Interviewed by Alan Finlay
New Coin, December 1996

MIROSLAV HOLUB (1923-1998) from the Czech Republic, worked most of his life as a researcher and immunologist in Prague. His poetry is well-known internationally, and has been published in many languages. He wrote essays and also published over 150 scientific papers. He was interviewed during the *Fault Lines* readings in Cape Town in July 1996.

Books of poems published in English (a selection):
Selected Poems (Penguin, 1967)
Although (Jonathan Cape, 1971)
Notes of a Clay Pigeon (Secker & Warburg, 1977)
Interferon, or On Theater (Oberlin College Press, 1982)
Vanishing Lung Syndrome (Faber, 1990)
Poems: Before and After (Bloodaxe, 1990)
Intenstive Care: Selected and New Poems (Oberlin College Press, 1996)
Supposed to Fly (Bloodaxe,1996)
The Rampage (Faber,1997)

What is the common root of art and science?

The common root of both is something which is nobly called 'creativity,' which I would call the art of getting proper ideas or, more exactly, the proper questions which are very specific for this artistic discipline or for that scientific discipline. Otherwise they have very little in common. Maybe there are some human capacities, faculties which can be used in both; like imagination, like the ability to think analytically.

How does science influence your writing?

Just in my own relation to reality. I am worried about what can be labelled a 'soft centred' approach. I think every fact, every norm, needs some scrutiny, analysis and critique. This I have from science. Because reality, the human, the natural reality, is so complicated I think that in poetry clarity of expression is essential. I don't like poetry which is a jungle of words, of feelings. I need clarity. Seamus Heaney called my poetry the 'fully exposed poem': my poems are fully exposed and consequently they are comparatively easy to translate.

In your book Vanishing Lung Syndrome *the title poem ends in a landscape where only surgeons write poems.*

The poem is about a rare disease which looks like losing one lung. The lung would be completely replaced by a cavity, and it's some sort of comment on the human soul. In another poem I say the action of a successful surgeon is the first poetry –- following Aristotle's division of philosophy into the first philosophy and the second philosophy. The first philosophy is the solution of

the practical questions of life. Mozart died of kidney failure. There would be a solution to the kidney failure if he lived now. He would have gotten a kidney transplant and would have written a couple more symphonies.

What kinds of questions can poetry ask that science cannot ask, or answer?

Well, poetry is a series of questions. In a poem you get something which is the basic metaphor. The question is, can this idea (it's not a philosophical idea, it's a poetic idea) be made into a poem? The second question depends on the education of the poet: how many people have already had the same idea? If we had a computer memory, we would discover that somewhere somebody has written almost the same poem. In science, questions are a consequence of the present trend, the present paradigm of science. They are derived from the ruling theory and must respect the given technical possibilities of the laboratory. So this is just another set of questions. Basically, as Peter Medawar, the British biologist, has said, "Science is the art of the soluble". Maybe, to paraphrase, poetry is the art of the imaginable.

Why are you so strongly against mysticisms, which are surely just human wisdoms that have existed from the beginning of time, so to speak?

Yes. I don't like superstitions including long-standing superstitions. Reality is changing, everything is changing on this planet and this universe, so why should human attitudes not change? But you know, I am speaking for myself. It's not a prescription for all. If everybody would be of the same opinion it would be a wasteland. I respect people with quite a different approach. For me one of the greatest Czech poets was Vladimir Holan, who was some sort of an introvert, a mystic of words, a deeply schizoid and isolated human soul who believed only in his own capacities. For me it is essential that truth is dependent on information, on available informations. For others, truth may be a result of an isolated personal mediation, intuition, insight and so on. To speak philosophically I would say that this may turn into a grave mistake. But speaking about poetry it may turn into an interesting poetic voice.

So for you creativity is about finding a new way, because we're always in an entirely new situation?

I don't like these sublime words like 'creativity,' but yes, I would say that creativity is something like deep and radical innovation. Is there something like a human nature, a human essence which would be unchanging? I doubt it. I think the human essence is changing as well as the essence of every creature or every phenomenon in the world is permanently slowly changing. Of course it's invisible. The human essence doesn't change in a hundred years. We know very little about the deep psychology of medieval man or of ancient man or of a hunter and gatherer.

In the introduction to the Penguin edition of your Selected Poems*, Alvarez writes that you are interested more in the question in the poem than how it is said. Yet a lot of poets would say that what's important for them is the music of the poem, exactly how it's said. For some poets song is the essence of poetry.*

Poetry may be chanting, it may be close to a song. Chanting is the way of Russian poetry or of some Latin American poetry. Typically Czech lyricism is

the lyricism of a song. Seifert, the Czech Nobel prize winner, called many of his poems songs. I was educated on hexameters, my first education in literature was Greek, classical Greek. Strict metres bring some limitations to the formation of images and of ideas. I reject those a priori limitations, I want to be free in finding out the contrasting situations which form the ruling metaphor of the poem. On the other hand a poem is definitely not just prose chopped into shorter lines. Even free verse has rules and these rules must not be upset, otherwise you get lost in some sort of inaccessible or less accessible prose.

How do you see your poetry in the context of Czech society, which has had so many upheavals over the past 50 years?

When one is living under oppression in more or less difficult sociological or political situations one is usually inclined to write more vigorous and even, which is funny, more optimistic kind of poetry. When you are left alone, when you are free, you relax. You may even become sort of sour, depressed and nihilistic. I have the feeling that poets in the real happy situation lose a part of their essence. They are not sure what to speak about. They don't have anything to complain about. What I noticed in the Communist regime which was in a way a chaotic regime, was disorganisation at every level. The oppression was one thing, but the generalized and legalized mess, moral mess, administrative mess was another. In a condition of general chaos, poetry is the last resource of order. In a completely orderly open democratic society poetry just gets the opposite role, to create some sort of turbulence, some sort of personal chaos which may be interesting.

Having just emerged from many years of Socialism, Eastern Europe style, how do you feel about the global capitalism of the 90s?

That's not easy of course. Who likes capitalism? Even for us having lived forty years under the so-called Socialism, Russian Socialism. Even now capitalism is a slightly dirty word. We have been born in that Central European situation with plebeian leftist ideas. The commercialisation of life, commercialisation of culture, it's a menace. On the other hand, if the alternative would be poverty and famine and tribal wars, then capitalism is the better eventuality. An affluent and technically progressive society without a free market might be impossible. Our poetry feels neglected in the new free market conditions. In spite of that, the mainstream of poetry doesn't try to approach people. The more we feel isolated, the more we isolate ourselves by esoteric and complex introvert, post-surrealist artefacts.

We have a similar situation in South Africa, where most poetry is not read, it's not listened to . . .

Well, when was poetry really read by many people? It was just that in some cultures poetry was an attribute of a knight or a warrior. Otherwise poetry was just an issue for a very limited number of people.

In your talk the other night you made a distinction between artistic poetry and poetry which comes from necessity, spontaneously from people who might not even think of themselves as poets.

I think that the key question is: is it about some sort of esoteric problem or is it about the problems which everybody confronts in everyday life? I was struck yesterday, watching the sitting of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, by what the poor tortured black victims were telling. In a way it was a cruel poetry and artistic poetry can't match it. And I would say exactly the same about a volume of Second World War poetry I read recently. There the most powerful poems are by plain people, a captain of a warplane, a victim in the Warsaw ghetto. It shows that poetry can happen everywhere. I once wrote "Poetry is everywhere, that's the greatest argument against poetry." I meant against poetry as literature, I meant against artificial poetry. Because I think poetry is embedded in everybody's life and it surfaces in the drastic experiences and during the more dramatic periods of human history.