

Passer-By

The Poetry of Ivan Blatný

In December 1971 the poet and translator Jan Zábřana sent me five poems by Ivan Blatný written during the years 1948-1953:

It seems that these five poems amount to everything which Blatný wrote in England. I haven't been able to confirm the reports that he was trying to write in English in and about 1955, and that a collection of eleven poems written in English exists. In the second half of the 1950s I heard about this "English" collection several times from various people, but I met with no-one who had read it or had it in their possession.

That was the state of our knowledge of Blatný at that time. We knew the four collections which he published in Czechoslovakia before 1948, but because of the walls which separated the two worlds, it was impossible to ascertain what he wrote and how he lived after his emigration. In the 1950s, a "report" spread around Prague that Ivan Blatný, destitute and abandoned, had died somewhere in England. The report was even broadcast by Czechoslovak Radio. This could have been deliberate disinformation, and indeed state security maintained an interest in Blatný's poetry up to the 1980s.

Let us return to the beginnings. Leaving aside the poems which Blatný published as a student in *Studentský Časopis* [Student Magazine], we see Blatný making his début in *Jarní almanach básnický 1940* [Spring Poetry Almanac 1940]. Fourteen young poets appeared in this almanac, half of whom now occupy a significant position in the annals of Czech poetry. The miscellany was introduced by the eminent literary critic Václav Černý:

Let us hold back from premature judgement as to whether or not this is a new generation. Perhaps they think of themselves in this way. However, they develop naturally from

tendencies which became apparent in the post-war recent period, in authors such as Hora, Halas, Zahradníček; and these names are enough to provide an idea of the prevalent themes.

While Černý's characterisation is accurate for several of the poets in the almanac, in the case of Blatný, he could not have been wider of the mark.

The preoccupations of poets like František Halas and Vladimír Holan are, in a word, dark. Halas, with his dark motifs of death, nothingness and his bitter eroticism, breaks with the avant garde generation of Vítěslav Nezval, which manifested an almost hedonistic intoxication with the beauties of life and social optimism; and Holan, through intensifying the philosophical dimensions of these motifs, continued in this vein. Significantly, Nezval and Halas differ even in formal terms: the mellifluous song of Nezval or Jaroslav Seifert is in stark contrast to the cacophonous and heavy-going formations of Holan, which are full of neologisms and strain the grammatical forms of the language.

In the same year that the almanac was published, Ivan Blatný brought out his first book *Paní Jitřenka* [Mrs Aurora], and in it, almost in the spirit of a manifesto, declares his allegiance to the poet whom Černý did not include in that kindred group, that is, to Jaroslav Seifert.

When I think of my death, I want to sing it
As I would apples or a robe of waters,
A ledge in autumn, leaves erasing it,
A wind which plays from these notes strewn in tatters.
On my last day let oval music sound
Through gardens where a dove wings lightly by,
And in its blue bath, languour-full and round,
So will I luminously, clearly die.
And tenderness, come close like city light,
And read out Seifert to me, passing bright.

.....
Then I'll breathe in, a tongue of drops so light,
So near to joy like Seifert's, passing bright.

Anything in early Halas demonstrates the abyss that lies between these two strands:

Of earth the scent of death the scent
the lurching shadow broken on the pavement
choking with the lunar bile
.....

In the oily agate of ominous waters
the blossom uglier of sickness opens
and dew of toads so hideous
.....

Evil contagion spreads even to the clouds
it will jealously protect its rain
and the scorpions are killed in sundown's pale blaze

And so on. In Halas, nothing associated with death is beautiful, and its shadow falls on everything and every situation; against this, Blatný, when confronting his death, would like to "sing it/ As I would apples". He will die "luminously, clearly". He will breathe in death "So near to joy like Seifert's, passing bright". What strikes one is the stubbornness with which Blatný repeatedly confesses his enchantment with the landscape, with girls, with all he sees and hears, its colours, light, and intoxicating fragrance:

And while young girls move back and forth
Above these limbs, intricate beryl,
With colours shimmering and still wet
I bring you this aquarelle.

The world is somehow brought to book, on a square of paper with light, translucent strokes. And if any shadow falls on this, it is only a slight melancholic haze.

Often, literary historians are simplistic in the way they extrapolate certain poetic dispositions from poets' biographies. If we were to take such a biographical approach to Blatný, we might be surprised to learn that at the age of eleven he lost his father and at thirteen his mother; in his poetry we find no trace of such catastrophes. From his *début* collection to his last, his fundamental outlook is, in the context of modern poetry at least, almost heretically positive. I emphasise that I am speaking here about Blatný's poetry, that is, about the poet's relation to the world as it is found within the text. In order to be completely accurate about his early work, I should add that luminosity, calmness and all that fragrance and shimmer are occasionally disrupted, albeit infrequently, by motifs of disharmony, intimations of the cruelty of love, and pain.

In the following year, 1941, he published his second book, *Melancholické procházky* [Melancholic Walks]. In formal terms, there is no difference between it and his first; if anything there is a more consistent use of prosody (especially the alexandrine), and rhyme (both cross rhyme and envelope form). In formal terms, he achieves perfection not through experimentation but rather through traditional means. That such perfection was achieved by a poet not yet twenty bears witness to his amazing receptive abilities. Change lay ahead, and this is announced discreetly in this book. So discreetly that contemporary criticism did not even register it. The new development is in image and motif. There are more images of urban landscapes and—what would become emblematic in his subsequent work—especially, an urban “everyday landscape”, “rotting marketplace”, “a house full of vegetables”, “a bus screeches out of the square”, “the rumble of a locomotive”, which he remarked was his most “beloved motif”, and so on.

Discreetly, and still in a modest measure, what begins to emerge is another constitutive element of Blatný's later poetic, one which would come to full flowering in the final phase of his œuvre, and one of the imagistic *points d'appui* of his poems' structure: quotation. Here, for the moment, it is only intimated. It is interesting that he does not quote only great authors: we do indeed come across Apollinaire (“Le Pont Mirabeau”, “La Jolie Boulangère”), Desnos (“La Bouteille à la Rivière”), but we equally we encounter Jan Jiří, a Czech poet known only to a handful of people today, and to only a few more in 1941.

The February 1942 number of *Život* [Life] printed an essay by Jindřich Chalupecký entitled “Generations”. This study can be considered the manifesto of the new artistic generation, heretofore unknown, that was only then emerging. Alternatively, we can view it as Chalupecký's attempt to draw it forth, as he groups together a few individuals in whom he senses its advent. Few of his formulations are positive in character, and his criticism of the young poets whom Černý gathered in the almanac is detailed and crushingly dismissive. The dismissiveness addresses two aspects: the vague humanism of the group surrounding the poet Kamil Bednár and the Parnassian, conventional poetic canon of the young poets who have already gained some renown. Chalupecký numbered Blatný among these. He refers to him through the quotation I gave above (“And read out Seifert to me, passing bright”):

By way of illustration, I used quotations from several different authors—authors who are the subject of this criticism... as representatives of the generation—and I did not name them. I do not wish therefore to pass judgement the earnestness of their personal efforts; on the contrary, I wanted to outline the general climate in which young art exists in the Czech Lands... It is melancholy. Somewhere far, far at the edge of a great spiritual development in the world, these verselets and images are growing, conceived without sin and without the prospect of reward, without hope and without resistance, conceived with good intentions. And it is only with those good intentions, those praiseworthy good intentions to make verselets and images, since the more verselets and images there are the better the world will be, and once there are only these verselets and images, my word, things will be so beautiful... So beautiful. And everything terrible and splendid, everything that art dared when it freed itself from its servitude and turned to itself, will be no more; and all that responsibility which it took upon itself will be no more. There will be verselets, images, critics, publishers and a readership—and all will read Seifert passing bright, and sometimes talk of the sublime idea of humanity, and nothing else...

Before this generation could agree about its programme and formulate it theoretically, in effect it determined it. This is a generation, and it is an academic, Parnassian generation. It is a generation which is the enemy of art.

Chalupecký does not formulate any binding programme. His assumption is that if this generational difference were to be tabled as a “new style”, then it would only lead to a new academism:

If there is a difference in generations it is this: the will to accuracy, the degree of limitation of the new art's own problematic... this is why the question of generations, half-generations and anti-generations is beside the point. What is central is that we can always distinguish those for whom art is only an inessential, facile ornament of life, an ornament of emotions, an ornament of ideas, an ornament of culture... from those for whom art is one part of that huge,

constant dream, that ominous and prophetic dream of Western man. [...] This art above all will not be something "cultural". It will be a part of human life, a part of human fate.

There is not space here to touch upon all aspects of Chalupecký's thought. It seems to me that in his thinking there resonates the avant garde illusion of going beyond the conflict between art and life, that is, he believes that art will become a part of human life and lead man to his destiny. It is not my aim to analyse the weaknesses of this programme, the priorities of which were an explicitly formulated resistance to academism and to art as an ornament of life. Chalupecký did not restrict himself to theoretical proclamations. On the pages of the same number of *Život* in 1943 he published poets and painters germane to his vision. Among the painters, we find František Gross, Kamil Lhoták, and František Hudeček; and among the poets, Josef Kainar, Milada Součková and in pole position Jiří Kolář. If Chalupecký's essay was a call to arms, then several painters and poets responded to him in the affirmative. Ivan Blatný was among them.

What this established, whether we view it as a result of a fixed program or not, was a certain number of themes which Group 42 (as the writers around Jindřich Chalupecký became known) dealt with. Their thematic terrain was the city and the man in the city. But when these artists say "city", they mean above all its peripheries, its yards, pubs, workshops, where one can hear the talk of ordinary city people. In *Roky a dny* [Years and Days], Jiří Kolář appeals to Chesterton, who said that the philosophy of mortar and bricks was closer to him than the philosophy of the beetroot. And he continues:

If someone worked up a poem about the miraculous goings-on of a city—whether image by image, shape by shape, word by word, or tone by tone—and transferred those mad goings-on to the thyme-filled atmosphere of the countryside... he could make flowers blossom from concrete, make trees of granite and tin bear fruit, from rivers make asphalt torrents or turn the air into clear glass. It is at that point that we would be convinced of the fine pristine character of this drama...

It would be worth investigating if this urban poetic, this urban bedazzlement, is connected with the opposition to some of the important ideas of the Czech national revival. That nineteenth-century movement saw the life and culture of village people as the authentic core of the national spirit. Such a turn towards ruralism had dangerous echoes in the Nazi ideology of blood and soil, and we might recall that at this point the Czech Lands were a Protectorate of Germany. More positively, what is undoubtedly going on here is the renovation of relations to the Western spiritual tradition, and the central tenets of this orientation were in part given by the European literary tradition. Just as the Surrealists looked back to Baudelaire and Rimbaud, so too did the poets of Group 42; however the latter stressed different aspects of these French poets than the Surrealists. For instance, Kolář recalled Baudelaire's statement that "the pertinent ideal of poetry is borne mainly from experience of the large city, from the crossing of its innumerable relations", and from Baudelaire's poetry he quotes these lines from "Paysage":

Les deux mains au menton, du haut de ma mansarde,
Je verrai l'atelier qui chante et qui bavarde;
Les tuyaux, les clochers, ces mats de la cité,
Et les grands ciels qui font rêver d'éternité.

*Perched in my high look-out, palms under chin,
I'd study buzzing shops and working men;
Turrets and chimney-tops are masts in skies
Endless enough to seem like paradise.*

(Trans. Walter Martin)

And from Rimbaud this:

I thought that I could judge the depth of the city in several places from the coppery benches, from the flat roofs and stairways, surrounding halls and pillars. It is a wondrous thing that I could not explain...

We also encounter names of writers unknown to or uninteresting for Kolář's predecessors: James Joyce, Henry Miller and T.S. Eliot. The French horizon of the pre-war avant garde is widened by the group—without doubt because of Chalupecký—to the world of

English and American poetry. However, Paris still remained for them the capital city of the world, and several members of the group travelled there once the war had ended.

Blatný published a new book of poetry, *Tento večer* [This Evening] after the war in the autumn of 1945. Its first poem, which was also its title poem, is dated 1942 and the whole book displays the influence of Group 42's poetic. The frontispiece was drawn by a member of the group, Kamil Lhoták, who furnished a picture with the necessary yard, clapboard kennel and floating balloon—the landscape of some flying field forgotten by the world shortly after 1900. In “Landscape”, Blatný would seem to have described this painting by Lhoták, or at least something similar:

While in the nearby hotel they draw the blinds and while we
flit through the new suburban streets
New yards, storehouses and playgrounds with lonely figures
standing lost
Lit up by gas lights like in some painting by Kamil Lhoták
From either the end or the beginning of this century.

The metamorphosis of Blatný's poetry did not go unnoticed:

Even in the darkest passages of this collection, the poet does not hide those moments and moods which were apparent in Blatný's earlier work. The tone fuses fragmented quotations caught in a welter of voices as they fill the yards, the corners, the pubs—and the desolate zones. Elsewhere... we see his descriptive tendencies. Thus different elements collide in his search. But for the time being they do not coalesce in new poetic material, let alone create a new form.

This contemporary critic (Karel Bodlák in *Listy* [Leaves]) is confused by the radical change. The song-like alexandrine is replaced by free verse, metaphor is for the most part substituted by “direct naming”; the banality of seeing, if we can consider the use of poetic clichés in the previous books as such, is replaced by the thematisation of banality to such a radical extent that we come upon part of a shopping list as lines of poetry:

Fish, cabbage, milk, rolls, matches	11.50
	4.40
	5.00
	2.10
	4.00
	<hr/>
	27.00

The poetry also absorbs fragments, in collage, of official notices, snatches of conversation heard on the street, and there are some poems written in a colloquial style.

Nevertheless, something of the earlier Blatný remains. In this book, which is so different in formal and thematic terms, Blatný's tendency towards mellifluousness bound by rhythm and rhyme is evident. This is also true for his next book, *Hledání přítomného času* [In Search of Present Time] (1947), where the number of rhymed lines (including alexandrines) increases. The motif of the pedestrian is new, and from this, in two poems published later in magazines, we get "Kolemjdoucí" [Passer-by]. It is worth remarking that this motif was beginning to take on the character of a symbol in the art of the time. The *First Testament* of Vladimír Holan begins with "Strider":

Morning comes... And this unsteady strider
 moves through the alleys... feeds the birds...
 Is everydayness in itself

Holan's walker appears in 1942, in the depths of the war, in the work of the surrealist painter František Janoušek: "two small oils with a spare male figure, who here strolls self-confidently with a whip in his hand, and there with a lordly gesture reaches out over a torpid figure—it is the last variant in a line of iconographic pictures of helpless victim and violent usurper" (Chalupecký). Inspired by Janoušek, František Hudeček transforms "Strider" in a recurring image of the nightwalker, the lonely inhabitant of the empty, nocturnal city streets. It is difficult to decide whether this inhabitant of the city house, of the city street, is a sign of indifference or of powerlessness. In the overall pattern of the poem, it is not significant. The passer-by is an anonymous someone, who walks through the day registering its banality without judging it.

In formal terms, Blatný goes furthest beyond the bounds of the genre in the poem "Play". Between the verse-sequences of three verses he inserts prose accounts of a dream. "Play" was his last magazine publication of a poem before his emigration.

Blatný departed for a study-stay in England at the beginning of 1948 in the company of his friends Jiří Kolář and Arnošt Vaněčkem (and with the intercession of Halas and Nezval). He would never return to Czechoslovakia. The Congress of Young Writers, which took place in March 1948, was a long way from being the levelled, servile assembly it later became in the Confederation of Writers, and yet it emphatically criticised Blatný's emigration. For a long time after this, the poet's name became taboo. In his book *Křídla* [Wings] (1952), Vítěslav Nezval, Blatný's father-figure and friend, published a poem which was without doubt addressed to Blatný, though the poet's name appears nowhere in it:

Ah, dear, the pity of your part,
You, the renouncing poet.
To fall out with your nation, heart,
Your tongue become a turncoat

.....

Was it for fame? What? Peace and quiet?
While still we dig, all who
You so disliked. The people's plight
You cheated—*we* stayed true.

This year the wheat so lightly falls
for us, for work we do.
While you're within asylum walls...
And still I pity you.

Indeed Blatný soon did end up within the walls of an asylum, and spent about ten years there. He could move freely about but there was nowhere for him to go. Friends who had emigrated had worries of their own. And Blatný, as people from Czechoslovakia who knew him during this period have remarked, was not equipped with those characteristics and skills which enable a person to organise life's practical arrangements. As a result, he spent the rest of his life, if not exactly locked up in asylums, not com-

pletely free. But let Blatný himself speak, here in an interview with Martin Pluháček in 1989:

Twenty years ago I was already in the House of Hope in Ipswich. I wasn't exactly happy there. Later in St Clement's Hospital I moved to Clacton-on-Sea. Maybe three years... Simply, from the time I arrived in Clacton, I have been happy. I live here in the Edensor Residential Hotel, I have a large comfortable armchair and I have a desk, where I sit very happily and write poetry every day.

A short time before, he could work in only one place where it was quiet and where he placed a kind of large book with hard covers on his knees on which to write poems. There had been a period seventeen years before this, that is, before Frances Meacham discovered him to be a Czech poet, when the sheets of paper with his poems on them were tidied away into oblivion by the careful hands of nurses. It was not Blatný's habit to bemoan his lot. Of the published poems I know only one where he complains bitterly about his fate, about his abandonment and about his fear of suffering:

The poor withered body of Ivan Blatný
wounded repeatedly by those who see
the body full of shame of sex
begins its sixtieth birthday

Sixty laughable years
the butt of all the world

In him there is fear too
the fear of the fists and kicks
of those who only know a quick and comfortable death
All his loved poets were such
They spent a day with him and left
and they enjoyed their happiness one whole day of life

He knows his place he shouldn't be offside
he was ostracised and booted out
of society

In a fashion, Ivan Blatný lived and was cared for. It is only right here to record with gratitude that he lived at the expense of the British state and in the last years of his life very happily, as he himself confirms. He died in England in 1990, in the Hotel Edensor.

In the 1950s and to the end of the 1960s Blatný wrote hardly anything. I mentioned earlier that from this period we know of only five poems. From the beginning of the 1970s he began to write with an energy which has rarely been seen in aging poets. The uncontrollable urge to write is more usually a symptom of youth. It is difficult to say what the impulse was for this reawakening. Martin Pluháček notes—and perhaps he had it from Blatný himself—that the inspiration for this fresh burst was the book of his friend Klement Bochořák, which someone brought to him in England. There are several hundred copybooks which Blatný filled with poems in his last twenty years. From this huge amount there emerged only three selections of poems by 1990, of which Blatný himself edited one. He gave it the title *Pomocná škola Bixley* [Bixley Remedial School], and this book was published in samizdat in 1982 in Czechoslovakia in the KDM series. It was an extraordinary step, in publishing terms, as it was not the habit to print émigré-poets in samizdat—priority was given to those poets who remained in the country and could not publish officially. *Pomocná škola Bixley* was published exactly as Blatný had edited it. Jiří Kolář sent a copy of the manuscript to Prague.

In 1979, Blatný published a collection with the Toronto house, Sixty-Eight Publishers, entitled *Stará bydliště* [Old Addresses], and Antonín Brousek selected and arranged the collection from a huge amount of manuscripts. Finally, in 1987, under the title *Pomocná škola Bixley*, another selection of poems, which contained most of the poems in the original collection of that title and other work chosen by Brousek from manuscripts which had not been arranged by Blatný, was published in Toronto.

After Blatný's long years of absence from Czech literature (with the exception of the freer days of the 1960s when it was possible to refer to him—if only to his pre-1948 work), his new poetry registered the brutal encroachments on the settled picture of Czech poetry and indeed his own poetry.

For the first time in the modern era we see the emergence of a poet who writes in several languages, for the most part in Czech and English, and who does this in such an unusual way that in the space of one poem alone the reader needs to call on two, if not

three, languages. A bilingual or even trilingual poet is one thing, but a trilingual poem? The lines in foreign languages are not what one might call “inserts”. Blatný often moves from one language to another through a denotation shared by both languages, but at the same time he exploits the various signifying fields of the word which are not covered in one of the two languages. I give one example of this approach:

Der Herbst is gekommen
aber die Sohne ist weich
ale slunce je měkké jako postel

*(Der Herbst is gekommen
aber die Sohne ist weich
but the sun is soft like a bed)*

In Czech, the sun in the sense of daylight cannot be “soft”, and so the poet’s image of that “softness” of light forges the association with the sun as material: it is soft “like a bed”.

Blatný had attempted to use bilingualism as a poetic method before this, during his time in the Czech Lands. In the poem “Play”, he combines a Czech text with French and German passages. Life in a foreign-language environment contributed to the development of this tendency. (He came from a bilingual family: he spoke German with his grandmother.)

“Poets have always been inspired by other poets”, he writes in one poem. Nothing surprising there, if we take it to mean the first impulse, which is often hidden away. In Blatný, where this rule holds, we must also understand that he frequently quoted other poets’ lines in order either to kick-start his own work in the metre and intonation of the quotation, or to obtain a rhythmic blueprint with which his line then immediately broke. Occasionally he worked with a half-quote or paraphrase: “socialism, far-and-near from it” (Pasternak), “surrealism, far and near from it” (Blatný). He liked to quote his beloved Seifert often: “The telephone receiver is a black blossom and bud”, and Nezval: “Marcel Proust still lived at that time and the Dadas held congresses”.

Blatný is not a poet of depths. It is unimaginable that he would write a meditation similar to Holan’s *Noc s Hamletem* [A Night with Hamlet]. He is a poet of the surface, where everything is similarly high or similarly proximate. How did he achieve such

an effect? In Blatný's poetry we encounter hordes of names: Nezval, Seifert, Desnos, Breton, Trakl, Verlaine, and on and on, but also F.S. Procházka, who "was a poet like everyone else, wasn't he?" He also frequently mentions the names of painters, for instance Kupka or Rousseau, and beside these, the caricatures of Josef Lada or Marold's historical panorama. So too with football players: in Blatný's poetry, unknown players from some club in the suburbs of Brno, his home town, rub shoulders with famous strikers.

In Blatný's world, the memory of a line of poetry, of a poet, of a painter holds the same significant meaning as the recollection of a football match. Each moment—I paraphrase Blatný's line—is worthy of a poem, each situation, each person is worthy of it. If the name of a politician appears in a poem—be it Lenin, Trotsky, Masaryk, Beneš or Hitler—that name is without any ideological context, and is part of a recollection of reading something, of an event, of some private experience—it is his event, an event in the life of the poet.

It was as if time was at a standstill. The dimension of the future is absent and the present is wedged into the past. Nezval, dead twenty-five years, "is alive and healthy, Ivánek, they didn't kill us". "Maqui, my tomcat, are you still alive?" rings the question after thirty or thirty-five years. But these are conscious, attentive attacks on the flow of time; this unmoving time forms the basis of his way of seeing in most of the poetry.

The poet astonishes us by composing a myth of urgent poetic force from the most ordinary facts of existence, from the ruins of events, personal or local names, or other poets' lines. That this was perhaps, from a psychological point of view, a stubborn battle for the restoration of memory and maintenance of the lost world of his home, shouldn't interest us all that much.

(Translated from the Czech by Justin Quinn)

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