, has written very interestingly about working in a Prague bookshop and selling his (and other poets') books and she has found me a YouTube sound-clip of this recording. I am SO grateful to her!

https://voca.arizona.edu/sites/voca.arizona.edu/files/media/Holub-Miroslav_03-30-1988_4.mp3

Here is the poem:

The Corporal who killed Archimedes

With one bold stroke
he killed the circle, tangent, cotangent
and point of intersection of parallels
in infinity.

On penalty of quartering
he banned numbers
from three up.

In Syracuse now
he heads a school of philosophers
for another thousand years,
squats on his halberd
and writes:
one two
one two
one two
one two

This has a deceptively simple Orwellian *edge* to it, and there is a clarity and precision that conceals as much as it reveals. This, I think is true of a lot of his poetry. We remember that Hitler was once a corporal and he thought of himself as a philosopher.

Holub was a notable scientist working on immunology, and his humorously ironic verse gained him recognition at home during the late Fifties and Sixties. The Prague Spring occurred in 1968 and its suppression after only seven months led to his falling out of favour with the Czech authorities. His poetry then began to find an underground audience at home and more admirers internationally, particularly in Britain, where Ted Hughes and Heaney championed his poetry quite early on, eg in their joint "*Rattle Bag*" anthology of the early Eighties.

Holub's sense of absurdity and irony have something in common with a strain that runs through a lot of British poetry from Chaucer to Swift, Auden and beyond. I like him saying, "I prefer to write for people *untouched* by poetry". He was apparently "against Marxism, parapsychology, Zen, yoga, animal rights advocates, alternative medicine, Hindu gods, J. R. R. Tolkien, postgraduate mystics, California philosophers and anyone or anything either premodern or postmodern." That covers quite a lot of ground.

Well, so he was a scientist! And a well-respected immunologist. Science for him was a very different activity from poetry, but one sees cross-currents between the two. If he teaches us

anything in his verse, it is to do with clarity, precision, rationality; the poems puncture blather, pomposity, propaganda...in other words, *bullshit*, though he might never have used that term. His poetry shies away from showy rhetoric and prefers to find honesty and truth in everyday happenings. You sense a sharp eye for dissection, for observing closely and drawing deductions from what he sees. Yet he also hides from view in his poetry – he covers up the personal, the autobiographical, and there is a certain guardedness about the poems, learned almost certainly from the dangerous times amongst which he was living - and surviving.

This is, perhaps, why irony seems to be the dominant mode of his writing. There is a fine balance between his darkly funny, almost surrealistic view of humanity as absurd, and the humane and empathic vision that lies behind his poetry.

He admired Homer, whose biography was obscure. He liked science because of its anonymity. “There is no personal background given: no age, no numbers of girlfriends or wives or children,” he once said. “Nothing.”

Here are some of my favourites from those early years:

Napoleon

Children, when was
Napoleon Bonaparte born,
asks the teacher.

A thousand years ago, the children say.
A hundred years ago, the children say.
Last year, the children say.
No one knows.

Children, what did
Napoleon Bonaparte do,
asks the teacher.

Won a war, the children say.
Lost a war, the children say.
No one knows.

Our butcher had a dog
called Napoleon,
says Frantisek.
The butcher used to beat him and the dog died
of hunger
a year ago.

And all the children are now sorry
for Napoleon

And since our garden is inundated by mole invasions from the adjoining field, and I've had to learn to put up with them (I *try* to like them and to respect the fact that the planet has to be shared, and that they may well be *aerating* (??) the soil etc. etc. as they wreak their havoc on the lawns) – this poem has for me a certain *ironic* resonance.

Brief Reflection on Cats Growing in Trees

When moles still had their annual general meetings
and when they still had better eyesight it befell
that they expressed a wish to discover what was above.

So they elected a commission to ascertain what was above.
The commission dispatched a sharp-sighted fleet-footed
mole. He, having left his native mother earth,
caught sight of a tree with a bird on it.

Thus a theory was put forward that up above
birds grew on trees. However,
some moles thought this was
too simple. So they dispatched another
mole to ascertain if birds did grow on trees.

By then it was evening and on the tree
some cats were mewing. Mewing cats,
the second mole announced, grew on the tree.
Thus an alternative theory emerged about cats.

The two conflicting theories bothered an elderly
neurotic member of the commission. And he
climbed up to see for himself.
By then it was night and all was pitch-black.

Both schools are mistaken, the venerable mole declared.
Birds and cats were optical illusions produced
by the refraction of light. In fact, things above

Were the same as below, only the clay was less dense and
the upper roots of the trees were whispering something,
but only a little.

And that was that.

Ever since, the moles have remained below ground:
they do not set up commissions
or presuppose the existence of cats.

Or if so, only a little.

The next, I think, is probably one of his most well-known. It's certainly a good one for these locked-down times. We *should* try not to be too fearful of the exterior world – the world beyond and exterior to our heads. Or is it that our heads and our fertile imaginations *create* what is outside “the door”? How far have we always been locked away...?

THE DOOR

Go and open the door.
 Maybe outside there's
 a tree, or a wood,
 a garden,
 or a magic city.

Go and open the door.
 Maybe a dog's rummaging.
 Maybe you'll see a face,
 or an eye,
 or the picture
 of a picture.

Go and open the door.
 If there's a fog
 it will clear.

Go and open the door.
 Even if there's only
 the darkness ticking,
 even if there's only
 the hollow wind,
 even if
 nothing
 is there,
 go and open the door.

At least
 there'll be
 a draught.

I got hold of the superb later collection *Poems Before & After*, Bloodaxe Books 2006, though it is sadly at home in France and I'm having to write this in North Wales without my books to hand. However, one of the joys of the internet is to discover even more of his poems and more about him.

Here below is an interesting one I didn't know, on “Creative Writing” – that mysterious PROCESS that all aspiring writers aim for (and that staple cash provider for lesser writers, usually, who are signed up in droves to teach it in universities). Miroslav Holub's ‘take’ on this is as ambiguous and slippery as is his ‘take’ on most things. Here we also have an

accompanying comment from the translator, which is an added bonus. Holub must, I think, be easier to translate than most foreign poets, as his words, if not his thoughts, are always crystal clear.

Creative Writing

On the express train to Vienna
she writes in her diary
notes about Rome and Naples.

Ink marks like parthenogenetic aphids,
pages like blood smears
of homing pigeons.

She is alone, gray, reconciled,
a Leda long after the swan's departure,
Odysseus retired at Lotophagitis.

Back home, in Maryland,
the notebook will be interred
in the archetypal drawer,

among the yellowed love letters,
among the infant hair curls,
among the dried adult flowers,

near the cushion where the castrated cat dreams
while Mahler's *forever forever forever*
chokes in the green wallpaper.

It is her message to imagined little sons;
it is her membership in the club
of Swifts, Goethes, Rimbauds, Horaces and
deathwatch beetles.

It is her monument outlasting bronze,
five-dimensional reality, the last engraving
of primeval man on reindeer bone,

the last drop
of the fluid soul
before evaporation.

Translator's Note: "Creative Writing" by Miroslav Holub
BY REBEKAH BLOYD

Here we have Miroslav Holub's stomping grounds: science, culture, history, and their undeniable entwining. Here, parthenogenetic aphids—whose females procreate without male fertilization—

illuminate human behavior. And here, a weary academic term is resuscitated and revisioned: creative writing as a necessary, death-defying act.

In this case, my role as translator was to polish the English as provided by Holub. On several occasions over sixteen years, we were a translation team, considering together his incisive essays and poems. We were at work on this poem, among others, in the weeks preceding his unexpected death in his Prague home (where, not so incidentally, along with contemporary Czech art, enormous plastic ants climbed the walls and dinosaurs roamed a living-room mural).

Having experienced Holub's generosity regarding word choice, I chose the ceremonial, earthy "interred" over the original, neutral "put up." The notebook will begin its decay and, over time, those ink marks will feed another living soul, be it beetle or boy. Initially, I found it curious that Holub decided to forgo "ewig" from the final movement of "Das Lied von der Erde" since this refined traveler was surely equipped with German. For the reader or listener of the poem in English, however, the three syllables of forever stretch nicely (and, fortunately, avoid the comic echo "earwig"!).

Holub presents a person who aspired to permanence and, perhaps, epic proportions but failed. Or did she? As forecast by the ticking beetles, her end draws near. But in the poem she writes. Present tense. The fluid soul continues.

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At the risk of tiring you, I shall just continue a little further simply to set down some of my "trouvailles". I don't feel they need much commentary – the style is direct and succinct. Not all of them have been easy to find and, at the risk of *copyright wrath*, I'm pleased to be able to set them down here.

Casualty

They bring us crushed fingers,
mend it, doctor.
 They bring burnt-out eyes,
 hounded owls of hearts,
 they bring a hundred white bodies,
 a hundred red bodies,
 a hundred black bodies,
mend it, doctor,
 on the dishes of ambulances they bring
 the madness of blood,
 the scream of flesh,
 the silence of charring,
mend it, doctor.

And while we are suturing
 inch after inch,
 night after night,
 nerve to nerve,
 muscle to muscle,
 eyes to sight,
 they bring in
 even longer daggers,
 even more dangerous bombs,
 even more glorious victories,

 idiots.

The next is perhaps my personal favourite. It was one of the first of his poems I came across and has been much anthologised, and rightly so. For me, it sums up his approach to life – and death. It has a view of man’s place, in the world and in the ‘historical process’, but it also pays attention to all of nature. We often talk of a “worm’s eye view” – well, here is a fly’s eye view. It’s also funny – or is it?

The Fly

TRANSLATED BY GEORGE THEINER

She sat on a willow-trunk
 watching
 part of the battle of Crécy,
 the shouts,
 the gasps,
 the groans,
 the trampling and the tumbling.

During the fourteenth charge
 of the French cavalry
 she mated
 with a brown-eyed male fly
 from Vadincourt.

She rubbed her legs together
 as she sat on a disembowelled horse
 meditating
 on the immortality of flies.

With relief she alighted
 on the blue tongue
 of the Duke of Clervaux.

When silence settled
 and only the whisper of decay
 softly circled the bodies

and only
 a few arms and legs
 still twitched jerkily under the trees,

she began to lay her eggs
 on the single eye
 of Johann Uhr,
 the Royal Armourer.

And thus it was
 that she was eaten by a swift
 fleeing
 from the fires of Estrées.

Here is another lovely one I read recently for the first time. Is this typical Czech humour, I wonder? There is a certain, almost fatalistic shrug of the shoulders. Flies don't live long, even though they may have "immortality". We can change some things, but (owing largely to human stupidity) there is a lot we can't. So, you may as well laugh at it all.

One of my favourite books in my teens was "*The Good Soldier Schweik*" by Jaroslav Hasek. It's a sort of Czech 'Monty Pythonesque' romp through the First World War – very funny, with a hero who is as 'stupid' as they come, but his obtuseness only highlights, with dark irony, the stupidity of the 'authorities' who are conducting this absurd war. I hear a similar strain of ironic and absurdist humour in Holub.

Brief reflection on accuracy

Fish
 always accurately know where to move and when,
 and likewise
 birds have an accurate built-in time sense
 and orientation.

Humanity, however,
 lacking such instincts resorts to scientific
 research. Its nature is illustrated by the following
 occurrence.

A certain soldier
had to fire a cannon at six o'clock sharp every evening.
Being a soldier he did so. When his accuracy was
investigated he explained:

I go by
the absolutely accurate chronometer in the window
of the clockmaker down in the city. Every day at seventeen
forty-five I set my watch by it and
climb the hill where my cannon stands ready.
At seventeen fifty-nine precisely I step up to the cannon
and at eighteen hours sharp I fire.

And it was clear
that this method of firing was absolutely accurate.
All that was left was to check that chronometer. So
the clockmaker down in the city was questioned about
his instrument's accuracy.

Oh, said the clockmaker,
this is one of the most accurate instruments ever. Just imagine,
for many years now a cannon has been fired at six o'clock sharp.
And every day I look at this chronometer
and always it shows exactly six.

Chronometers tick and cannon boom.

And how about this for *very* grim humour about an 'everyday' occurrence, but then spiralling outwards?

Collision

To think I might have been dead,
he said to himself, ashamed, as if this were
a curse of the heart, raising a bundle of bones
to a man's height. As if it were suddenly
forbidden to touch even words that had dropped to the ground.
Besides, he was afraid of finding
his body in a metal press. Embarrassing
down to the capillaries.

The tram stood jammed above him
like an icebreaker's prow and all that was left of the car
was a grotesque pretzel with a chunk bitten off
by the dentures of a demented angel.
Something dark was dripping on the rails,
and a strikingly pale wind was leafing
through a book still warm.

People were forming a circle and with deaf-mute
 sympathy awaited the play's catharsis,
 like maggots emerging from
 under the wings of a beheaded chicken.

From afar came the approaching wail of sirens,
 congealing in the jinxed air-conditioning of that day
 and that minute. Dewdrops were falling
 on the back of the neck like remnants of
 atmospheric dignity. Embarrassing down to the capillaries.

No, thank you, he said, I'll wait;
 for a silent film had started to run
 without subtitles, without colour and without answers.

And what about the magnetic monopoles
 escaping seconds after the Big Bang,
 protons violating the irreversibility of the flow of time?

What about the giant molecular clouds
 under the galaxy's shoulders, conceiving
 the embryos of stars?

What about the loneliness of the first genes
 accumulating amino acids in shallow primeval pools
 at the expense of entropic usurers?

What about the desiccated starfish
 like proto-eagles' talons dug into the bed
 of a vanishing sea?

What about the mortal migrations of birds
 observing the sun's inclination
 and the roar of sex hormones?

What about the caged half-crazed
 orang-utan who vomits because
 he has nothing else to do?

What about the mice which for a thousand years
 have learned to sing and the frogs balancing
 on one leg like the thigh
 of a beauty queen from Mesopotamia?

What about poetry, an enterprise
 so disorderly it twists the rulers
 and increases the squint of school inspectors?

And what about the little girl
 in the leukemia ward who, on the toilet,
 tried to show what kind of moustache the kind doctor has,
 but as her skinny sticks of hands let go of
 the edge of the bowl, she falls in and so
 tried again and again?

And what about the weak-kneed intellectual,
 the professor who understood the approximate universe
 but forgot the traffic rules?

No, thank you, he said to some uniform,
 I don't need anything. My papers are in my pocket
 but I can't reach there. And he tried
 to smile a little at this embarrassment of complicated creation.
 It's all my fault, he said,
 thank you.

And then he died.

And I leave you with this last one – again, a new one for me and very much one for the virus-stricken times we are living in. His images tease uncomfortably. The words are clear enough, but the meanings stray nebulously, evoking – here – west-coast America in the throes of the AIDS epidemic, but linked outwards to nature, from where viruses emerge. The purity of music is tainted by the humanity of the musicians composing and playing it. Music has a journey, as has the coursing of our blood. The phrases “velvet hum of the disease” and “praise of non-clotting” near the end are disturbing and ambiguous. We *are* our blood, and blood flows unceasingly in our bodies, just as music flows. Clotting acts to stem this stream (which saves us from death) – but that clotting (from one point of view) only temporarily *stops* the flow, halts the deadly music of our bodies, which are set on a journey where blood will stop somewhere, one day, anyway.

It makes me want to get hold of his final collection of poems, “Vanishing Lung Syndrome”. I found this on the internet somewhere and I cannot be absolutely certain of its format – but what the hell, it's unmistakably Holub.

“Haemophilia/Los Angeles,”

From his final collection “Vanishing Lung Syndrome,” translated by David Young and Dana Habova (Faber & Faber, 1990)

Filtered Through a Scientist's Eye
 And so it circulates
 from the San Bernardino Freeway
 to the Santa Monica Freeway and
 down to the San Diego Freeway and
 up to the Golden State Freeway,

and so it circulates
in the vessels of the marine creature,
transparent creature,
unbelievable creature in the light
of the southern moon
like the footprint
of the last foot in the world,
and so it circulates
as if there were no other music
except Perpetual Motion,
as if there were no conductor
directing an orchestra of black angels
without a full score:
out of the grand piano floats
a pink C-sharp in the upper octave,
out of the violin
blood may trickle at any time,
and in the joints of the trombone
there swells a fear of the tiniest staccato,
as if there were no Dante
in a wheelchair,
holding a ball of cotton to his mouth,
afraid to speak a line
lest he perforate the meaning,
as if there were no genes
except the gene for defects
and emergency telephone calls,
and so it circulates
with the full, velvet hum of the disease,
circulates all hours of the day,
circulates all hours of the night
to the praise of non-clotting,
each blood cell carrying
four molecules of hope
that it might all be something
totally different
from what it is.