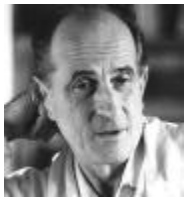
David Grayson

The Poet-Scientist: The Poetry of Miroslav Holub



IN 1996, Miroslav Holub gave a reading at the University of San Francisco. He opened the reading with a joke. "I'm a poet-scientist," he declared. "Do you know the difference between a poet and a poet-scientist?" The crowd waited. "A poet is usually late; a poet-scientist always arrives on time."[1]

Holub was born in 1923 in Pilsen (in what was then Czechoslovakia). His father worked as a lawyer for the railways and his mother was a language teacher.[2] Holub lived through the Nazi occupation, the Communist period, and the Velvet Revolution. During the Nazi occupation, all universities were closed and Holub was conscripted to work at a railway station.[3] Holub also suffered significant retaliation for engaging in reformist activities during Communist rule (as will be discussed below).

Besides a renowned career as a poet and literary essayist, Holub was also a distinguished immunologist (M.D. and Ph.D.). He was an editor of the scientific journal *Vesmír* (*"The Universe"*) and worked for many years at the Microbiological Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Science. He published over a hundred and fifty scientific papers, and he even developed a strain of hairless mice that were used to study various diseases.[4]

I.

Asking questions is a hallmark of science, and Holub's poems are stubbornly inquiring. He asks

questions about everything, from genes, to disease, to fate. For Holub, asking a question is a first step:

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.[5]

As a scientist, Holub is concerned not only with asking questions, but also with methodology: *how* we try to answer those questions. In "Brief Reflection on Cats Growing on Trees," Holub describes how a kingdom of moles investigated the unknown world above ground.

They elected a committee to supervise the project.
  This committee
  sent up a quick and clever mole who, when he
    left the motherland
  underground, spotted a bird sitting in a tree.

And so a theory was established; up there birds
  are growing on trees.[6]

Holub cautions against easy or obvious answers. His background as a scientist compels him to make the reader acutely aware of the challenges of science and of seeking knowledge. For example, in "Brief Reflection on Accuracy," Holub relates how two local timekeepers—one a clock maker and the other a soldier who fires a cannon at "six o'clock sharp" each day—unwittingly rely on each other for an authoritative time standard.[7] Also, he notes how slow and piecemeal intellectual progress can prove. In "Brief Reflection on the Theory of Relativity," the French poet and *penseur* Paul Valéry asks Einstein how he approaches new ideas. The renowned physicist replies:

  Monsieur Valéry, in our business
  ideas are so rare that
  if a man hits upon one
  he certainly won't forget it.[8]

Beyond the inherent limits of science, constraints are imposed externally, too. As a survivor of both the Nazi occupation and Communist governance, Holub is acutely aware how politics can enmesh honest and open inquiry. Indeed, Holub had personal experience with the practice of government control. During Communist rule, Holub chose not to join the Communist party; he also, as mentioned, participated in reformist activities. The repercussions of these decisions were significant. He was fired from his position at the Microbiological Institute, his books were banned for many years, and his travel abroad was restricted. He had to issue a public apology in order to work at even a junior position.[9]

These personal experiences suffuse his poetry with a hypersensitivity to authority. In "Žito the Magician," for example, Žito is able to do everything the king requests: "To amuse His Royal Majesty he will change water into wine. Frogs into footmen. Beetles into bailiffs." However, when Žito is asked to "think up sine alpha greater than one," Žito cannot do it, explaining that "sine is between plus one and minus one." [10] Like Žito, Holub sticks to proofs. A friend and translator of Holub's poetry, David Young noted: "He viewed science and reason as antidotes to Communism. He put his faith in facts and was critical of all expressions of irrationality."[11]

II.

Although the spectrum of challenges can be discouraging, our survival as a species depends upon our study of the world. Equally important, there is pleasure to be derived from overcoming obstacles; this is the very heart of the scientific quest. Describing Holub's approach, the physician and essayist Lewis Thomas writes that scientists and poets look for "the points of connection between things in the world which seem to most people unconnected."[12] Indeed, Holub revels in this role—seeing new worlds through the lens of a microscope:

> Here too are dreaming landscapes,
> lunar, derelict.
> Here too are the masses
> tillers of the soil.[13]

Holub saw no contradiction between science and poetry. He remarked, “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.”[14] As Mary Karr notes, he thrived at the nexus of art and science.[15]

Indeed, Holub adores learning of any kind. For instance, he lauds his elderly mother studying Spanish.

She started at the age
of eighty-two. She falls asleep
each time, page 26.
Algo se trama.[16]

It is because of such perseverance that Holub has faith in humanity. Despite everything, we retain our capacity to adapt and progress in the face of challenges from each other and the natural world.

But above all
we have
the ability
to sort peas,
to cup water in our hands,
to seek
the right screw
under the sofa
for hours

This
gives us
wings.[17]

Notes

[1] Miroslav Holub, poetry reading at the University of San Francisco, 1996. Note: This quote is taken from notes by the author at the reading.

[2] Sarah Boxer, “Miroslav Holub is Dead at 74; Czech Poet and Immunologist,” *The New York Times* (July 22, 1998).

[3] Darran Anderson, "The Eurekist: In Praise of Miroslav Holub," *dogmatika*. http://dogmatika.com/dm/features_more.php?id=3281_0_5_0_M.

[4] Boxer, op. cit.

[5] Miroslav Holub, *Intensive Care: Selected and New Poems*, Field Translation Series 22 (Ohio: Oberlin College Press, 1996), page16. Poem translated by George Theiner.

[6] Ibid, 100. Poem translated by Stuart Friebert and Dana Hábová.

[7] Ibid, 102. Poem translated by Ewald Osers.

[8] Ibid, 104. Poem translated by Ewald Osers.

[9] Jan Culík and Jirí Holy, "Miroslav Holub." University of Glasgow Slavonic Studies. http:// www.arts.gla.ac.uk/Slavonic/Holub.htm.

[10] Daniel Weissbort (ed.), *The Poetry of Survival: Post-War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), page 169. Poem translated by George Theiner.

[11] Boxer, op. cit.

[12] Lewis Thomas, foreword to *Sagittal Section*, by Miroslav Holub, tr. Stuart Friebert and Dana Hábová, Field Translation Series 3 (Ohio: Oberlin College Press, 1980), page 5.

[13] Holub, op. cit., page 149. Poem translated by George Theiner.

[14] Boxer, op. cit.

[15] Mary Karr, "Poet's Choice," *The Washington Post* (June 29, 2008).

[16] Holub, op. cit., page 73. Poem translated by David Young and Miroslav Holub.

[17] Ibid, 14. Poem translated by George Theiner.

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David Grayson is a poet and essayist who lives in Alameda, California.