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ISSUES OF TRANSLATION IN MIROSLAV HOLUB'S POETRY

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Zpracovala (author):

Markéta Prunarová

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Vedoucí práce (supervisor):

doc. Justin Quinn, PhD

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ABSTRAKT

Miroslav Holub, nejpřekládanější český básník dvacátého století, má své nezastupitelné místo v anglofonní literatuře, a přesto mu v české literární kritice náleží jen malá pozornost. Cílem této bakalářské práce je objasnit otázky, které z této v české literatuře ojedinělé situace vyvstávají, a to především jakým způsobem a z jakých důvodů se Holubova poezie stala nedílnou součástí anglofonní tradice a jaké umělecké charakteristiky umožnily její ukotvení. Práce se zabývá aspekty nejen Holubových básní, ale také kulturní a politické situace, které umožnily pozitivní přijetí jeho díla v zahraničí. Vzhledem k tomu, že Holubova poezie nutně vstoupila do britské a americké literární tradice v překladu, hlavní pozornost je upřena na odlišnosti a podobnosti mezi dynamikou jeho práce v originále a v anglickém jazyce.

První část této práce představuje poezii Miroslava Holuba tak, jak je nejčastěji vnímána v českém prostředí. Je nastíněna genealogie jeho díla v širších literárních a společenských souvislostech, a to zejména v kontextu poezie všedního dne. Pro lepší pochopení tohoto kontextu je část této kapitoly věnována Holubově biografii. Těžištěm druhé kapitoly je popis Holubova básnického jazyka s cílem stanovit, jak je tento jazyk vhodný nebo naopak nevhodný pro přenos do jiného jazyka. Jinak řečeno se tato část zabývá otázkou, co je z jazykového hlediska ztraceno v překladu.

Ve druhé části práce je Holub prezentován z mezinárodní perspektivy. V duchu teorií světové literatury a transnacionalismu, které se oproti národně-historickým přístupům zaměřují na pohyb literárních prvků a inspirací překračujících národní hranice, zpracovává třetí kapitola vzájemný vliv Holubovy poezie a anglicky píšících autorů. Dále se snaží dokumentovat jeho setkání s anglofonním světem. Dílčí pasáž se také věnuje problematice Holubova osobního postoje vůči politické situaci, a to z toho důvodu, že jak Holubův osobní postoj, tak politická situace ovlivňovaly vnímání jeho poezie. Určitým způsobem doma a jiným v zahraničí.

V poslední části práce jsou obě představené perspektivy navzájem konfrontovány na různých úrovních. Nejprve je diskutován dopad širšího politického a kulturního kontextu, kterým v té době byla studená válka a který měl rozhodující vliv na různé sféry života včetně umění a jeho percepce. Pohledy ze dvou stran železné opony jsou stavěny do kontrastu a komparovány. Skrze rozbor překladu jako média umožňujícího nabytí poezii nadnárodních, v určitých případech až univerzálních, rysů se ve čtvrté kapitole zájem zužuje na analýzy konkrétních básní a porovnávání jejich podoby v originálu a v překladu, a to jak z formálního, tak z obsahového hlediska. Konec práce se zaměřuje na způsob, jakým Holub v obsahové

rovině svých básní pracuje s propojením konkrétních a abstraktních prvků. Toto propojení vede k možnosti interpretovat jeho poezii jednak velmi úzce a jednak velmi univerzálně, což ve svém důsledku vede k atraktivnosti pro širší, různorodé publikum. Práce končí závěrem, že Holubova vědomá práce v rovině poetiky, tvaru i formy je velmi příznivým východiskem pro přenesení a pozitivní přijetí jeho poezie do anglicky psaného literárního kánonu.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Miroslav Holub, *Poems Before & After*, poezie všedního dne, česká poezie v anglickém překladu, poezie v době studené války, transnacionalismus

ABSTRACT

Miroslav Holub, the most translated of twentieth-century Czech poets, has an integral place in Anglophone literature, yet he has received little attention from Czech literary critics. The aim of this bachelor thesis is to shed light on questions that arise from this singular situation. First and foremost, in what ways and for what reasons has Holub's poetry become an integral part of the Anglophone tradition and what artistic features allowed its consolidation? This thesis explores the aspects of Holub's poems and of the cultural and political contexts that helped the positive reception of his work abroad. Since Holub's poetry engaged with the British and American literary tradition in its translated version, the main focus of this thesis is on the differences and similarities between the dynamics of Holub's oeuvre in the original and in English.

The first part of the thesis introduces Holub's poetry from the Czech point of view. The genealogy of his work is outlined in its broader literary and social circumstances, especially within the context of the Poetry of the Everyday. To understand this context, a part of this chapter is dedicated to his biography. The core of the second chapter is the description of Holub's poetic language. This aims to determine whether such a language is suitable or unsuitable for a transference into another language. In other words, this part deals with the question of what is, from the linguistic point of view, lost in translation.

In the second part of the thesis, Holub is presented from an international perspective. Drawing briefly on theories of World Literature and Transnationalism, both of which concentrate on movements of literary elements and inspirations across the national borders rather than on national-historical approaches, I focus on the mutual influence of Holub's poetry and English-writing authors. Further, the third chapter attempts to document Holub's encounters with the Anglophone world. One section is also dedicated to Holub's personal approach to the political situation, since this, coupled with the changing political situation, influenced the reception of his poetry in one way in his homeland, and in another abroad.

In the last part of the thesis, both of the above perspectives are brought into confrontation on various levels. Firstly, the impact of a broader political and cultural context—the Cold War at the time—is discussed. The Cold War had an immense influence on different spheres of life, including the arts and its perception. The two points of view from the different sides of the Iron Curtain are compared and contrasted. Through the analysis of translation as of a medium that allows poetry to acquire transnational—and in some cases even universal—

features, the focus in the fourth chapter closes in on analyses of individual poems and on the comparison of their appearances in original and in translation, both from the formal and the contextual standpoints. The end of the thesis concentrates on the way Holub works with the interconnection of concrete and abstract elements on the contextual level of his poems. This allows readers to interpret his poetry from either a very narrow perspective or from a very universal point of view; as a consequence of this, the poetry is attractive to a broad, heterogeneous audience. The thesis comes to the conclusion that Holub's deliberate work on the level of poetics as well as on the formal and contextual levels is a very favorable starting point for his poetry's transmission and later positive reception in the Anglophone canon.

KEY WORDS

Miroslav Holub, *Poems Before & After*, Poetry of the Everyday, Czech poetry in English translation, poetry in time of the Cold War, Transnationalism

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

On the back cover of *Poems Before & After*, a book of translated poems by Miroslav Holub, a poet and a scientist, one can read two quotes: “Miroslav Holub is one of the half dozen most important poets writing anywhere” by Ted Hughes, the British Poet Laureate, and “One of the sanest voices of our time” by Al Alvarez, a prominent literary critic. And yet Miroslav Holub is a minor figure on the Czech literary scene. The one monograph on his poetry was written only in 1971 and his name does not appear among the compulsory readings for either the Bachelor’s or Master’s final exam for the Czech studies department at Charles University in Prague. Although he exceeds all other Czech authors in the number of translations to other languages,¹ he has not received much attention in modern Czech literary criticism. Given these notably differing views on the importance of Holub’s poetry, the aim of this bachelor thesis is to identify and explore different dynamics at work in the transference of Holub’s work to English through a comparison of various aspects of his poetry in its original version and in its translations.

Through analyses of the particular example of Miroslav Holub’s poems on several levels, this thesis will question literary translation and the possibility of conveying Czech poetry to an English speaking reader in general. Such a topic could be beneficial for recognizing fundamental problems concerning the position and reception of Czech literature in the English-speaking world. The choice of Holub’s work is warranted by the fact that he has been internationally recognized as one of the major Eastern European poets after World War II and his poetry has been translated into over 30 languages. The two quotes above are not accidental; they represent the general emphasis that is put on Holub’s importance in the Anglophone world, where he has received more attention than the Czech Nobel Prize winner Jaroslav Seifert.² Moreover, Holub proved to be influential on several English poets. This exceptional position of Holub’s poetry brought international critics and authors to comment on it, which results in a large number of available secondary sources. These sources help to reconstruct the fascinating story of Miroslav Holub’s oeuvre that expands from the poetry itself into the politicized contexts in late fifties and the sixties: the time of gradual thaw after

¹ Kathryn Murphy, for example, counts fourteen single-authors volumes for Holub compared with six for Jaroslav Seifert. In Kathryn Murphy, reviews of *Poems Before & After* by Miroslav Holub and *Six Czech Poets* edited by Alexandra Büchler, *Translation and Literature* 18 (2009): 143.

² Cf. Alexandra Büchler, Introduction, *Six Czech Poets*, ed. Alexandra Büchler (Todmorden: Arc, 2007), Arc Publications <<http://www.arcpublications.co.uk/content/112>> 10 Mar. 2013.

the clench of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia and the Cold War worldwide. The national and global phenomena significantly influenced the readings of poetry, and has to be discussed by drawing on broad literary and cultural contexts in order to distinguish the patterns of Czech and English literary history and criticism. Throughout the course of this thesis, the objective is, therefore, to shed light not only on Holub's poetry and its translation specifically, but also on issues beyond the literary that played an important role in the transmission of Holub's poetry.

The first chapter will introduce the position of Holub's work in Czech literary tradition. In order to demonstrate this issue in all its complexity, biographical and historical backgrounds will be outlined. Further, Holub's literary development in the light of the Czech literary history, in particular the movement called the Poetry of the Everyday will be discussed. In reading a poem in its original language and in a translation to another language, the question of faithfulness to the original arises. The next issue to discuss will hence be Holub's poetic language and the possibilities of its translation. Holub uses a rather specific and new language in the Czech literary tradition, which limits the proposed objective to identify patterns of translation from Czech to English in general as Holub's language is not representative of the main issues that occur in translations of other Czech poets. Robyn Marsack refers to Alexandra Büchler's introduction to the book *Six Czech Poets*, in which "[she] maintains that Holub is by no means representative of Czech poetry."³ The aim of the first chapter is to introduce and explain both formal and contextual elements that play an important role regarding Holub within the Czech national framework.

In contrast to the national, the second chapter will concentrate on Holub from international and transnational perspectives. On the particular example of his encounter with the Anglophone world and poetry, the chapter will show the possibilities of theories that concentrate on elements crossing the borders and assign them a major significance—the theory of World Literature and Transnationalism. In light of these theories, the second chapter will explore the identification of the English inspirations and influences in Holub's work and vice versa. This chapter will summarize the main aspects of the translation of Holub's work into English. Once more, it will be imperative to mention Holub's personal experience. He met, and even cooperated with many of his translators, and with other literary English speaking

³ Robyn Marsack, review of *Six Czech Poets* edited by Alexandra Büchler, *Poetry Wales* 44.1 (Summer 2008), Arc Publications <<http://www.arcpublications.co.uk/reviews/345>> 16 Sep. 2013. My italics.

figures, which retroactively shaped his poetic creation. The first two chapters intend to set the general context, and in an expository way present the background, on which the third, more concrete, chapter will build up. They should stand as the core research-based parts of the thesis that will serve as the starting point for the analytical and argumentative last chapter.

In the third chapter, the two previously separately introduced contexts will be brought into a direct comparison and contrast. I will use the theoretical background introduced in the first two chapters to analyze individual poems in original and translated versions. Distinctions and similarities on the formal and contextual levels will be commented upon in an attempt to reach certain underlying principles of Holub's poetry which are made evident through the issues inherent to the translation of his poetry from Czech to English. The way the ideas are carried over the borders of one language into the milieu of another will be explored.

CHAPTER II: WITHIN THE BORDERS¹

In order to fully understand the poetry of Miroslav Holub, one must first know of his life, both as a poet and as a scientist. The following section will detail some important events throughout his life in an effort to outline necessary background information for an interpretation of his poetry. Furthermore, this information should be kept in mind when drawing conclusions on the specific international position held by Holub as a person as well as a poet. Lastly, the historical situation will not be overlooked, as it is crucial to an understanding of his poetry.

Miroslav Holub was born on the 13 September 1923 in Plzeň, Czechoslovakia. His first literary attempts date back to the end of the war under the influence of French and Czech avant-garde poetry. His first publications came in 1947 and 1948 through the daily *Svobodné slovo* (Free Word), in the journal *Kytice* (Garland), and in the anthology *Ohnice* (Charlock). After interrupting his writing as a result of the communist coup in February 1948, he resumed publishing only in the late 1950s as a part of the literary circle that formed around the journal *Květen* (May). In a new aesthetic programme, this group of artists established the movement of the Poetry of the Everyday. The main ideas of this aesthetic programme were formulated in two core texts: Holub's essay "Náš všední den je pevnina" (We Are Grounded in the Everyday), and Josef Brukner's poem "Óda na sušení prádla" (Ode on the Drying of Clothes). This manifesto stood as a reaction to the contemporary ideal of literature which was limited to the bombastic Socialist Realism celebrating the ideas of communism. Poets of the Everyday did not necessarily oppose socialism as such (in fact, most of them identified with its goals); however, they rejected the "superficial rhetoric"² that was promoted in writing. They shared the optimism of the official literature and in accordance with the main tendency promoted themes such as the faith in ordinary man, but demurred that the complexity of being was

¹ All factual information in this chapter can be referenced in Jiří Holý and Jan Čulík, "Miroslav Holub," *Twentieth-Century Eastern European Writers: Third Series*, ed. Steven Serafin (Detroit: Gale Group, 2001) 139-145. and in Bohumil Svozil and Karel Piorecký, "Miroslav Holub," *Slovník české literatury po roce 1945*, ÚČL AV ČR, inSophy, Studio Vémola, 20 Feb. 2007 <<http://www.slovníkceskeliteratury.cz/showContent.jsp?docId=1023&hl=miroslav+holub+>> 16 Sep. 2013.

² "povrchní rétoriku" Jan Lehár, et al., *Česká literatura od počátku k dnešku* (Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2008) 758. My translation.

reduced to empty ideological phrases.³ In opposition to the pretentious phrases of socialist literature, the artists put forth “the truth of the everyday.”⁴ The general ideological manifestations were changed for the values of the simple, day-to-day living. They concentrated on the importance of factual reality and advocated the need for concrete details. Similarly to the poetics of Group 42, whose style Holub knew, the poets of the Everyday emphasized reality as seen from “below.”⁵ Holub stresses that only the facts of life can capture the dynamics of the world.⁶ Features of the Poetry of the Everyday are strongly manifested in Holub’s first and second collections *Denní služba* (Day Duty), and *Achilles a želva* (Achilles and the Tortoise).

The poets of the Everyday diverged from the contemporary conception of literature by forming a group and establishing their own aesthetic programme. However, they were not the only ones who called for a change in the time of limitations and censorship. From the second half of the 1950s, the Czechoslovakian cultural scene tried to free itself from ideological control. Attempts to liberalize the communist system from within culminated in the Prague Spring in 1968 and were brutally halted August 21 of that year when members of the Warsaw Pact invaded the country. Holub was among the many Czech artists and intellectuals who had taken an active part in this reform movement through his writings in the liberal cultural periodicals. Jiří Holý and Jan Čulík note that Holub’s early collections included poems in which he “seemed to be commenting implicitly on the constraints of the totalitarian system and, on another level, on the unsatisfactoriness of the human condition in general.”⁷ As a result, he was dismissed from the Institute of Microbiology in 1970. His work could not be published, the printing plates for the poetry collection *Stručné úvahy* (Brief Contemplations) were destroyed and his books were removed from libraries. He was forbidden to travel abroad. His books could not be published until 1982. After 1968, Holub’s poetry notably changed. Holý and Čulík note that Holub turned to metaphysical questions, now “[i]nfluenced by his exposure to the West and disappointed by political developments [...]”⁸ Holý and Čulík

³ Cf. Pavel Janoušek, et al., *Dějiny české literatury 1945-1989, II. 1948-1958* (Prague: Academia, 2008) 242.

⁴ “pravdu všedního dne” Jiří Holý, “Miroslav Holub: Achilles a želva,” *Česká literatura 1945-1970. Interpretace vybraných děl*, ed. Jiřina Táborská and Milan Zeman (Prague: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1992) 216. My translation.

⁵ Cf. Lehár 758.

⁶ Cf. Janoušek 242.

⁷ Holý and Čulík 142.

⁸ Holý and Čulík 143.

further observe that Holub's lost faith in progress is most effectively illustrated in his collection *Ačkoli* (Although) from 1969.⁹

Despite being ostracized in Czechoslovakia, his work in both literary and scientific fields became well known abroad. He was made a member of the Bayerische Akademie der Schönen Künste (Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts) and of the New York Academy of Science, and he received an honorary doctorate from Oberlin College in Ohio. Not being a member of the Communist Party, Holub was allowed to travel abroad only in the 1960s, and then again from the end of the 1970s. During these periods, he visited numerous countries (among others the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Ireland, Greece, China, India, Israel, Australia, and Mexico) not only for scientific research or as a guest lecturer, but also to read his poetry. He travelled to the United States in 1962 and 1963, and from the end of the 1970s every three years. From 1965 to 1967, he worked at the Public Health Research Institute in New York City. He continued to visit Britain and the US until his death. Drawing from his experience in the United States, Holub wrote two books of lyrical travel essays in prose that notably cross the common conception of a travel report. In 1963, he published *Anděl na kolečkách: Poloreportáž z USA* (An Angel on Wheels: A Semireport from the USA), and in 1969 *Žít v New Yorku* (To Live in New York). His American trips also inspired the collection of poems *Beton: Verše z New Yorku a z Prahy* (Concrete: Poems from New York and from Prague) from 1970. Holý and Čulík remark his ambivalence toward the United States, "Holub is enchanted as well as perplexed by the United States, which he sees as a land of sharp contrasts, a paradoxical mixture of the profane and the sacred; this impression is expressed by the image of the 'angel on wheels,' a statue of a Baroque angel on casters that he saw at a New York airport."¹⁰

After Holub made a public statement of self-criticism degrading his earlier work in 1973, Holý and Čulík remark,¹¹ he found employment at the Institute for Clinical and Experimental Medicine. His literary work, however, continued to be forbidden from publication until 1982. During that time, Holub published anonymously and in samizdat publications. After the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, Holub never fully became a part of the new literary mainstream although he continued to write for several magazines including *Lidové noviny*

⁹ Holý and Čulík 143.

¹⁰ Holý and Čulík 143.

¹¹ Holý and Čulík 144.

(The People's Paper) and *Svobodné slovo* (Free Word). He is sometimes blamed for not speaking out openly against the regime in the 1970s and 1980s.¹² The fact that he was allowed to travel also raised allegations that he had cooperated with the secret police.

Equally problematic for the acceptance by the Czech critical audience is Holub's rational, terse poetic style that in some way diverges from the Czech literary tradition. It was established earlier in the text that Holub's poetic universe is intentionally narrowed to everyday matters in accordance with the Poetry of the Everyday. Correspondingly, Holub chooses to use a rather simple and deliberately limited poetic voice. The clarity of both the content and the form is prominent in the aesthetics of Holub's work and, as this thesis will show, further allows the poetry to be easily conveyed into other languages. What some writers criticize from a literary standpoint as too rational or terse, helped to make Holub's language well suited to English translation and further to make Holub an internationally recognized author.

Holub's lexicon is not expansive, but nonetheless unusual. The predominance of his vocabulary is given to nouns and action verbs. On the contrary, descriptive adjectives, attributes and modifiers are mostly eliminated. Specific to his poetry is the use of scientific and medical terminology, which comes from Holub's professional life. In 1946, when he entered the Faculty of Medicine at Charles University in Prague, he undertook his lifelong career in immunology. He also attended lectures on logic, philosophy and literary history. In 1953, he received his master's degree and began to work as a pathologist in a Prague hospital. A year later, he joined the Institute of Biology (later Microbiology) at the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. From 1951 to 1965, he was the executive editor of the scientific journal *Vesmír* (The Universe). Holub's scientific and medical background is reflected in much of his poetry. In fact, Holub himself considered science his primary concern,¹³ and he is often praised for how naturally he brings these two spheres together. The use of scientific and medical themes and motifs is what is often seen as remarkable in his poetry, and utterly new in the Czech poetic tradition.¹⁴

¹² Holý and Čulík 144.

¹³ Cf. "Miroslav Holub," *Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2013
<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/269715/Miroslav-Holub>> 11 Mar. 2013.

¹⁴ Cf. Lehár 759.

Holub often juxtaposes words to create surreal images. As Paul I. Trensky notes, words are often taken from “a lexical ambience remote from the poem’s subject matter, e.g., the language of prayers.”¹⁵ Similarly, Wallis Wilde-Menozzi observes that, in Holub’s poetry, different realities from different vocabularies are forced onto the same page.¹⁶ Grammatically, Holub’s style neutralizes the most prominent differences between English and Czech. His expressions are not reliant on declination, and they lack conspicuous grammatical devices characteristic of the Czech language, such as diminutives. Indeed, there are few verbal or linguistic effects in Holub’s poetry. The employed syntactic structures are not complicated and often reoccur. Bohumil Svozil stresses the repetitive use of infinitive sentences and determines it as one of the main reasons why Holub’s poetry gives such a transpersonal impression.¹⁷ In fact, Svozil recognizes the syntactic parallelism in Holub’s poetry as one of its distinguishing features, and assigns it as a very important function in establishing Holub’s poetic universe.¹⁸

Holub’s language is devoid of traditional poetic tools and ornamentation. He writes mostly in free verse. The lines are often very short with only two or three words, and the stanzaic structures are relatively straightforward. His poetry suppresses figurative speech. On the other hand, it frequently employs repetition and gradation. Holub works with common poetic tools, such as accumulation and intensification of elements. His ideas and imageries are carefully developed, yet presented without superfluous details. Kathryn Murphy remarks that Holub’s poetry consists of “successive declarative sentences, and relies heavily on oxymoron, non sequiturs, zeugma, and the surprising juxtaposition of terms from different disciplines or spheres of experience.”¹⁹ The formal features of Holub’s poetic world, as well as the content and language, are precisely and clearly delimited. Jiří Brabec insists that, unlike figuratively or metaphorically rich poetic language, Holub employs direct appellation, accentuating the immediate relation of a word to reality.²⁰ The metaphorical is evidently undermined in order

¹⁵ Paul I. Trensky, “The Květen Generation in Perspective,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 17. 4 (Winter 1973): 422.

¹⁶ Wallis Wilde-Menozzi, “Revising Miroslav Holub,” *Southwest Review* (2003): 521.

¹⁷ Bohumil Svozil, *Vůle k intelektuální poezii: o básnické tvorbě Miroslava Holuba* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1971) 11.

¹⁸ Svozil 15-16.

¹⁹ Murphy 144.

²⁰ Jiří Brabec, afterword, *Anamnéza: výbor z poezie 1958-1963*, by Miroslav Holub (Prague: Mladá fronta, 1964). Reprinted in Holub, Miroslav, *Spisy: Básně*, vol. 1 (Brumovice: Carpe Diem, 2003): 1006.

to emphasise the factual, material message. Svozil explains it as “an effort to liberate poetry from the distended poetics.”²¹ Trensky captures this when he marks Holub as “the master of the miniature, striving at pointed compositions with a maximum economy of words.”²² Renouncing some of the most important resources for a poet, Holub’s style remains close to prose. His writing, which avoids subjective impressions and lyricism, has been concisely described as “terse and matter-of-fact,”²³ “telegraphic”²⁴ or possessing a “sloganlike simplicity.”²⁵

From the remarks above, it can be seen that Holub’s rhetoric is defined by precision and explicitness. His poetic language is clearly defined by concrete expressions, in which ambiguities are avoided. He expresses himself briefly and unequivocally. Holub’s language is essentially factual and logical, and it does not employ means symptomatic of Czech lyrical poetry. Such a language, which is, in fact, more reliant on ideas than words, poses fewer obstacles for translators and is easy to render into a foreign language. Murphy even points out that the real challenge for the translators lies in restraining themselves from adding any extra information when translating Holub’s poetry.²⁶ I will return to this in the fourth chapter of this thesis, where poems in their original versions and in translations will be compared and contrasted. All this suggests that the differences or similarities to be analyzed are rarely a consequence of translation obstacles as such.

It was established above that Holub’s writing technique allows his poetry to be almost entirely accessible through translation. It should be further mentioned that such a state is not accidental in Holub’s case. It was Holub’s own intention to write in a universal language, and he often said that he wrote his poetry with the idea of translation in mind. He specifically said: “Personally, I feel one must write with a sense for the translation – I have been criticized for this attitude, but I will continue to have a sense of the sound, the possibility of rhythm in the

²¹ “[...] úsilí zbavit poezii zbytnělého poetična.” Svozil, *Vůle k intelektuální poezii* 11. My translation.

²² Trenskey 421.

²³ Holý and Čulík 144.

²⁴ “telegrafický” Brabec 1006. My translation.

²⁵ Trenskey 423.

²⁶ “[...] the challenges are in fact mostly negative: avoidance of the temptation to elaborate or ornament.” Murphy 145.

language of translation.”²⁷ One may further assume that the fact that he knew his work would be translated into English also influenced the original. As Holub deliberately chooses his poetic universe to be centered on everyday objects, he also deliberately chooses to use language that is comprehensible and easily translatable. As Justin Quinn writes, “Holub dreamed of a poetry that would float free of these burdens, as shareable across the world as scientific work is.”²⁸

This is a rather unusual situation on the Czech literary scene, and some critics observe that it also has consequences for Holub’s reputation. Whereas he is praised around the world as being an international or European poet, the Czech intellectuals are often concerned rather with him not following the Czech tradition. In the obituary for *Britské listy*, Jan Čulík hints at this. Through Holub’s own words, he suggests that the science-influenced poetry that is, in fact, not dependant on language (the Czech language in this case) is the reason for both Holub’s international success and the unfamiliarity to the Czech reading audience.²⁹ In the review of *Poems Before & After*, Murphy sees this as imperative for Holub’s international success. “The simplest reason for [Holub’s] popularity is the ease of rendering his poems into English,” she declares.³⁰ Holub himself was repeatedly asked to comment on this issue in various interviews. He often summarizes and confirms what was already suggested—the fact that he is less reliant on words, which makes him different from other Czech poets. Because he sees poetry as a dialogue or interpersonal communication, and because he wants to write for broad reading publics, he is motivated to be the most understandable and comprehensible while writing.³¹ He says, “[...] because the public which reads and buys poetry is slightly

²⁷ Suzanne O’Shea, “Interview with Miroslav Holub,” *The Poetry Ireland Review* 30 (Autumn/Winter 1990): 69, *JSTOR* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25577035>> 11 Mar. 2013.

²⁸ Justin Quinn, “California Dreaming: Miroslav Holub and Seamus Heaney,” *Ireland and the Czech Lands*, eds. Ondřej Pilný and Gerald Power (New York: Peter Lang, 2014) 183.

²⁹ “Proč působil Holub pro některé čtenáře v Čechách cize a proč měl tak obrovský mezinárodní úspěch: V Glasgowě o tom v dubnu řekl: ‘Moje poezie se dá překládat, protože není příliš silně závislá na jazyce. To je vliv vědy, protože věda by neměla být závislá na jazyce.’” Cf. Jan Čulík, “13. července zemřel básník Miroslav Holub,” *Britské listy*, 16 July 1998 <<http://www.britskelisty.cz/9807/19980716f.html#05>> 10 May 2013.

³⁰ Murphy 144.

³¹ “Čeští básníci jsou závislí na slovech. Já nejsem tolik závislý na slovech. [...] A konečně, mým motivem pro psaní poezie není rozšiřování mého duchovního obzoru, ani třeba vydělávání. Poezie je pro mě dialog. Poezie je mezilidskou komunikací. A při této komunikaci chci být co nejsrozumitelnější.” In Čulík, “13. července zemřel básník Miroslav Holub.”

diminishing, and what can make poetry popular again is comprehensibility, not postmodernist hermeneutics. So I'm trying to be even more comprehensible [...].”³²

Miroslav Holub died on 14 July 1998 in Prague at the age of 74.

³² In Roy Scheele, “Miroslav Holub,” interview, *The Verse Book of Interviews*, eds. Brian Henry and Andrew Zawacki (Seattle: Wave Books, 2005) 255.

CHAPTER III: FOUND IN TRANSLATION

In this chapter, Holub's oeuvre will be introduced in a larger framework, which contrasts with the perception of his work within the nationalistic boundaries as it was described in the previous chapter. Two major theories have to be taken into consideration before thinking beyond the national context: the theories of World Literature and Transnationalism. In light of these two theoretical approaches, the concrete example of Holub's work will be discussed, specifically in its crossing the national boundaries and communicating with others, mainly English speaking cultures. Holub's inspiration from and influence on the English tradition will be explored on both artistic and personal levels. Lastly, the issue of translation will be raised yet again as it will lead to the narrower interpretation of individual poems in the last chapter.

Before I discuss Holub beyond the National, I want to summarize what establishes and determines Holub domestically to show how, in his particular case, the two contexts stand in a rather striking contrast. While he is a well-recognized, respected and influential writer abroad, Holub is by no means a major poet in the Czech Republic (or in the former Czechoslovakia, for that matter). "Alongside Seifert," Louis Armand writes, "Holub was widely regarded by many outside the ČSSR to be a major defining figure of the Prague literary scene."¹ Holý and Čulík note that while before 1982 "Holub was ostracized in his native country, his literary and scientific work became well known abroad."² In his homeland, Holub has not received recognition commensurate with his international success. Armand remarks that the famous quotes by foreign artists about Holub are "starkly at odds with the reception of Holub's work among the mainstream of Czech academics and critics."³ From the material discussed in the previous chapter regarding the Czech context, there are several possible explanations for why, in the present day Czech Republic, Holub remains virtually unknown.

Finding reasons for this situation is difficult. There are, however, several aspects that have to be taken into consideration if one asks what makes a poet popular or unpopular. One could posit the following, tentative explanation based on three reasons which are implied in secondary sources on the neglect of Holub's work domestically: his poetic language, which is distant from the specificities of Czech language and poetic features; the politics of the time

¹ Louis Armand, "Introduction: The King of Majáles," *The Return of Král Majáles: Prague's International Literary Renaissance 1990-2010, An Anthology*, ed. Louis Armand (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia Books, 2010): 3-4.

² Holý and Čulík 144.

³ Armand 3-4.

influencing the Czech literary scene, both then and now; and lastly Holub's biography, which includes elements that are objectionable for many cultural critics. Interestingly, it seems that the same reasons which might have been harmful to Holub's reputation in his homeland were, conversely, beneficial for his international recognition.

I have already addressed the issue of Holub's poetic language in the previous chapter, therefore, this section will focus on select key aspects and their consequences for the reception of Holub's poetry. It was established that Holub's poetic language is not characteristic of Czech poetry, insofar as it relies on ideas and imagery rather than on words, which makes it easy to translate. Furthermore, it was mentioned that such language helps Holub's international reputation, and, at the same time, may distance it for Czech readers. The question of why it may feel strange for Holub's home audience, however, remains.

There are several possible tendencies that may shed light on this issue. Firstly and most generally, we have to consider the status of poetry as the most language-based literary artefact, deeply rooted in the original language with its specific rhyme and meter restrictions. If those elements are omitted, the final picture may seem "un-rooted" from the original language and, therefore, distant for the audience that speaks it. Secondly, it is the specific position of the Czech language, a minor language with its small and homogeneous number of speakers, which played a key role in establishing and defining the Czech national identity throughout its tumultuous history. Thus, one can assume that poems that do not draw on these resources of language will be less easily identified with the national canon. In an extreme case, it might even lead it to be excluded from the national literary canon. Holý and Čulík simply state that "[f]rom a literary standpoint, many writers and critics could not accept Holub's rational, terse poetic style."⁴

The second factor is the political situation and its influence on the literary scene. During the totalitarian periods of Czech history, literature held a specific place in society and its shaping. Those who did not identify with the Establishment wanted more from literature than its mere aesthetic value. Literature needed to be charged with important political and moral potential, and to be open to other interpretation than the monolithic, official ones.⁵ Holub's poetry, then, is not easily classifiable, as it is neither on the side of the official, socialist

⁴ Holý and Čulík 144.

⁵ Petr Bílek, "Čtení děl české literatury 20. století II," Department of Czech Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague, Prague, summer semester 2011/2012. Lecture.

realism, nor on that of the strong, morally appellative, anticommunist literature. If we accept the premise that the Czech reading public favored literature that expressed moral imperatives, with strong political statements, then the problematic reception of Holub's poetry is explained. Despite a large number of studies that try to accentuate the political and historical context in his poems, and interpret them as comments on the political situation, Holub's poetry remains rather apolitical.⁶

Furthermore, there is the question of Holub's personal attitude towards the establishment. When dealing with such circumstances, which are external to literature *per se*, it is important to realize how the Czech literary scene approaches them specifically. Armand aptly summarizes:

The apparent ideological rift between a broadly “western” poetics and the national sensitivities of some Czech translators and academics – as made clear in the case of Holub – has arguably less to do with poetics as such than with a certain “resentment” which applies equally *within* the sphere of specifically “Czechoslovak” and later “Czech” literature of that period, in which dividing lines are often perceptible in terms of personal politics and political histories – between émigrés and non-émigrés; dissidents and non-dissidents; anti-communists, socialists, anarchists, democrats, capitalists, monarchists; and also inter-generationally.⁷

The facts that Holub made a self-critical statement in 1973⁸ and that allegations of Holub's cooperation with the secret police occurred—since he had been able to travel to the West in the 1980s “while other Czech authors were languishing as nonpersons in the dissident ghetto,”⁹—are very much accentuated and approached rather personally. Holý and Čulík write that some of Holub's “compatriots felt *betrayed* by his self-criticism [...] and *could not forget* that he had never come out openly against communism in the 1970s and 1980s.”¹⁰ The Czech

⁶ For instance Louis Armand states Holub is an “apparently apolitical writer.” In Armand 3.

⁷ Armand 5.

⁸ Holý and Čulík 144.

⁹ Holý and Čulík 144.

¹⁰ Holý and Čulík 144. My italics.

critical field tends to place Holub within the problematic domain of extrinsic readings, as the biographical facts seem to provoke more reactions than Holub's literary work itself.

Another specificity of the Czech (literary) scene is the way in which it deals with its own history. Armand writes, "[f]or Holub there was no room after the revolution for the perpetuation of the 'ghetto mentality' that had gown up within the mainstream of Czechoslovak literature."¹¹ Armand then quotes Petr Bilek who described this type of literature as one which, "preferred to dwell on specific domestic issues rather than be part of an international exchange."¹² The disparity between the Czech mainstream and Holub is evident when this prevalent domesticity is compared with Holub, who maintained "a sense of the artist's moral duty to enquire about the state of world at large."¹³ It does not mean, however, that Holub was not concerned about his and Czech history.

An interesting point of view on how Holub coped with his past is provided by Wallis Wilde-Menozzi who interviewed Holub in 1994 in order to gather information for an essay. This was published only in 2003 with an introduction by Wilde-Menozzi in which he describes how Holub made certain corrections to what he had said originally in the interview.¹⁴ These changes "largely concerned his position within censorship and party politics under Communist regimes."¹⁵ These issues of 'personal truth,' as Wilde-Menozzi calls them—concerning the political position and including Holub's claim that a fake 'recantation' was produced and published by the State Security—seemed to be of enormous importance to Holub according to Wilde-Menozzi. Holub tried to explain his position as 'non-personhood,' which was broken into four stages of humiliation illustrating a "complex series of perspectives on his need for dignity as well as survival [...]."¹⁶ Wilde-Menozzi suggests that the modifications Holub made to his original interview, which was intended as a literary essay, shifted the focus from Holub, the writer, to Holub, the man. "His 'lie' about whether or not he recanted in order to obtain certain scientific and artistic space outside of his country, if it is true, seems an issue loaded with cultural perspectives," writes Wilde-Menozzi.¹⁷ This shows the complexity of the topic: a shift in perspective can affect one's opinion dramatically.

¹¹ Armand 4.

¹² Qtd in Armand 4.

¹³ Armand 4.

¹⁴ Wilde-Menozzi 519-530.

¹⁵ Wilde-Menozzi 519.

¹⁶ Wilde-Menozzi 520.

¹⁷ Wilde-Menozzi 522.

While this is an issue of importance to Holub himself—as well as to the Czech reading audience as we have shown—it is of no importance to many foreign critics, often simply because they do not find the historical and political context important or because they do not know it well. This maintains the idea that foreigners might have been more accepting and sympathetic to Holub because they were exempt from the pressures of the historical and cultural contexts or not interested in it. Wilde-Menozzi also explains that, in this sense, it is understandable and significant that Holub reached out for English as another language, not only in his poetry, but also in his statements regarding his personal history. Language and science, according to Wilde-Menozzi, allowed Holub to step out from this personal reflection of his own victimization. Wilde-Menozzi quotes Holub, “I was never—‘sufficiently depressed and desolate’—because of science.”¹⁸ Justin Quinn argues that ignorance of the Czech context may, in fact, be “an enabling agent,” because it “allows the imagination freedom and space to create without the restriction of knowledge,”¹⁹ and further that it “does not imply less valid aesthetic choices.”²⁰

Then how does Holub’s oeuvre change if it is taken out of its national borders? In the introduction I stated that the choice of Holub’s poetry is warranted by his international recognition, especially in the English speaking world where it even exceeded the attention given to the only Czech Nobel Prize winner Jaroslav Seifert.²¹ Additionally, Holub proved to be influential on several English poets. On several occasions, he was referred to as a European rather than a Czech poet. Moreover, his name often appears in relation to other national literatures, thus demonstrating his international relevance. The following are a few examples of papers in which Holub’s work is discussed in various contexts. Quite understandably, the works of Czech authors in translation such as the novel *More than One Life* by Miloslava Holubová or the poetry of Sylva Fischerová are compared to Holub.²² In his article “Literature’s afterlife,” concerning the qualities of modern literature and post-war Polish

¹⁸ Wilde-Menozzi 524.

¹⁹ Quinn 182.

²⁰ Quinn 182.

²¹ Cf. Büchler.

²² “More than One Life,” *Publishers Weekly* 246.24. (14 June 1999): 50, *Literature Resource Center* <<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA54917497&v=2.1&u=unipari&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>>, 11 Mar. 2013. And Virginia Parobek, “Sylva Fischerova. The Swing in the Middle of Chaos: Selected Poems,” *World Literature Today* 84.4 (July/Aug. 2010): 73.

poetry, Patrick Morgan concludes with one of Holub's poems.²³ Similarly, the Irish poet Chris Arthur uses an experience from Holub's personal life to illustrate a point in his article reflecting on the Irish expression "broken flags."²⁴ Additionally, features of Holub's poetry are used as a reference in reviews of poets of various nationalities, for instance in Alan Gould's review of the Australian poet Gary Catalano²⁵ or in Biespiel and Solari's review on the Chinese American poet Arthur Sze.²⁶ In another context, the way Holub once defined poetry is used as a reference in an article on teaching poetry.²⁷ Holub also influenced the South African poet Wopko Jensma, who mentions him in one of his poems.²⁸ Furthermore, Holub was even asked to be one of the poets to comment on South African Poetry in a book of interviews by Robert Berold.²⁹

If Holub is to be discussed in an international context, it is imperative to mention two theories that regard writers as part of a larger literary world, in opposition to the enclosed nationalistic view: the theories of World Literature and Transnationalism. Both of these theories concentrate on elements that cross the boundaries of the nation and thus are difficult to cover within the prevalent nationalistic framework. This approach corresponds with the trend in recent years where criticism "has been searching for ways to surpass the national canon as a fundamental organizing principle for literature."³⁰

²³ Patrick Morgan, "Literature's afterlife," *Quadrant* (Sept. 2001): 70.

²⁴ Chris Arthur, "Broken Flags of Ireland," *Contemporary Review* 289.1686 (Sep. 2007): 344.

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²⁵ Alan Gould, "Family Ties: Australian Poems of the Family," *Quadrant* 43.4 (Apr. 1999): 83.

Literature Resource Center

<<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA54527232&v=2.1&u=unipari&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>> 26 Mar. 2013.

²⁶ David Biespiel and Rose Solari, "Stanley Plumly," Interview, *American Poetry Review* 24.3 (May/June 1995): 43. *JSTOR* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27781783>> 26 Mar. 2013.

²⁷ "Poetry is energy, it is an energy-storing and an energy releasing device." Miroslav Holub. In Janette Hughes and Sue Dymoke, "'Wiki-Ed Poetry': Transforming Preservice Teachers' Preconceptions about Poetry and Poetry Teaching," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 55.1 (2011): 47.

²⁸ Stefan Helgesson, "Sing for Our Metropolis: Self, Place and Media in the Poetry of Rui Knopfli and Wopko Jensma," *English in Africa* 33. 1 (May 2006): 86.

²⁹ Roger J. Kurtz, "South African Poets on Poetry: Interviews from New Coin, 1992-2001," *World Literature Today* 79.1 (Jan./Apr. 2005): 85.

³⁰ Quinn 180.

In the book *What is World Literature?* David Damrosch looks at how works change as they move from national to global contexts. He declares, “[a]s it moves into the sphere of world literature, far from inevitably suffering a loss of authenticity or essence, a work can gain in many ways,”³¹ and claims “a literary work *manifests* differently abroad than it does at home.”³² The way Damrosch looks at the transformations of a book in circulation and translation is significant for an interpretation of Holub. Transnationalism, as proposed by Jahan Ramazani, Peggy Levitt and Sanjeev Khagram, is important for this text as it concentrates on common poetic features and forms as they transgress borders. The emphasis on the extra-national influences, on movements crossing the boundaries, and on literary conversations between cultures are symptomatic of what happens when dealing with Holub.

These theories aspire to cover a vast range of literature, which encounter obstacles in particular applications. For example, literatures cross boundaries mainly in translation, but the capacity of people to speak different languages is limited. Also, the institutional possibilities are restricted and, therefore, the separation of university departments according to national canons is preferable. Despite the obstacles mentioned, ideas that these theories propose are a useful tool for the aim of this thesis as they accentuate aspects (even see them as central core principles) of literature that very well suited Holub’s poetic creation. In the light of this general theoretical framework, I will now concentrate specifically on the concrete relation between Holub and Anglophone countries.

Holub’s encounter with the English speaking world is described in detail, notably, in Ian Milner’s paper “Microscope and Magic: Miroslav Holub and his Poetry.”³³ Some important dates and events will be outlined here. Ian Milner, the New-Zealand born Prague resident, was Holub’s first translator.³⁴ In the winter of 1962, the British poet, essayist and critic Al Alvarez visited Prague, and Milner showed him some of Holub’s recent poems that Milner had

³¹ David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) 6.

³² Damrosch 6.

³³ Ian Milner, “Microscope and Magic. Miroslav Holub and his Poetry,” *London Magazine* (Mar. 1988): 78-82.

³⁴ Holub and Milner met in person. However, they give differing accounts of when they first met. Milner says it was „soon after soon after the publication of his first volume [1958]” in “Microscope and Magic. Miroslav Holub and his Poetry,” *London Magazine* (Mar. 1988): 78-79. Holub’s account is in James McNeish, *Dance of the Peacocks: New Zealanders in Exile in the Time of Hitler and Mao* (Auckland: Vintage, 2003), 308, 316. Their meeting is in the first case dated in the mid-1950s, and in “1963 or 1964” in the second case.

translated with his wife. Holub made his debut on the English literary scene with two poems published by Alvarez in the issue of 16 June 1963 in the *Observer*, under the headline “The Poet and the Knife.” A volume of selected poems in translation by Milner and George Theiner was published in the Penguin’s Modern European series in 1967 with Alvarez’s introduction. Later, his work was brought out by Faber and Bloodaxe. Holub read at major poetry festivals like Rotterdam, Toronto, Cambridge, and on many American campuses. Milner remembers a reading from London, 1969, which was described by *The Times*, “[Holub’s] delivery was granular, close to the bone. The translations set up an unexpected duet with the originals, and the audience rose to a brilliant reading.”³⁵ Holub’s poems were printed in the *TLS*, *London Magazine*, *New Statesman*, *Stand* and *Encounter*, and in American, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand journals. Holub himself was a frequent contributor to British journals like *Encounter* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. In the spring of 1979, he was invited to be a writer-in-residence at Oberlin College, Ohio. While Holub could not publish books in Czechoslovakia until 1982, volumes of his poetry appeared in English (*Although* published by Jonathan Cape in 1971, *Notes of a Clay Pigeon* by Secker and Warburg in 1977, a selection of the early poems *Sagittal Section* in 1980 and *Interferon, or On the Theater* two years later in Oberlin’s Field Translation series). Bloodaxe Books published *On the Contrary* (1984), *The Fly* (1988), *Poems Before & After* (1990), *Intensive Care: Selected and New Poems* (1996), and *The Rampage* (1997). Besides Ian and Jarmila Milner, translators of Holub’s poetry have been Ewald Osers, George Theiner, David Young, Dana Hábová, Rebekah Bloyd, Stuart Friebert and James Naughton.

Also, Holub’s medical and scientific work enabled him to communicate with the world. “Science kept me connected to a larger world whose borders have few confines,” quotes Wilde-Menozi.³⁶ Alexandra Büchler, in her introduction to *Six Czech Poets*, explains why Holub appealed to an English speaking audience: “That Miroslav Holub is by far the most widely-known Czech poet is symptomatic of the ready acceptance of cerebral poetry of linear thought, ‘universal’ ideas and easy-to-decipher allegories on the one hand, and of a reluctance to engage with poetry referring to an unfamiliar cultural and literary context on the other.”³⁷ Holub was also a part of a larger influence of Eastern European writers on British and

³⁵ Qtd in Milner 79.

³⁶ Qtd in Wilde-Menozi 522.

³⁷ Büchler.

American poetry in the period from 1960 to 1990.³⁸ It was a time, Quinn remarks, when English poets, including Seamus Heaney, searched for ethical and aesthetic models in Eastern Europe, because they were not to be found in their own tradition.³⁹ Along with other Eastern European poets Czesław Miłosz, Vasko Popa, Joseph Brodsky, and Zbigniew Herbert, “[Holub] was to become one of the most influential poets on Anglophone poetry in the following two decades,”⁴⁰ Quinn writes. Ian Milner rephrases Ted Hughes, who associates Holub with the Yugoslav Popa and the Polish Herbert, as all “working from deeper wells of experience than most western writers”⁴¹ and further mentions in an editorial for a 1969 issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation* devoted to Czech poetry, “[t]he Western poet perhaps envies his brother in the East...the reality of the threat and the danger is not his. There is a tendency for the Western poet to become isolated and turn inwards, whereas the poet of the East is in tune with the rhythms of his people in a much more direct and dynamic way.”⁴² This recognition of the disparity between how the Western and Eastern literary worlds worked—as they were also politically separated into two parts by the Cold War—is not unique for Hughes. Seamus Heaney also “acknowledges the ‘extra-literary’ attraction of an audience to whom poetry really mattered.”⁴³ And then there is Philip Roth’s well-known statement:

When I was first in Czechoslovakia, it occurred to me that I work in a society where as a writer everything goes and nothing matters, while for the Czech writers I met in Prague, nothing goes and everything matters. This isn't to say I wished to change places. I didn't envy their persecution and the way in which it heightens their social importance. I didn't even envy them their seemingly more valuable and serious themes. The trivialization, in the West, of much that's deadly serious in the East is itself a subject, one requiring considerable imaginative ingenuity to transform into compelling fiction.⁴⁴

This search for deeper values justified by political oppression in Eastern European poetry, which was one of the reasons why Holub was introduced by Alvarez to English, needs further exploration. It was suggested that Holub did not satisfy the demand for a strong

³⁸ Quinn 179.

³⁹ Quinn 180.

⁴⁰ Quinn 183.

⁴¹ Milner 80.

⁴² Qtd in Murphy 143.

⁴³ Murphy 143.

⁴⁴ Hermione Lee, “Interviews: Philip Roth, The Art of Fiction No. 84,” *The Paris Review* (Fall 1984) <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/2957/the-art-of-fiction-no-84-philip-roth>> 2 Feb. 2014.

political anti-communist statement from the Czech audience. Yet the English-speaking audience, looking from the other side of the Iron Curtain, was able to find political comments filling the gap of values missing in their capitalist society. This only proves the impact of the phenomenon of the Cold War on art.

Before Holub was brought to English by Milner and Alvarez, he had been influenced by several English poets. This part of the chapter will focus on the sources of inspiration Holub found in the English world. The poet that seems to be most influential for him is William Carlos Williams. David Graham notes “Holub brings the distinctly rational intellect of an experimental scientist. Like William Carlos Williams, whom he admires, Holub maintains two full-time careers [...]”⁴⁵ Kathryn Murphy points out that with Williams, “Holub shared an insistence on ‘No ideas/but in things’.”⁴⁶ Holub himself mentions Williams as an inspiration, but also admits that he “doesn’t get some of his poems.”⁴⁷ Another influence Holub mentions, along that of Williams, which moved his poetry into more relaxed, free verse line, were the movements in 1960s England and America. Holub also refers to the influence of Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and Craig Raine. Justin Quinn specifically mentions the influence of Ferlinghetti, Corso and Ginsberg on the *Květen* group as a whole, and further compares Holub with Ferlinghetti and Heaney in detail.⁴⁸ Holý and Čulík mention the influence of T. S. Eliot.⁴⁹ Holub himself acknowledges other poets he admires, among whom are Galway Kinnell, Russell Edson, C. K. Williams, John Ashbery, Robert Creeley, David Young and Stuart Friebert. Reviewers, remarks Quinn, tend to place Holub, whose literary culture is mostly unknown, into a larger context including Primo Levi and Ezra Pound⁵⁰ and the Confessionals.⁵¹ Holub is also associated with Samuel Beckett in the way his poems express the ambience of the absurd.⁵² Finally, affinities with Holub’s poetry and more generally with European poetry (Zbigniew Herbert and Vasko Popa) have also been made with the poetry of

⁴⁵ David Graham, “The Frightened Fawn of Sense: Mind and Nature in the Poetry of Miroslav Holub.” *The American Poetry Review* 16.4 (July/Aug. 1987): 3.

⁴⁶ Murphy 145.

⁴⁷ Roy Scheele, “An Interview with Miroslav Holub,” *Poets and Writers Magazine* 20:6 (Nov./Dec. 1992): 30.

⁴⁸ Quinn 189-194.

⁴⁹ Holý and Čulík 144.

⁵⁰ Oliver Reynolds, “A Voice for the Mute,” reviews of *Poems Before and After*, *Vanishing Lung Syndrome*, and *The Dimension of the Present Moment* by Miroslav Holub, *TLS* (May 1990): 467.

⁵¹ Al Alvarez, Introduction, *Selected Poems*, by Miroslav Holub, trans. Ian Milner and George Theiner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967): 11.

⁵² Milner 81.

Louis MacNeice.⁵³ The example of the movement of inspirations and influences that come from England to Czechoslovakia and then return in a transformed way is an index of the transnational notion of routes instead of roots introduced by James Clifford. Transnationalism proves useful for describing Holub's journeys beyond Czech borders.

⁵³ Alan Gillis, "'Any dark saying': Louis MacNeice in the nineteen fifties," *Irish University Review: a journal of Irish Studies* 42.1 (May 2012). *Literature Resource Center*
<http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.univ-paris3.fr/ps/retrieve.do?sgHitCountType=None&sort=RELEVANCE&inPS=true&prodId=LitRC&userGroupName=unipari&tabID=T001&searchId=R3&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&contentSegment=&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm¤tPosition=1&contentSet=GALE|A293948865&&docId=GALE|A293948865&docType=GALE&role=LitRC> 25 Nov. 2012.

CHAPTER IV: CONFRONTATION

From the two previous chapters, the notion of Holub's poetry is ambiguous. There seem to be two major tendencies in describing his work. The first one, which is mostly included in sources written by Czech critics, almost always places Holub only within the context of the Poetry of the Everyday. He is mostly regarded as a member of the *Květen* group. Features common to all writers of this period are emphasized. The changes that this group introduced to the Czech literary scene after the schematic social realism of the fifties are often highlighted, but with no special focus on Holub (with the exception that he is marked as the first poet to introduce scientific language into the Czech poetic tradition). There is no other prominent discussion of political ideas in Holub's poetry. On the other hand, his personal attitude towards communism is debated quite widely and even interpretations of his poetry are often loaded with unfavorable political and biographical contexts. If he is criticized for not acting against the regime openly, one can assume that the poetry contributes to this picture. His work is then interpreted within the limits of Czech historical and political context. In the largest online dictionary of modern Czech authors, no foreign secondary sources are mentioned for example.¹

On the other hand, we have the second tendency prominent in sources written by non-Czech authors, i.e., authors whose primary access to Holub's poetry is through translation. These critics approach Holub without further interest in the *Květen* group. The majority of essays on Holub mostly omit the personal with two exceptions. The first is how Holub himself presented his political views and his life; the second is the appreciation of Holub's personality as a witty, humorous and ironical man. These last three features become defining characteristics. Even short articles mention this aspect, as it was, along with Holub's ability to connect science and poetry, characteristic for his poetry. The obituary in the *New York Times* for instance introduces him as a "[...] poet and immunologist known for his ironic wit, his impatience with irrationality and his knifelike poetry full of scientific imagery."² Ian Milner remarks that "[Holub] had a fund of social anecdote from which he drew with ironic wit."³ The interpretation of his poetry is more independent of contextual analyses and is more

¹ Bohumil Svozil and Karel Piorecký, "Miroslav Holub," *Slovník české literatury po roce 1945*.

² Sarah Boxer, "Miroslav Holub is Dead at 74; Czech Poet and Immunologist," *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company (22 July 1998): A17.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/22/arts/miroslav-holub-is-dead-at-74-czech-poet-and-immunologist.html>> 14 Nov. 2013.

³ Milner 79.

regarded as a self-sufficient unit. If he is associated with other poets, those are the Eastern Europeans, whose main characteristic is recognized as the artistic creation under the pressure of the Eastern Block during the Cold War. This is perhaps because foreigners saw the former Czechoslovakia as a part of the world on the other side of the Iron Curtain, in which, as described by Roth, artists had a cardinal role in expressing the ideas of society under communism. It is clear that two distinct cultural readings are undoubtedly at work.

It is important to remind that despite looking from two opposite sides of the Iron Curtain, defined by two different sets of cultural and political circumstances, the readers still share their focus: the poetry. The context internal to the poems allows various interpretations that are then shaped by the external factors. Because of the poems' universal aspect, political as well as generally human meanings can be found in them. Holub might have wanted to write understandable poetry, but one can argue that he hardly wanted to write poetry with one unequivocal meaning. A means to achieve that is the so called Aesopian language that allows multiple interpretations. Holub reflects on the fact that poems should not, in fact, be interpreted indisputably:

You know, I hate the explication which points to a poem and asks, "What does it mean here?" I don't mean anything! You just read it, and either you get it or you don't. There is no home truth or philosophical message in the poem; it's just a feeling, a hint about something. So I am hinting at something in a poem, and I would advise: Read my poems in this way. And don't try to treat a poem like a crossword puzzle."⁴

When he says that poems should not be solved as crossword puzzles, one can imagine that he means that a poem's meanings and interpretations should not be restricted to a prescribed grid. It should not try to fit a rigid form prepared by someone else. I understand the above quote as an appeal to the readers to accept the hints from the poems and interpret (or maybe rather feel them) without restrictions. When Alvarez asked Holub if he had any poetic theories, Holub wrote a paper named "Some very individual points/valid on June 8th, 1965, 17.00 hrs,"⁵ which shows his awareness of the changeable nature of theories. Ideas once expressed may change, and one should not assume their eternal applicability. From these

⁴ Scheele, "An Interview with Miroslav Holub" 25.

⁵ Alvarez 10.

points, we also learn that for Holub “art is only experimental” as opposed to science, which is experimental and theoretical.⁶ In his poems, experiments play an important role in people’s lives. It is a necessary part of our nature which allows us to broaden horizons and discover new worlds. The experiment itself is in some cases more important than the results it brings, as for example in the poem “Pes v lomu” (A Dog in the Quarry) in which boys go through an adventure to save a dog. The end of the poem is “There are days when no answer is needed.”⁷ His poetry often mocks teachers who think they have correct answers to everything and try to impose them on pupils. While Holub’s art is perhaps not experimental in form, it is so in its juxtaposition of items that we rarely associate. This association, however, brings us a new understanding of reality, although it may be inexplicable. This notion distinctly appears as a theme in Holub’s poetry. For example, take the poem “Nemocný slabikář” (The Sick Primer). In this poem, the idea of children making their own primer from their own thoughts and ideas is in opposition to the teacher’s view, for whom such an unclassifiable activity is unimaginable.

Then how does this background help us to understand the differences in the cultural readings and identify their reasons? The aim of this chapter is to examine this on analyses of selected poems in the original and translation and to explore the validity of the theoretical background. In other words, what differences and similarities do readers see when they look at the same poem in Czech and in its English mutation, and how does it correspond with the background presented above? The Czech poems will be cited from Holub’s collected poems, a critical edition with extensive notes that include also a list of variants that appeared in poems published more than once. In our case, none of the examples used have, according to this edition, more variants. Therefore, unless Holub provided the translators with unpublished versions of these poems, we can claim that the differences appear only in translation.

Firstly, I want to focus on Holub’s approach to translation which established the final form of poems that will be presented. It was already mentioned that poetry as such is the most

⁶ Alvarez 10.

⁷ Miroslav Holub, *Poems Before & After*, trans. Ian and Jarmila Milner, Ewald Osers, George Theiner, David Young, Dana Hábová, Rebekah Bloyd and Miroslav Holub (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2006) 76. Translated by George Theiner.

difficult genre to translate.⁸ However, it seems that Holub turns this on its head, and actually uses translation as one of his poetic principles. In an interview, Holub proposes that Czechs should “preserve the language and go bilingual” to have a sense of “inner translation.”⁹ He also reflects on it elsewhere, “I was told by some important people at the American embassy: You are only protected here by being published abroad.” So I learned in the 1970s to write with the view of the English translation in my mind. And nowadays I write almost immediately both language versions.”¹⁰ There seems to be a positive and productive relationship between Holub’s emphasis on capturing the essential in things, as something independent from language, on the one hand, and easy and exact translations on the other, and vice versa. From Holub’s explanations, it is clear that the awareness of translation ultimately influenced his poetic choices already in the creating process. Conversely, these choices retrospectively influenced the actual translation. With such an attitude, Holub has been an inspirational source for other fellow poets and translators. For instance, Jan Owen wrote in an essay on translating Baudelaire, “IS POETRY what is lost in translation? Miroslav Holub, for one, did not agree with Robert Frost. His counter-definition of poetry was ‘what is preserved in translation.’ I hope so.”¹¹ On a similar note, a poet and a translator Kevin Hart reflects, “[t]he very fact that the language of the translations was often flat made it easier for me to grasp what was essential: the ways in which new perspectives could be discovered, new parables could be told, and ordinary things could be opened up to illuminate the strangeness of being alive.”¹² This comment helps us understand the way Holub saw translation. Tomas Tranströmer addresses a similar issue and looks at the relation between a poem and its concrete realizations in different languages,

⁸ One phrase illustrating this by Arne Novák, “Avšak běda! Právě lyrika to je, která nejtíže a zároveň nejméně dokonale proniká z domova do ciziny, ztrácejíc při tomto přechodu v rukách tlumočnicků nejvíce ze svého barevného pelu na motýlích křídlech a jsouc připravena v reprodukci vždy nedokonalé o hlavní své kouzlo melodické.” In Arne Novák, *Dějiny českého písemnictví* (Prague: Sfinx, 1946): 8.

⁹ Suzanne O’Shea, “Interview with Miroslav Holub,” *The Poetry Ireland Review* 30 (Autumn/Winter 1990): 69, *JSTOR* <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25577035>> 11 Mar. 2013.

¹⁰ “A conversation with Arnošt Lustig and Miroslav Holub,” *Trafika* 1 (1993): 157. Qtd in Armand 4.

¹¹ Jan Owen, “A parallel music: Translating Baudelaire,” *Southerly* 63.1 (2003), *Literature Resource Center*

<<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA126492269&v=2.1&u=unipari&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>> 25 Nov. 2012.

¹² Kevin Hart, “Tracking the trace: Why are poets so attracted to translating other poets? Kevin Hart reflects,” *Meanjin* 64.4 (Dec. 2005), *Literature Resource Center*

<<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA140657226&v=2.1&u=unipari&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>> 1 Dec. 2012.

Let me sketch two ways of looking at a poem. You can perceive a poem as an expression of the life of the language itself, something organically grown out of the very language in which it is written—in my case, Swedish. A poem written by the Swedish language through me. Impossible to carry over into another language. Another, and contrary, view is this: the poem as it is presented is a manifestation of another, invisible poem, written in a language behind the common languages. Thus, even the original version is a translation. A transfer into English or Malayalam is merely the invisible poem's new attempt to come into being. The important thing is what happens between the text and the reader. Does a really committed reader ask if the written version he reads is the original or a translation? Probably not, is the answer to that question. The reader consumes the text and doesn't worry about its origins. But the consumption will be greatly aided by the quality of the text—that is, the quality of the translation.¹³

According to this idea, Holub's poetry is more representative of the second view, and that his work can be considered a manifestation of these "invisible poems, written in a language behind the common languages."

One sees an example of such a language in the poem "Moucha"¹⁴ (The Fly).¹⁵ The poem, both in Czech and in English, accurately exemplifies Holub's use of language. The presumptions regarding language proposed in chapter two prove to be valid with little exception. The description is matter-of-fact and events are reported in short, telegraphic lines; poetic ornaments, on the other hand, are given little space. The repetition and gradation are present in variations of words (řev / supění / sténání) and phrases (Třela si nožky / Na rozpáraném koni; S ulehčením usedla / Na modrý jazyk; Začala klást vejce / Na jediné oko Johanna Uhra). Figurative speech is suppressed. The poem is an easily translatable narrative.

Certainly, there are dissimilarities between the Czech and English versions that arise from the different natures of the two languages, such as the impossibility to express "mušák" in English by one word (although it is a neologism in Czech, it has a clearly understandable

¹³ "Splendid Sights: Four European Poets," review of *Bloodaxe Poetry Introductions 2* edited by Neil Astley, *The Poetry Ireland Review* 87 (Aug. 2006): 31, *JSTOR*.
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25625469>> 25 Nov. 2012.

¹⁴ Miroslav Holub, *Spisy: Básně*, vol. 1 (Brumovice: Carpe Diem, 2003) 136-137.

¹⁵ Holub, *Poems Before & After* 52. Translated by George Theiner.

meaning derived from its root). Such differing morphological and syntactical structures are, however, insignificant for the transfer of meaning. Holub's deliberate choice of vocabulary and grammatical structures allow the translation to convey virtually the same meaning as the original. Although written in two different languages, the two versions of the same poem express the same message. As it is the case with language, rhyme and meter in Holub's poems are hardly problematic for translators. Generally speaking, Holub's readers do not lose or gain anything from the poetry in translation as Holub rarely uses traditional poetic forms. Neither metre nor rhyme is a fundamental principle of his poetry.

There are, however, a few distinctions that most likely resulted not from the linguistic and poetic possibilities of the translation from Czech to English, but from the translators' choices. These choices—notably the recurring shift in perspective caused by the change of verbal voice—need further exploration as they may affect the reading of a translated text. For instance, in the original of the poem “O Popelce” (Cinderella), Cinderella is evidently presented as the person to sort out the peas, “A přece ten hrách přebere;”¹⁶ she is the agent of the action. In English, the same line is expressed in the passive voice and the agent disappears, “And yet the peas, they *will* be sorted out.”¹⁷ Similarly, in poem “Hodina dějepisu” (A History Lesson) there is a distinguishable second person addressed in the Czech lines, “Králové / jako když pouštíš / zlatá prasátka na stěnu,”¹⁸ but it disappears in the English translation, “Kings / like golden gleams / made with a mirror on the wall.”¹⁹ On the contrary, the pronoun “you” appears in the translation of the poem “Polonius” (Polonius). In English we read “You buy him,”²⁰ whereas, in the Czech original, there is “Prodává se.”²¹ This reflexive form of the verb “to sell” can have two meanings—it is either a general statement or it implies that Polonius is selling himself. This ambiguity is important because the use of “prodávat se” as in the later context would have negative connotations; it is used for example with prostitutes. Most Czech readers are likely to notice this connotation, and the fact that Polonius has an active role in his own corruption is therefore highlighted. The translated line shifts this emphasis slightly. Such shifts in perspective may emphasize or diminish a certain aspect of a particular poem.

¹⁶ Holub, *Spisy: Básně* 10.

¹⁷ Holub, *Poems Before & After* 24. Translated by Ewald Osers. Osers' italics.

¹⁸ Holub, *Spisy: Básně* 115.

¹⁹ Holub, *Poems Before & After* 44. Translated by George Theiner.

²⁰ Holub, *Poems Before & After* 56. Translated by Ian Milner.

²¹ Holub, *Spisy: Básně* 154.

Nevertheless, they do not have a major impact on the transference of the poem's meaning. The imageries, logical structures, and messages are preserved.

A more radical impact, in my view, is caused by other changes made by the translators for no obvious reason (e.g. for metric or rhyme requirements etc.). The omission or addition of words and phrases in translated poems and different stanzaic structuring are among them. Here are some examples of poems in which something was added or omitted. To facilitate the identification of these changes, the parts which were omitted in English translations were italicized in the Czech original, and the parts added to the English versions are also in italics.

Umřela večer ²² Popel byl hrubý / jako z <i>obyčejného</i> <i>Hnědého</i> / uhlí	Death in the evening ²³ The ashes were coarse As coal
Nemocný slabikář ²⁴ A děti si musí / <i>samy</i> <i>namalovat slabikář</i> , / některé malují tečku,	The sick primer ²⁵ And children / themselves will have to paint a dot,
Poledne ²⁶ Nebe je sladké / jako tvář, již milujeme.	MIDDAY ²⁷ The sky is sweet /as a face we love <i>that day</i> .
Výlov ²⁸ A hrůza skřelí a hrůza slizu, <i>oválná hrůza tlamy</i> // spokojeně	Haul of Fish ²⁹ And the terror of the gills and the terror of slime contentedly

These modifications change the poem in translation to different extents. The title of the poem “Doma” was in English changed to “Home I.” A title is a significant part of a poem, by which the author usually indicates the subject of the whole poem. As a result, these changes are in my opinion unwarranted and negative. Such is also the case with the change in the stanzaic structure through the translation. In several poems, such as “Nemocný slabikář” (The

²² Holub, *Spisy: Básně* 72.

²³ Holub, *Poems Before & After* 36. Translated by George Theiner.

²⁴ Holub, *Spisy: Básně* 118.

²⁵ Holub, *Poems Before & After* 46. Translated by Ewald Osers.

²⁶ Holub, *Spisy: Básně* 123.

²⁷ Holub, *Poems Before & After* 47. Translated by Ewald Osers.

²⁸ Holub, *Spisy: Básně* 128.

²⁹ Holub, *Poems Before & After* 50. Translated by Ewald Osers.

Sick Primer) or “Noc v ulicích” (Night in the Streets), the translators—in this case Osers and Theiner respectively—regroup some of the stanzas. Again, these changes cause interpretive differences. This might change the flow of reading, and one might personally disagree with the translator’s decision, but to argue that the translated poem differs dramatically from the original would be an over-statement.

Furthermore, one might address the problem that readers who access Holub’s poetry in English are presented only with a selection of poems that has been chosen for them by someone else. They cannot thus have a picture of the poetry as complex as the readers of the original versions. For example, poems such as “Denní služba” (Day Duty) or “Achilles a želva” (Achilles and the Tortoise) that gave names to entire collections (which implies their significance in the given collection) are not translated. Also, many of Holub’s collections are subdivided into smaller units. This subdivision disappears in the translation. Moreover, these units are often introduced by a citation completing the final impression of the units on readers. The readers of the English version miss, for example, the information that the poem “Polonius” (Polonius) is in the collection *Slabikář* (Primer) in the part called “Nauka o člověku” (Study of Man), which is introduced by a citation by S. J. Lec, “I believe people evolved from apes. But I do not believe they are of one kind.”³⁰ This citation underlines the malice between men in the poem and the reader of the translated version is not aware of that. Of course, this problem could be solved by translating all the collections in their entirety, but, until then, one should be aware of these facts and approach the poems with this knowledge.

Although there are some other formal issues that in some interpretations may cause different readings (e.g. the use of italics that occurs in the translation, but not in the original), we may conclude that in spite of the limits that were described, the English translations of Holub’s poems correspond strongly with the Czech originals on the formal level. It is certainly true that they cannot be completely identical due to the very nature of the two languages, but the differences are negligible for the transference of meanings. Thus, the readers of the translations encounter virtually the same poems as the readers of the originals. The differences are, therefore, caused not by form, but by context.

On the edge between formal and contextual lies the translation of proper names. A translation of a poem that keeps proper names in their original language will inarguably give

³⁰ “Věřím, že lidé pocházejí z opic. Ale nevěřím, že z jednoho druhu.” Holub, *Spisy: Básně* 151. My translation.

the impression of something more exotic than a translation that changes them. In Holub's case, this varies. In the translation of the poem "Napoleon" (Napoleon), the local boy remains František.³¹ In the translation of the poem "Abeceda" (Alphabet), the Ječná Street remains in Czech as well.³² In "Pět minut po náletu" (Five Minutes After the Air Raid), on the other hand, Nádražní třída becomes Station Road.³³ Although it can play an important role in individual poems, this phenomenon does not occur steadily enough to draw a general conclusion from it. On the other hand, what is relevant to the argument of this thesis is the fact that Holub hardly limits the reality represented by proper names to Czech facts. He employs figures from various geographical, historical and mythological contexts, and thus creates a wide range of references with which readers can identify. Interestingly, the poems dealing with English facts—"Piccadilly Circus" (Piccadilly Circus) and "Greenwichský čas" (Greenwich Time)—have not been translated, but there are many others including foreign facts that were translated. Among others, the figures in these poems include Napoleon, Jeanne d'Arc, Albert Einstein, Galileo Galilei, Pablo Picasso, Immanuel Kant and others. In 1942, Holub graduated from a grammar school where he received an education with emphasis on Greek and Latin literature, which is often reflected in his poems. Holub certainly did base some of his poems on a specifically Czech context, but by employing foreign facts, he enlarges his world outside the Czech lands and history. The alien element of Czech particularity is then eliminated in translation. The choice of historical figures is also an expression of esteem for a common shared world. Holub thus becomes, as he wanted in language, more universal.

This universality may at first appear in contrast with Holub's emphasis on the concrete and the everyday. However, in Holub's case these concepts are not mutually exclusive. Rather, the universality and the basic facts and objects complement each other. The universality is a consequence of reductions to concrete objects, while these objects, on the other hand, come to represent universality. Bohumil Svozil similarly recognizes a concept of *nadindividuality* (something that is above the individual).³⁴ According to Svozil, Holub presents situations that are only outlined in their contours and are represented by mere elements. Yet these contours and elements have a fundamental validity for different situations. Svozil says that Holub

³¹ Holub, *Poems Before & After* 34. Translated by Ian and Jarmila Milner.

³² Holub, *Poems Before & After* 43. Translated by Ewald Osers.

³³ Holub, *Poems Before & After* 37. Translated by George Theiner.

³⁴ Bohumil Svozil, *Vůle k intelektuální poezii: o básnické tvorbě Miroslava Holuba* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1971) 56.

reduces situations to their “skeleton.”³⁵ In a similar way, Seamus Heaney admired Holub’s ability to lay things bare. But this bareness does not stop at the surface, Heaney suggests. In his words, Holub’s poetry explores “not so much the skull beneath the skin, more the brain beneath the skull.”³⁶ Complex situations are represented by these reduced elements. Svozil further argues that such reduced situations are deprived of concrete and individual features, and acquire characteristics that exceed the individual.³⁷ The elements, which may be represented by an object or a figure, do not merely represent themselves. They represent a category; they become models and types, and thus become universal.

In addition, this idea of reduction to reach the fundamental—and thus universal—is supported by enumerations, which, as we mentioned in chapter two, are a common poetic tool in Holub’s poetry. Holub often names items in a list, whether they are objects, people, places or anything else. The practice implies that they are interchangeable. The series of objects creates the impression that the list is not limited and, therefore, opens possible spots to be filled in by the readers. For example in “Patologie” (Pathology), Holub enumerates “the tongues of beggars / the lungs of generals / the eyes of informers / the skins of martyrs.”³⁸ The variation has an accentuating impact in the poem. It puts together various concrete items which, as a whole represent a paradigm to which readers may add their own terms. In this poem, the relationship of body-parts and people is emphasized through repetition and it becomes more important than the individual items named. A structure in which a particular body-part defines a man’s activity—the tongues are representative of beggars, the eyes of informers, etcetera—is established.

The enumerations also carry a principle of equality and democratization. Even though the items are listed in order, the hierarchy is not important. The message would not be changed if they were switched. Listing them also means putting them at an equal level. This may be well proven by the poem “Ambulance” (Casualty), in which it is supplemented with an ironic twist. Holub writes, “they bring a hundred white bodies / a hundred red bodies / a hundred black bodies.”³⁹ The fact that bodies of different colours are listed separately gives the

³⁵ Svozil, 56.

³⁶ Seamus Heaney, “The Fully Exposed Poem,” *Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 46.

³⁷ Cf. Svozil 56

³⁸ Holub, *Poems Before & After 29*. Translated by George Theiner.

³⁹ Holub, *Poems Before & After 30*. Translated by Ewald Osers.

impression that they are differentiated. The whole poem, nevertheless, results in the opposite meaning. When a man is reduced to a corpse, the colour of skin is of no difference. Another example is a list from the poem “Výbuch” (Explosion), “people with shovels / people with hopes / people with rags.”⁴⁰ Placing shovels and rags on the same list with hopes show that feelings, emotions and ideas are inseparable from objects, and they seem not to be two different things, but rather two declarations of the same element. Holub easily lists such various items in one poem and, therefore, implies the transition that takes place from objects to a larger, universal world.

The specificity of this object-world relationship is what critics often recognize in Holub’s poetry world as microcosms and macrocosms and their mutual relationship, along with a focus on man’s role in these relations. As Amy Ling also notices,⁴¹ the best index of this notion is the poem “Křídla” (Wings) introduced by a quote by Williams Carlos Williams, “We have a microscopic anatomy / of the whale / this / is / reassuring.”⁴² In the poem, the microcosm is represented by microbes, and the macrocosm by the universe. Their relationship is presented as a mutual one as the phrase “We have / a map of the universe / for microbes,” is immediately reversed to “We have / a map of a microbe for the universe.” These two opposite poles of one connected world are then transformed into a man’s life, whose microcosm includes “the ability / to sort peas, / to cup water in our hands, / to seek / the right screw / under the sofa / for hours.” This ability is what brings him to the macrocosmic universe, because “This / gives us / wings.” Holub works with this theme as he works with language—he minimizes the world into a fundamental reduction, which has a universal validity. Similarly, his language is simplified to become the index of ideas, and as such can be understood universally.

⁴⁰ Holub, *Poems Before & After* 38.

⁴¹ Amy Ling, “The Uni(que)verse of Miroslav Holub,” *Books Abroad* 48.3 (Summer, 1974): 506-511.

In this essay, the Williams quote is. “We have a microscopic anatomy / of the whale / this / gives / Man / assurance.” It is then different from the one in *Poems Before & After*.

⁴² Holub, *Poems Before & After* 60. Translated by George Theiner.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Just as the small activities of men in the poem “Křídla” (Wings) reach to the outer world into a general sense of humanity, so Holub’s poetry crosses borders into larger contexts. Throughout the thesis, it has become clear that Holub’s present day position on the literary scene is a result of a set of variables, all of which proved to have a significant relevance. From the concrete to the abstract, they could be named: the language of the poetry and its formal features, the contents of the poetry, author’s personal life and its reflection in the poetry, the literary scene, the cultural and political situation, and the global phenomenon of the Cold War. Generally, the issue of transmission of poems’ meaning in translation is closely connected to the cultural and political situation. In Holub’s case, it is also affected by his personal encounters with the English-speaking world, and especially with his translators. We should not have to choose between historicizing readings and close readings in Holub’s case. The influence of such diverse aspects on the reception of Holub’s poetry support the idea that literature is a vast and complex entity which can be interpreted from different standpoints. The most important conclusion this thesis has come to is therefore the fact that the picture of Holub’s poetry cannot be reduced to a single aspect; it has to be considered in light of the larger framework up to the Cold War. To explore this grander plan, one cannot limit themselves to a narrow nationalistic reading. The picture of Holub’s poetry, which the theories of World Literature and Transnationalism theory help to uncover, is much richer beyond the national borders. Cases like Holub’s are indexes of the need for such theories. If Damrosch establishes world literature as work that gains in translation, Holub’s work certainly has its place in it.

The focus on language as the medium that allows the transmission of Holub’s poetry from one world to another has led us to conclude that Holub’s use of language is very specific. Writing in a “universal” language, as Holub remarks, is a complicated issue when it comes to comparison with other Czech authors. In his opinion, it was not fair that his language made him famous in the West while there were several poets much better than he writing in Czech.¹ Answering a question in an interview regarding what other Czech poets deserved to be better known in the USA, Holub said, “[w]ell, somebody is always being ignored. Translation is a

¹ Cf. Christopher Meredith, “The Tension in the Line,” *The Literary Review: an international journal of contemporary writing* 44:2 (Winter 2001): 210.

kind of discrimination, so you never get a full perspective of a nation's literature from the mirror of translation. The trouble is that the most interesting Czech literature cannot be properly translated."² This proves the aim of this thesis to uncover general issues inherent to the translation of poetry from Czech to English to be too ambitious; nonetheless, the particular case of Holub was explored.

Another limitation to the objectives established in the introduction that I have encountered during the writing of this thesis is the amount of Holub's work. His poetry stretches over almost forty years and certainly has its specificities at different periods. It is certain that to look at Holub's poetry as a whole may be overly generalizing as each of the time periods would deserve to be approached individually. Also, after seeing the course of Holub's life, the question arises as to how Holub's poetry changes through time under the influence of English. For example whether it changed after he had travelled to the United States or at times when he knew English was the only language in which his books could be published. He declared that his awareness of this fact made him to write with English versions of his poems in his mind, and that in some cases, he intentionally put this into praxis by writing the two versions at the same time. Unfortunately, such an issue requires space that is not possible in the course of this thesis. Due to the necessity of choices, I have decided to include Holub's poems from his first four collections as they represent what had riveted Alvarez's attention and as the poems from this period is in the Czech criticism discussed more than his later work.

The close analyses of these poems have brought us to the core outcome of this thesis. Holub's deliberate reduction of objects and ideas to their fundamental features, which is formally expressed by simplified, reduced language, carries an aspect of universality. The language as well as the content of the poems is minimized to basic key ideas which have a ubiquitous aspect, and as such are only a representation of a larger macrocosm. The concrete and the abstract are interconnected; the concentrated elements gain a general validity. Such a condensed content is easily transferable to another language, yet does not lose any of its charged qualities.

² Scheele, Roy, "Miroslav Holub," Interview, *The Verse Book of Interviews*, eds. Brian Henry and Andrew Zawacki (Seattle: Wave Books, 2005) 254.

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