

Trees, Woods and Literature – 38

The Forest

Among the primary rocks
where the bird spirits
crack the granite seeds
and the tree statues
with their black arms
threaten the clouds,

suddenly
there comes a rumble,
as if history
were being uprooted,

the grass bristles
boulders tremble,
the earth's surface cracks

and there grows
a mushroom,

immense as life itself,
filled with billions of cells
immense as life itself,
eternal, watery,

appearing in this world for the first
and last time.

This poem appears in *Selected Poems* by Miroslav Holub¹ (1923-98). Born in Pilsen, Western Bohemia in former Czechoslovakia (now Czech Republic), Holub had a remarkable career as a poet, essayist and scientist.

He studied medicine at Charles University, Prague after World War II. Initially, Holub worked in a psychiatric ward in Prague and began his clinical research when he turned 30, about the time he began writing poetry. In 1990 he was appointed Head of Immunology in Prague Institute for Clinical and Experimental Medicine.

“While the combination of poetry and science is not unprecedented” observed

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Alfred Alvarez (Holub 1967) “what makes Holub so unusual is his distinction in both fields”. When asked how he managed to reconcile these two callings, Holub, while acknowledging the “uneasy relationship” between science and poetry said: “I have a single goal but two ways to reach it...I apply them both in turn. Poetry and science form the basis of my experience” (Ibid.).

It is impossible to discuss Holub’s poetry without reference to the political climate under which he lived in Russian-controlled post-World War II Czechoslovakia. He worked, seemingly unfettered, as an immunologist for much of this period and has been criticised for not speaking out against communism. Andrew Motion (2004) regarded this criticism as unfair. “After the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968, he was sacked from his job in the Microbiological Institute, and his books were banned,” Motion maintained.

However, Motion admits that Holub came under pressure from the regime and did eventually relent which “caused dismay among former colleagues, who felt that he had betrayed his liberal beliefs”. Sarah Boxer (1998) understood his plight and struggle;

Shortly after the Prague Spring of 1968, Mr. Holub became a “nonperson” in Czechoslovakia. Any mention of his work was forbidden. And none of his poetry was published there between 1970 and 1980. During that period, Mr. Holub continued to work as an immunologist in Prague, but he also wrote poetry ‘to the table,’ a Russian phrase meaning for an underground audience.

Alvarez (1967) acknowledged that his poems were “sharply against the establishment” but in truth, Holub found his own voice – and his own way – of dealing with the “the big traumas of his time” as Motion (2004) observed: “...rather than approaching these things head-on, he broadened their significance by subtleties – by wry humour, by stoicism, and by moving very rapidly from the actual to the symbolic.”

Seamus Heaney (1988), who was an admirer of Holub, touched on this aspect of his work in a paper that revolved around *Sagittal Section: Poems New and Selected* (1980), Holub’s first book published in the United States. “It has in it all the worn-down truth-to-life of the disillusioned man, but it also has a contrary and heartening vision of a possible good based upon stoicism about decencies and impulses in the usual life. It is at once down to earth and wide open”.

Although nature and landscape frequently appear in his poems, Holub eschewed romanticism and sentimentality as he demonstrates in *The End of the World* (1990):

The bird had come to the very end of its song
and the tree was dissolving under its claws.

And in the sky the clouds were twisting
and darkness flowed through all the cracks
into the sinking vessel of the landscape.

In *The Forest* he probes the undergrowth to create a great nature poem. He even creates a sound to describe an event that is silent in essence but needing resonance – “a rumble” – to remind us of what we take for granted. The scientist and poet in him fuse to describe this moment of startling beauty as the mushroom emerges (“immense as life itself / filled with billions of cells”).

He captures a moment of creation but as in many of his poems, his ending – “for the first and last time” – catches the reader off guard. It is abrupt and unnerving, but as Heaney (1988) observed [he] “finds an image of his truth-telling responsibilities as scientist and artist”.

On another level it may be a reference to the “embattled Communist Party vision of the world reduced to microscopic dimensions” (Holub 1967), which coloured poems such as *Pathology* and *In the Microscope*. From whatever level the reader approaches *The Forest*, it is “poetry in which intelligence and irony make their presence felt without displacing delight and the less acerbic wisdoms” (Heaney 1988). In *The Forest* – as in so many of his poems – “science and poetry become two ways of looking at the same reality, differing only in technique” (Holub 1967).

Heaney (1988) described Holub as a poet “in pursuit of the ‘fully exposed poem’” and he shares Alvarez’s view that his poems are always inventive, experimental and “eager to tell truths about the nature of reality”;

They brim with inventiveness and are driven by a logic generated out of the friction between two contradictory, equally commanding truths: annihilation is certain and therefore all human endeavour is futile – annihilation is certain and therefore all human endeavour is victorious.

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2014

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