

The Portrayal of the United States of Miroslav Holub's Writing From the 1960s¹

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Miroslav Holub entered the world of literature in the middle of the 1940s with his diary notes from a scout's camp poem "A Remembrance of a Forest Camp" ("Vzpomínka na lesní tabor") and poetry published in the *Svobodné noviny* newspaper. Immediately afterwards his work appeared in two anthologies which were published in 1947 by the Ohnice group. He was a guest during an evening event organized by this group in the autumn of 1947 in Prague, as part of the series called "Young Literature" (Mladá literatura). Here, the Ohnice group claimed the legacy of Jiří Orten's poetry and in connection to its works it often used the term existentialism. Kamil Bednář gave Holub a start in literature.

In 1948, Holub still published one poem in the magazine *Kytice* but February 1948 changed the situation of Czech literature. All art groups were dissolved and only the official creative, interpreting method was declared socialistic realism and the only intellectual movement became Marxism-Leninism. Holub prepared a collection of poems called "Here" (Zde) for publication in 1949 and he received a prize from the from the Klostermann's Fund in Pilsen, yet the book was never published. Instead of writing poetry he devoted himself to research activities and in 1954 he printed several schematic poems corresponding to the poetry of the first half of the 1950s. One of them was about a little delicate flower which had so much power that it managed to smash a stone and the poem ended with verses: "And when even a flower can destroy rocks, / why wouldn't we smash them!" Similarly, it was put in another poem, "When I See the Work" (Když vidím dílo) which portrayed building a socialistic society: "When I see all people with their faces sweating, / oh, it is you, oh, you it is, / when I see the work being a success, / feeling blissful, I know – we are growing!" The poem "Sparrows" (Vrabci) was for once directed against exiles (from the text implication it was obvious that it was against those who had left for exile after February 1948). Holub compared sparrows with a desire for the native soil and with faithfulness: "They don't know anything about a foreign country, / they're freezing, nosing around and chirping. // How many songs has the local land, / the sparrows' one – that is the most faithful."

Research activities of Miroslav Holub became evident in the middle of the 1950s in his papers and technical notes. Ideology was already penetrating when he wrote about the 6th Microbiological Congress held in Rome in September 1953, he assumed a sceptical position towards the discovery of American scientists. In an article about the effects of an atom bomb he evoked man's atrocious experience of the atom bomb explosion in Hiroshima. However, using concepts significant in the period he branded the American nuclear research as "the way into a nuclear chasm" and as "prosecution of the old society".

Holub is, above all, known as an author from a circle of authors around magazine *Květen* which came out in the second half of the 1950s. He is the author of the text "Our Ordinary Day is the Land" (Náš všední den je pevnina) which was classified as a program of so-called poetry of

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an ordinary day, although he himself denied it. In this article he tried to formulate the problems of modern art which was reminiscent of the endeavour of Jindřich Chalupecký and authors from Skupina 42 (Kolář, Blatný, Kainar, Hauková, Hanč or artists Hudeček, Gross, Zívr, Matal and others). Contrary to Skupina 42, attempting to discover a new reality, to find a relation with it and to newly express this reality, Holub and some other authors from the *Květen* magazine were primarily concerned about the reaction to the schematic work of the previous period, i.e., the first half of the 1950s, which they created (Šotola, Šiktanc, Florian, Červenka and Holub himself). The way was supposed to be a return to the concreteness which they sought in a humdrum, day-to-day and ordinary life, again – as already other artists before them – they endeavoured to reflect in their works a seemingly non-poetic environment (suburbs, battered houses, courtyard galleries, a town at half past five in the morning when people on trams are travelling to work etc.) In contrast with Skupina 42, they were also concerned about an optimistic expression; joyful, cheerful and so optimistic that even his “Obituary” (Parte) was supposed to be an optimistic poem, as Holub demanded. An active and optimistic relationship with objects resulted, according to Holub, from living and working experience and from youth. By this he not only meant a person's youth but also the youth of society. “A person free of pessimism and optimism is eventually optimistic when they have at least a little hope. And we have reasons aplenty.” Holub refused the sadness of a mundane day of Langston Hughes; he stood for the existence of an optimistic, run-of-the-mill day as he found hope everywhere.

Miroslav Holub's endeavour to achieve a symbiosis of art and science was a specific issue in his work. He attempted to prove in his several articles that art and science were very close. As a poet and a scientist he was particularly interested in facts. A look into a microscope evoked an aesthetic experience in Holub. As a scientist, writing papers, he wanted to pay attention to expression, and as a poet he strove to achieve the most possible concise expression. He matched both activities. He found in them something identical or, at least, similar. According to him, art and science should mainly help people to become better, humanize them and give them optimism. Both areas should, according to Holub, be synthesized, which, at that time, he missed precisely in art. “The task of art is to depict the whole of the world,” he wrote in the article “What Is True in Literature” (Co je pravda v literatuře), which had been in progress in Czechoslovakia prior to the 3rd Congress of the Czech and Slovak Writers in 1963.

At the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, Holub's enthusiasm for science as the main possibility to enhance a human being received a great impulse: it was the launch of a satellite into orbit and the flight of the first human being into space. Holub became included among tens of artists who attempted to deal with this topic in their work. The proof thereof lay in his poems and journalistic texts in which Gagarin became a modern Icarus, a space conqueror, a person who had pushed the boundaries of science and technology a step further – and thus contributed a great deal towards, as Holub proclaimed, greater humanization of an individual in general, however mostly, of those who were members of a socialistic society.

Soon after Gagarin's flight into space Holub managed to visit the US. His reports were initially published as a magazine series in 1962; for the first time they were published in book form in 1963 and then they came out three more times as a book during the 1960s. *Angel on Wheels* (Anděl na kolečkách), as the book was called, became one of the most frequently

published Czech reportage books after World War II. The reporting genre had been favoured in Czechoslovakia already in the 1950s – it was supposed to fulfil one of the slogans of socialistic realism: the portrayal of current reality. Reporting was thought to come out of reality and thus it should almost automatically guarantee the truthfulness of a work of art. On the brink of the 1950s and 1960s, the reporting genre came back to art literature and it was something similar to that of ten years' earlier: i.e., the return to reality following a false coverage of the image of the world, a world of joy, mutual help and, happiness. Hence, a publishing division, called Life Around Us (*Život kolem nás*), was founded in 1959 by the publishing house *Československý spisovatel*. The name indicated that this division was meant to publish books dedicated to contemporary life and, moreover, books written using a realistic method. This intention did not last for long as art reporting was soon superseded by, above all, shorter prosaic genres (short stories and novellas) which were published here. This tendency was even intensified after the founding of a so-called small series at the Life Around Us division in 1963 (here, the storybooks and novellas of Milan Kundera, Bohumil Hrabal, Jiří Fried, Josef Jedlička, Vladimír Körner, Ivan Klíma, Jan Trefulka, Josef Škvorecký, Alexandr Kliment, Petr Pujman or Karol Sidon came out during the 1960s. They were books which had already nothing in common with the original intent of the division). Holub's book *Angel on Wheels* carried an unusual genre announcement in its subtitle – a semi-reportage. It was not a classic book report for the author sought in it the essence of America not only its form. He went through two roles: tourist and scientist. There was some ambivalence apparent in the former. On one hand, he was fascinated by the United States. It was not so much a matter of admiration as a fascination which begins when he landed and continues by the subsequent floods of lights of New York. It further continues by describing a huge number of highways and roads which link towns and cities and are themselves the picture of life in the US. A car is something which is taken for granted; something which belongs to the American life that often does not recognise the slightest journey on foot – except walking to the car itself. A labyrinth of towns and large cities is also a large part of Holub's fascination: "Brooklyn is plus/minus infinity." Department stores are over packed with goods that one gets almost lost in them. On the other hand, he finds it difficult to find the cities' inhabitants. They disappear in never-ending queues of bumper to bumper cars, on motorways or moving very slowly. Above all he sees poor and disabled people, for example bootblacks: "Boys sit with boxes under their arms, along 6th Avenue in New York and along 34th Street, as well as in Memphis, Chicago and San Diego. And men sit by boxes, their backs leaning against walls, their eyes on passing shoes. And old men and the disabled sit by the underground." He refuses, however, to come to terms with the existence of private property, in particular, private land, where he wants to stop and examine a house or lace up his shoes.

As a scientist he admires the US. He begins with the outlay on science and research, continues with equipment in, for example, the pathology laboratory of New York University and closes with a surprising discovery that syringes here are made of plastic and not glass and after use are disposed of. His admiration is concentrated into a sentence: "The world is made so that even the silly syringe is an image of America." Holub also fairly fluently crossed over from his admiration for the Soviet cosmic research to the American research. Live television coverage of John Glenn's flight into space was a huge experience for him. Until then he was excited only by Gagarin's flight. "Ball-shaped fire exploded under the rocket, the rocket somehow lifted, it was silence like after the birth of the world, our eyes were fixed on a little pinhead in the tip of the

rocket, we felt somehow very strongly about what a man is and the rocket was rising with difficulty, (...) it was ascending vehemently and irreversibly like the world's history, (...) it was announced that the cockpit reached the orbit and everybody took a breath of relief, as if it had been announced that Glenn had come home for lunch.”

At the end of the first release of his book *Angel on Wheels*, Holub included a passage which somewhat lessened his admiration for science and engineering. It appears that it was a text almost compulsorily inserted during that period. The US was reduced to a country of objects, real estate, beautiful but too many unnecessary things, an abundance of food and sex, a country of business enterprises that according to the author, does not allow for dealing with the problems of an individual person or society. The book was similarly interpreted by literary critics of that period, who read it as a criticism of a capitalistic society. Fifteen years after February 1948 it was no longer possible to label the US with the same negative expressions as in the 1950s. Some reviewers saw in Holub's book a new opportunity how to newly express antagonism towards the US: to interpret the US as an “over-technological” society without a spirit. Milan Jungmann (in a review “When a Poet Writes a Report”, published in *Literární noviny* number 25, (1963), for example, wrote: “It is not a guide to landmarks and sights of this large and complex country, it is not a collection of statements and statistical data nor is it a bombardment from the other side of the barricade of today's world. And still, you learn about America very much. Jungmann still adhered to approaching literature as a tool in an ideological conflict, even a fight, by means of which “one must hit those who do not agree”. Jungmann interpreted the conclusion of Holub's book as an impulse for praise to socialistic society because a person's problems can only be solved by a society originating from the collective concept, “to wit, a social community, a society organized on the grounds of scientific socialism.” The American technological progress had separated, according to him, from the development of a human spirit and social progress. This corresponded with Holub's famous pun that “in Czechoslovakia we are always at least one hour ahead of the West in terms of the time zones.”

In the 1960s Holub revised his opinion of the US in his stories in newspapers and in his book *To Live in New York*, published in 1969. Holub had revisited the United States, worked there for a longer period of time and also wrote for local periodicals. For example, for *Revue Delos* in Houston he wrote the text *The Meaning and Boundary of Translation* (Význam a hranice překladu). In an interview for magazine *Literární listy*, which was published in June 1968, his criticism of the beginning of the 1960s changed: he conveyed substantially more reservations towards the society in Czechoslovakia than towards the one in the US. He was concerned not only about the difference in the living standard, which was still very high, but also about the way people in Czechoslovakia approached work, about bureaucracy, indifference etc. which would not be solved with clichés about a perfect socialistic society. Holub recognized the freedom of speech in the US and in parallel he made reference to the repression of freedom and culture in Czechoslovakia. He compared his return from the US to Czechoslovakia to travelling in time: “It is like to travel from 1967 to 1930 plus. (...) Towns, cleanliness, correctness, style and purchase power all diminish. Darkness in the streets and entertaining false hopes are the first and most obvious encounters in our country.”

In his book *To Live in New York* (*Žít v New Yorku*) Holub had an opposite view from book *Angel on Wheels*, where, the ideological ending showed that a socialistic society was more advanced than the American one because technology did not lead to anything but dehumanization and a lack of interest in human beings. In the very beginning of his second book he speaks about a high living standard in New York and the whole United States and points out that one has to see any hardship or grievance in the context of a high living standard. Holub discovers the principle of a town; he expands his observations from his previous book *Angel on Wheels* here and his fascination and admiration ascend, criticism occurs infrequently. He pays more attention to art; he concerns himself with theatres and their productions, visits a performance of Salvador Dalí, film performances and gets to know the work of author members of the Beat Generation.

Yet again, he attempts to find an ordinary New Yorker, a person with concerns, who is living in poverty; he is interested in the dark side of a town, similarly to what he did in poetry in the 1950s where he depicted a town's periphery. The United States environment is, among Holub's concerns, most present in a book called *Concrete* (Beton) which was published in 1970 with the subtitle *Verses from New York and Prague* (Verše z New Yorku a Prahy). He depicts the life of a city; Rockefeller Center shows an old man crossing 5th Avenue on a red light, East River Drive personified by cars, Park Avenue by ten thousand glass eyes. Holub copies graffiti from walls which make part of his poetry and follows Jiří Kolář, who seeks new methods of creation, a new relation with reality. Holub calls such poems “found poetry” and he uses news from the *New York Times*, for his poems. Kolář used an identical term – “found poems and cakes”; they originated equally, also in an urban environment, as in the case of Holub. Kolář expressed this, among others: “They are the salt of urban folklore. (...) Forgeries of all kind belong to them. (...) Fifty years manage to bury a poem as well as to render an ordinary thing a poem.” (Philippe Soupault used the designation “poems rediscovered”, in French *Poèmes retrouvés*, for poems from 1918 to 1981 collected in a book published in 1982. As opposed to Holub and Kolář, who found poetry in newspapers, using mainly their own writings for creating a new context for known works of art or for everyday ordinary displays, Soupault rediscovered his own poems.) Holub also finds poetry in ordinary things, in newspaper news and in graffiti, for example: “Lie down, I think I love you.” Or: “Be economic with water, have a shower with a partner.” Or: “Death is a way nature warns you to slow down.”

Although Holub did not include any “American” poem in his collection *Sagittal Cut* (Sagitální řez), [1988], he included one of them in two other collections: the poem “Freedom” (Svoboda) is in the collection *Concrete* and also in Holub's last published collection *Birth of Sisyfos* (Narození Sisyfovo) [1998]. Although the latter book contains poems from 1989 to 1997, it also features the almost 30 year old poem “Freedom”: “At a vertiginous height / on a perpendicular water level / skyscraper / celestial flag. // Through the middle of the road / is coming jerking / a poliomyelitis-stroked boy / on roller skates, / pushing off / by only one leg, / the one without a prosthesis.” The contrast between the skyscraper and the jerking movement of the crippled boy is the clash between the technology, civilization advancement on the one hand and a particular human fate on the other. The talk here does not have to be about ideology and still it is possible to pronounce the suffering of the existence which is, however, lightened by the possibility of movement of the disabled boy. The freedom of a skyscraper's elevation, the freedom of a flying flag and the freedom of a human being's motion constitute a symbiosis of the

modern world. The United States provided Holub a forum for various topics. A European is a person of historical experience and an American is a person concerned with the present time. Holub knows the roots of the former very well and he learns about the image of the latter from living in the US. While the former is settled down, the latter is in motion which is his/her nature. He tries to portray an individual human fate everywhere. From excerpts of such common day events, he composes a portrayal of the contemporary world and its inhabitants.