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ARTHUR REDDING

## **'GOD THE LINGUIST TEACHES US TO BREATHE': IVAN BLATNÝ'S POEMS IN ENGLISH**

'Language,' writes the critic Martin Tucker, 'which makes possible a writer and whose "foreignness" makes possible the destruction of that same writer, is [a] measure of both psychic, rooted exile and literal exile. Indeed language may be the ultimate measure of psychic exile, for the exilic sense of separation springs from the fall of communication between a foreign writer and local/national community' (xxiii).

But such an exile, when rendered in language, may also be a condition of poetic possibility, a potential which Tucker goes on to speak of when he speculates that an adopted language may indicate that a writer has 'overcome' the condition of exile. This may or may not be the case; for me, rather than indicating that a writer has come to feel 'at home' in a new language, the decision to write in one's adopted tongue underscores the radical 'foreignness' of language in any case, and opens linguistic estrangement up to poetic exploration. Exile, an ubiquitous and deep-rooted political phenomenon of this century, throws us into the strangeness of speech.

Ivan Blatný (1919–1990), an exiled Czech poet from Brno with a history of hospitalization and mental illness, spent the last few years of his life living in a pension in Clacton-on-Sea, England. In the grip, still, of 'the drug of art/of modest small old surrealistic art' ('Leon-Paul Fargue: Droga'), he continued to write, producing a great deal of scattered verse and two books, *Stará bydliště* (1979) and *Pomocná škola Bixley* (1987), which were published in Canada. Blatný's late pieces are modest and surreal, certainly, a mesh of quirky, fragmented impressions, images, occasional judgments. They are delicate compositions of linguistic drift, put together from a mix of languages, Czech and English, predominantly, with snatches of German, French, and Spanish. The poems in English are, usually, the most restrained, short, spare arrangements marked by an austere whimsy:

## Thirst

No mice no flies no goblins  
perfect life

It may be already quarter to two  
David Westbrook appeared

Friends and muchachas  
take me to a distant tanking station.

Some of the manuscripts of this period are now in the hands of Jan Šmarda, of Brno, who has kindly passed them along to Professor Josef Hladký in the English Department of Masaryk University. A portion of these works has been published recently, as part of what is becoming a minor Blatný revival. The bulk of Blatný's production dates from the years of the second world war and immediately thereafter (he wrote four books between 1940 and 1948), and though some of his earlier writing had almost seen the light of day in 1968, he is left unmentioned in most histories of Czech literature written before 1989. In Brno in 1994, Atlantis brought out his collected verse 1933–1953 (complete with an appreciative biographical essay), and Horst re-issued *Pomocná škola Bixley*, a collection of his poems written in England and first published in Canada in 1987. The collection passed on to us by Šmarda includes a xerox of the manuscript of the latter, but there are other pieces, so far as I know, unpublished. Most are rendered in Blatný's sometimes infuriating handwriting, which I have done my best to decipher; a couple ('Weinachten' and 'Winter') have been typed for inclusion in what appears to be a magazine put out by hospital patients.

Blatný was a Brno poet, perhaps best known for his autumnal *Melancholické procházky* [*Melancholic Walks*] (1941; re-issued twice in 1968 and then again in 1992). As a young man, he was close to the poet Jiří Orten (a Jewish Czech, run over and killed by a German ambulance on his twenty second birthday), friends with Vítězslav Nezval and Jaroslav Seifert, and closely associated with Group 42 during the years of Nazi occupation. This generation was influenced primarily by French writers, notably Breton – Blatný will write in his poem to Andre Breton 'I am the filing you are the magnet' ('Andre Breton') – whose *What Is Surrealism* was translated into Czech in 1937, and who theorized and justified experimentation in the subjective consciousness and the politicized – if apolitical – unconscious of the poetic speaker. Group 42 was equally interested in such different American poets as Langston Hughes, Carl Sandburg, or T. S. Eliot. Temperamentally distinct, these Americans collaborated in freeing rhythmic and musical elements from the constraints of traditional prosody, and each fashioned a poetic diction to accommodate popular dialects. Such aspects of an emergent Anglo-French modernism were important to the mid-century Czech poets, who were themselves trying to overcome a highly formal and self-consciously 'literary' tradition.

A typical figure in the writing of Blatný and his contemporaries is the persona of the walker in the grotesque city, an updated and displaced *flâneur*, whose solitary and heightened sensitivity serves as ground and filter for meditations on the jarrings and wrenchings dictated by modern industrialism and the ravages of fascism and occupation, as well as for the subjective trauma attendant upon such transformations. Angelo Maria Ripellino writes that 'in some of Blatný's poems the pedestrian becomes a *kolemjdoucí*, a passer-by, an automaton, a minor clerk clumsily sauntering about the city like a slapstick comic, a grey being given to pausing in front of shops and dreaming, with an occasional touch of eccentricity or madness' (60).

The writing from the years of exile bears the legacy of earlier concerns and this history, but it is as if they have been accelerated, stripped down, as if the bulwarks of poetic imposture have been kicked away or eroded over time. It would be dismissive, however one reads Blatný's later history of exile and mental illness, to suggest that the 'eccentricity or madness' has gained the upper hand on his verse. The poems never claim to be a chronicle of his mental illness. In these later writings, for example, melancholy has been largely shrugged off. It remains, in dead patches, as if an old skin, but is immediately embarrassed:

There is a village without a bell  
there is a world without leadership

Choc-ice is in czech called Eskymo  
I used to have three on a bench at Felix slow Road  
every Saturday and Sunday  
(‘Anarchy’)

For the most part the pitched mournfulness has given way to an austere irony. We have only glimpses of the speaker's own psychic wounds, as in the closing, nonsensical, lines of 'Inferiority': 'hurt/declared'. The syntactical and grammatical rupture here, so untypical of Blatný, generates a resonance, a glimpse of solitude, but we can only speculate as to its context. For even in 'Inferiority', such lines are framed by only the most banal of quotidian details. The short poem opens:

John Dolen goes away on Tuesday  
and with him the magical magazine Playboy  
and with him the magical magazine Blighty

It is as if the conscience, the consciousness of the poet has been scraped to the opacity of onionskin paper. Blatný's 'signature' technique is the mere juxtaposition of details, evidence, historical data, and snippets of language *sans* commentary, and we are left to make of the images what we will. To what ex-

tent that task is burdensome, of course, will rest with the reader, yet Blatný, if a demanding poet, is seldom commanding:

Beirut is the capital of Lebanon  
 Cornwall is the western tip of the british mainland  
 a sentence of G. K. Chesterton  
 ('Dílo')

Blatný is, no doubt, a historical vagabond; an Occam's razor of years, exile, distance and personal catastrophe – all unmentioned in the text – has honed down the inside of his skull, his eyeballs. The speaker is still, placid, no longer mobile or frantic, as before. Blatný's long solitude has perhaps occasioned another shift, to echo the starkness of the later writing. The scene has been redrawn, shifted away from the cityscape of industrial, petit-bourgeois Brno. We are given visions of a new territory, at once more claustrophobic – there is a strong sense that these poems are interior pieces, written inside a closed room – and more historically expansive, even if that history is newspaper history, presented as scraps, factoids, and lacking even the minor orchestration of surrealist collage:

I had for house-maid Milena  
 I had for house-maid princesse Anne  
 we often went for a hen-party.  
 ('Always Optimistic')

In their now-classic *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari speak of the libido 'hallucinating all history, reproducing in delirium entire civilizations, races and continents, and intensely "feeling" the becoming of the world' (98). Deleuze and Guattari's thinking is largely shaped by Antonin Artaud, a writer who also bears comparison with Blatný. In the latter's poems in English, hallucinations are more or less off-the-cuff, impersonal:

Don't uproot the begonias leave them in the  
 gardens of the Gulf Stream  
 sweet like a nun's concerne for the world  
 sweet like the warble of a Bonni's warbler.  
 ('Charity')

Lyric poetry, and this is, evidently, still lyrical, is thereby stripped of the personal. Impersonality has been long a strategy of surrealism's investigation into the so-called 'unconscious' wanderings of the psyche, but the postulated liberty of the technique is corralled, typically, by a romantic-obsessive fascination with an objectified 'woman'. The function of the figured woman in such poems is to re-assign – through distance and objectivity – to the speaking, voyeurist con-

sciousness a sense of place, priority, propriety, a sense of rightness. While chaos may threaten the coherence of the self, heterosexual fascination can preserve its integrity. While doubtless true in part of Blatný as well, there seems to be much less of a scramble for sense through sexuality in these later works. All in all, the verse shows little evidence of systematic thinking; though composed of fragments, they are not *pointedly* schematic, nor pointedly, demonstratively, clever:

Mona Lisa was completed in 1504  
Bernini died in 1680  
Renaissance and baroque  
(‘Teaching’)

And eros, family, and history are not distinguished, nor, precisely, distinguishable, as if the self can no longer assign them a precise place within a system of priorities. Here sexuality – inaccessible in Blatný, when not onanistic – is confused with the television format in which it is made available:

The superwrapped goodies will be undressing  
there is nothing like undressing with a woman

Yesterday in the serial Penmarric  
it happened twice  
piece after piece of clothing was being put aside  
(‘Cheval’)

Schizoid, perhaps, but ‘tuned-in’, so to speak. Doubtless a key to the disorientated ambling through history, culture, media, the humbleness of the everyday, an amble undertaken by a confined and pent-up consciousness, is the fact that these are written in Blatný’s adopted language. ‘The Monx speak Monx’, begins one poem, ‘I speak czech and english’ (‘Janua Sapientiae’). Recalling another Deleuzean injunction (here he is thinking of Kafka), one writes as a stranger in one’s native tongue. Rupture, estrangement, displacement, as in the interlinguistic puns and rhyming Blatný is so fond of, are the initial, core constraints of the poet’s most primary medium, language. Utterance is already, always already, as Jacques Derrida would insist, exile.

Consequently, Blatný insists, passively, that nothing – thirst, masturbation, and whimsy excepted – can be taken as natural. Little can be claimed as one’s right. History, then, as it comes to us, is not a question of roots or tradition, and like the characters penned by the most notorious of linguistic exiles, Samuel Beckett, the poems are flotsam tossed up on a stage that might as well be anywhere, that might as well be eternal. Blatný is not consciously tied to a place, a land, a language, a native country. He is never ‘at home’, no less in language than in life. Yet his own exile is seldom mentioned, as if it were not an occasion for misery (he misses his buddies, of course). There is no yearning for a home-

land, no cheap nationalism. Displacement is matter-of-fact, a fact of life, and there is an unmarked oddity in the details that crowd into the bare rooms in which he finds himself doomed to write.

Idiosyncrasies, singularities abound – this is a writer much amused by the world and body he finds himself in – but what has been dropped out of the verse, what is lost in translation, if you will, is what might be called the impositions of personality. The poems are evidence, tracings, reliefs of a destiny, a biography, what is no longer there, maps of the space between languages into which the self has disappeared – but no, it is not a space, for it lacks a topography. So Blatný's dictum, which can only be taken as a negative theology: 'God the linguist teaches us to breathe' ('Outside and In').

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### Ivan Blatný's poems in English<sup>1</sup>

#### Weihnachten

The continental Christmases are full of mystery,  
 nearly always white  
 through snow we are going to the midnight mass  
 to the church of St. Francis  
 my favourite saint.

He liked the simple pleasures of life  
 like decorating the christmas tree  
 when you are old enough to do it yourself.

---

1 The poems are printed here in Ivan Blatný's spelling, with *christmas, Kalifornia, approche, milde, concerne, happiness* and *hapines* etc. The English glosses to the Czech lines in the poems have been provided by the editor. (JH)

The tinkle and glass ornaments are brought from the attic  
where they rested one whole year.  
We sometime had troubles  
but the christmas pastry never fails.

I like the best vanilla Crescents  
but they never cross the English Channel.

## Winter

Open the window, see, the view is undulating  
But it is black and bare, death is still in the trees  
Death is still in the trees, and we are, we are waiting  
For somebody to come to take us out of this

\*\*\*\*

A friend should come, a priest to join us in the prayer  
For something warm and sweet, for resurrection spring  
For something warm and sweet, for something bright and gayer  
For music, song and dance and for a wedding ring

\*\*\*\*

Suddenly they'll emerge<sup>2</sup>, there where the road is bending,  
Suddenly they will emerge, my<sup>3</sup> hope is never ending,  
There will be flowers, bees and overflowing hives.

\*\*\*\*

There will be brothers<sup>4</sup>, gifts and thanks for air and water,  
There will be lines and verse<sup>5</sup> there will be father and mother,  
We'll listen and we'll<sup>6</sup> write thanking for being alive.

---

2 Several changes were made, in hand, to the typed original. The hand may be Ivan Blatný's.  
Original text: Gradually they will emerge  
3 *my* is added in the margin of the page  
4 Original type-written text: crackers  
5 Original type-written text: joy and laughter  
6 Original type-written text: we will

**Denní zprávy<sup>7</sup>**

Hanoi is the capital of North Vietnam  
 Saigon of the the South

Now Vietnam is all quite communiste  
 and refugees from there are still coming to our country

We are calling them the boat-people  
 they could also emigrate to Japan  
 which is now democratic and demilitarized.

**Cheval**

The superwrapped goodies will be undressing  
 there is nothing like undressing with a woman

Yesterday in the serial Penmarric  
 it happened twice  
 piece after piece of clothing was being put aside  
 když senátor měl lásku

Pen Marric staré sladké péro  
 nemusíme už šplhat na hory abstrakce.<sup>8</sup>

**Janua Sapientiae**

The Monx speak Monx  
 I speak czech and english  
 I have an instrument for getting traffic-wardens out of the drain-pipes  
 And changing them into an apple-rose

It all happens in time-space  
 when the traffic warden is already out  
 we can hear the noise.

---

7 Daily News

8 When the Senator made love / Pen Marric old sweet prick / we don't have to climb the mountains of abstraction

### **Thirst**

No mice no flies no goblins  
perfect life

It may be already quarter to two  
David Westbrook appeared

Friends and muchachas  
take me to a distant tanking station.

### **Charity**

Hearken, the rivers won't be frozen this winter  
or nearly any other winter for that matter  
this is a milde climate

Don't uproot the begonias leave them in  
the gardens of the Gulf Stream  
sweet like a nun's concerne for the world  
sweet like a warble of a Bonni's warbler.

### **Fate**

The will to life is remorselessly exploding all eternity  
there is no death  
we must acquiesce  
there is no and then the yes  
yes we want it so  
we can't choose the absolute nothing

### **Always optimistic**

Some say that the police-tower is only  
a facade of a troubled world  
of the city of death  
I don't believe it  
I had for house-maid Milena

I had for house-maid princess Anne  
we often went for a hen-party.

### Teaching

One-eyed man with green skin  
happened to the chicken and professor

Mona Lisa was completed in 1504  
Bernini died in 1680  
Renaissance and baroque

### Outside and in

A group of factory buildings may be called a plant  
God the linguiste teaches us to breath

In a hollow of a tree  
there is a cart  
there lives the wood-cock  
there is the crown  
there is the flamboyant madame Lupescu.

### Happinesse

Pursuit of happines  
that's one of the rights of american citizens  
granted by the constitution of 1832

What does it mean  
it meansto marry and have children  
or not tohave children and have the woman  
the woman only  
If you haven't got a woman have a dog.

## Inferiority

John Dolen goes away on Tuesday  
and with him the magical magazine Playboy  
and with him the magical magazine Blighty

There were inferior actors and actresses in it  
hurt  
declared

## Dílo<sup>9</sup>

Vivaldi was a priest but he had a mistresse  
pluhslova obraci si těžké listy hlíny  
dívám se tiše do krajiny<sup>10</sup>

The orchestra plays the Summerized Polka  
butwe can never summerize weare eating crumbs  
Beirutis the capital of Lebanon  
Cornwall is the western tip ofthe british mainland  
a sentence of G. K. Chesterton  
aboutthe cornish coast

## Non-Kalifornia

Ireturned in the dairy the lost rationbook  
Iaman honest man  
I am writing in the cityof the chop  
Chop off his head

Es ist wahr wir müssen niessen  
the capital of Paraguay is La Ciudad.

---

9 Work

10 the plough of words turns the heavy pages of soil. I am looking quietly into the countryside

**Maureen**

Harold Lloyd is hanging from one of the skyscrapers  
 01-345 78910  
 pig him out  
 02-567 91050  
 from the mouth of the grave  
 MCMLXXVIII

**Orange Squash**

At Muswell Hill we had a restaurant called Aladdins Lamp  
 Francis Albert Sinatra  
 take me to Picadilly  
 buy the underground tickets  
 I am a little bit tired  
 the nature is a father  
 I must sometime lie with him on the moss  
 the rabbits have the voting right.

**A biscuit**

I am reading Corriere de la Serra to please the pope  
 Give me all the balloons of the Lufthansa  
 the first trials with balloons at Nassau  
 Blanchard like a dominican monk

**Lovesong**

You are my fortress  
 you are my Mothers Artillery  
 the horrid alarum of war is gone when you approache

Bring the saddle-soap we are going for a ride  
 I'll polish all the harnesses on the estate

Do you know what it is voseling(?) apples?  
 That is invoking the apple-tree  
 to bear much fruit

our grandchildren and great grandchildren

### **Rodina\***

I feel at home with you, when watering the cacti,  
the rubber plant, the ivy and the rest.  
I must be going then, your putting right my neck-tie,  
the breakfast's over now and you can have a rest.  
And when the evening comes, I'm back to our harbour,  
the world's a picture now, you are the golden frame,  
with our dogs and cats, the mantel-piece of marble,  
for years and years from now it will be quite the same.

### **The Count**

The count left the castle  
and went to the township bustle  
tired of loneliness.  
Tired of deer-park walking,  
he wants some more noise, more talking,  
tired of playing chess.

And when he has enough of claxons,  
of motor-cars, of taxis,  
he's glad and turns round.  
Again the relaxation  
above the lower nation,  
lucky we have a count.

### **Sheery**

The curtain rises and we see the scenery  
the decor  
panoramic view of the snow-bound highlands in the back-ground  
a cloud like a grand piano  
red jam and yellow jam  
the white ellbows of Tiffi

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\* Family

a green pound  
 I am stone in love with you  
 don't cry for me Argentina  
 niekto  
 fortunátova kápě.<sup>11</sup>

The Theatre Royal in Norwich playing Twelvth Night.  
 Real Madrid.

### Sunday

Grock wiped off his make-up  
 Fratellini the little brothers left the circus-ring  
 Leo my father is back in his cage  
 the lion tamer entered his wife

Prince Charles will be Charles the Third  
 when he ascends to the throne  
 the first one was executed in 1649  
 the second restaured the monarchy  
 bringing thus relief to the frustrated people  
 Nell Gwyn lived in the elegant mansion of Hampton Court

The vicar's window is still alight  
 he is preparing the sermon for Sunday morning

Sonntag  
 es ist verflossen  
 und eine neue Woche beginnt.

### Misspelled

So restoration is not spelled au  
 Ispelled it so thinking of the czech word restaurence  
 to restore  
 and go with a lady to the Room  
 like a unicorn to the mirror  
 all naked in the mirrors  
 so that I could see the blood trickling.

---

<sup>11</sup> somebody / Fortunatus' cape

## Cocktail

Oh how I love the big city life  
What a share  
What a mosaic of drug-stores, restaurants and night-clubs

of castles and cathedrals sometimes beach  
is it you that created all the clergy  
is it you that created all the nuns  
rich like Madame de Guermantes  
rich like the Duke of Guermantes  
rich like madame de Cambremer,  
rich like madame Verdurin,  
rich like the Prince of Guermantes  
rich like the Queen of Naples  
rich like Legrandin  
rich like Morek (?)  
rich like Bařina  
rich like Jupien  
rich like Bloch  
rich like de Saint-Loup  
rich like mademoiselle de Saint-Loup  
rich like Albertine  
rich like Gilbert  
rich like Gisele  
rich like Andrée  
rich like Bergot  
rich like Françoise  
rich like Venteuile  
rich like madame Verdurin  
rich like Swan  
rich like Odette  
rich like Proust himself eating Madelains  
rich like baron de Charlees who never wanted to end anything  
let us also live eternally  
doctor Dieulafoi be our hope

## Mirondelle

Eluard l'amour lo fo  
which has got several meanings

firstly that it is the same thing  
then that poésie is his love  
and so forth perhaps  
I am very bad tu enumerations  
for that it is necessary to read Rabelais  
and to have a gosling for a very unpleasant thing.