

Czech Metaphysical Poetry of the 1960s

MILENA KALINOVSKA

ABYSS OF ABYSSES

Love towards God destroys itself
To give Space to God
Love of oneself and of one's neighbours destroys both
To give Time to God

Yet we do not love God and destroy love
To give Space to nothingness
Yet we do not love either ourselves or our neighbours
And destroy God
To give Time to nothingness

In August 1968, the liberalization of Czech society was suddenly cut short by the Soviet invasion. For Czech literature this meant the re-establishment of Socialist Realism, the official literary style which demands "a truthful and historically correct portrayal of reality in its revolutionary development". Socialist Realism was formulated at the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934 and was adopted by the Union of Czechoslovak Writers at its First Congress in 1949 after the Communist Party took power in Czechoslovakia. Literature now had to glorify the building of the socialist State, and censorship introduced by the regime eliminated all deviation from the Party line. Only certain publishing houses, controlled by the Communist Party, were allowed to function and writers had to join the Writers' Union and so submit to Party control, or else face persecution, abuse in the press or imprisonment. As a result of Khrushchev's speech at the 20th Party Congress (of the Soviet Union) in 1956 and the ensuing "thaw", the Czechoslovak Writers' Union became more tolerant towards writers. Artistic activity began to flourish and works which largely ignored Socialist Realism appeared in the '60s. Writers were no longer interested in the social usefulness of literature: they now wanted to express their own ideas and feelings.

Metaphysical poetry formed an important part of Czech poetry in the '60s. Politics became divorced from art and writers started using a personal style in their work. They turned from worldly matters to the inner world, to the human soul. An interest in mysticism, officially neglected for decades because it was considered reactionary, revived. Writers returned to traditional values and challenged the values of official literature by writing from direct experience. They combined the earthly with the divine and used religious symbolism to convey Christian truth as revealed in everyday life.

The Czech poet, Vladimír Holan, believes that only metaphysical poetry can answer the basic questions about the nature of man,¹ and it was he above all who developed this kind of poetry in the 1960s. Vladimír Holan was born in Prague in 1905. The old Augustinian monastery where he learned Latin attracted him so much that he wanted at first to become a monk. However, after finishing his secondary education he worked for seven years in a pensions office in Prague and then became an editor of the arts journal, *Zivot* (Life) in 1933. Since 1940 he has devoted himself to writing. His early poetry (1920s) was melancholy and introverted, but after the events of Munich in 1938 he turned to political poetry and dedicated a poem "Thanks to the Soviet Union" to the liberation of Czechoslovakia from the Germans in 1945. In 1948, however, Holan was subjected to official disapproval for not adhering to Marxist literary theories: he was accused of "formalism". From 1948 to 1963 he remained silent. Then in 1963 his voice was heard once more: the Third Congress of the Writers' Union held that year marked the final break with the Stalinist era, and as a result it became possible to publish new works, including poems by Vladimír Holan.

Between 1963-1964 ten collections of his poems were published almost simultaneously and Holan was suddenly acclaimed as the principal living Czech poet. He won international literary awards and was given the highest praise at home. His poems were translated into English, German, French, Italian and Swedish. During his period of isolation Holan often questioned his work as a poet and found himself reduced to talking to himself.² But poetry helped him to survive. In the following poem he expresses some of the anguish which he experienced during this period.

MEMORY OF SEPTEMBER 1952

The wall of autumn itches
 Scratched to the raw blood-red
 Of ampelopsis leaves
 And you a Czech poet before the wall
 Almost a beggar
 But to trust in man
 Is like denying God
 And yet to long for miracle

Holan is not strictly speaking a religious poet. He is simply interested in the enigma of God's presence in a godless and lawless world and he portrays the mysteriousness of religion.³ Although Holan writes on a metaphysical level, his poetry is the product of real life: he interprets historical situations, comments on man's existence and speaks on behalf of humanity. Man stands at the centre of Holan's poetry. Man's sorrow, linked with the biblical account of Paradise lost, fills Holan's poems.⁴ Suffering, Holan writes, is the only inborn reality of man's life,⁵ and paradoxically, it is through suffering that man is redeemed.

Today Holan is criticized in official circles for writing poetry which lacks a positive outlook on life. His poetry is considered introverted and divorced from society; official critics accuse him of singing odes to death instead of celebrating life. But the basis for his pessimism is to be found in the reality which surrounded him. Words like "good", "love" and "freedom" had been so distorted that they had lost all meaning, and in order to recover their value Holan had to turn to expressions which remained unspoilt and place them next to those that had been destroyed. Thus his poetry contains many paradoxes, shifting themes and questions. When he writes about death it is because he wants to awaken life; when he writes about murder it is because he wants to protest against it; when he speaks about hell, as in the following poem, it is with the hope of God in mind:

HELL

I do not think that one should break
Through the doors of the tower
To find out what action to take
When bells are ringing
I do not think that time is within reach
Like a book to be read
Now on its own
Hell is always at the beginning
And hope should be found
Only at the end

Despite his scepticism, Holan finds in the ambiguous, desolate world a place for God, beauty, love and innocence, and so he does not lose hope. Despite all the dehumanizing forces, man remains a being created in God's image who longs for the Absolute.

The liberal period of the '60s has passed, and now, during the present period of "normalization", the creative writing of the '60s is condemned for deviating from true socialism. Poetry is accused of neglecting the proletarian purpose of art: it has failed to strive for "the greatest level of collectivism and the negation of bourgeois individualism". The artists of the '60s are accused of élitism since they isolated themselves from the

people. According to official pronouncements, since the XIV Congress of the Communist Party in 1971, artists have disassociated themselves from "right-wing adventurism" and have suppressed the religious tendencies which appeared in the poetry of Vladimír Holan.⁶ So ideological conformity has been re-established – but at a cost. In the following poems Holan expresses the pain which his "scourged" heart has experienced.

TODAY

Thus it is today
Utter darkness
And God looks on us
With torn out eyes

We ask each other
Do you still exist?
And God himself is groping
Through the sacked heavens

PUNISHMENT

Scourged is my heart
And beaten out my spirit
I tried to find a centre
Of that which is a circle
Within the circle traced by God

(The poems included in this article were translated by Karel Brušák. Ed.)

¹ "S Vladimírem Holanem", *Literární Noviny*, 9 May 1964, p. 6.

² *Ibid.*

³ Vladimír Holan, *Selected Poems*, tr. Jarmila and Ian Milner, Penguin Modern European Poets, London 1971, p. 13.

⁴ Vladimír Holan, "K Poezii", *Lamento*, sebrané spisy, svazek III, Odeon. Prague 1970, p. 280.

⁵ "Lyrika Vladimíra Holana", *Literární Noviny*, 14 November 1964, p. 5.

⁶ "Rozhovor s šefredaktorem Dr. Jirím Hájkem", *Tvorba*, 14 January 1976, pp. 1-2; "Ve znamení socialismu", *Tvorba*, 7 January 1976, pp. 10-12.