

Miroslav Holub

Sand Game

and Three Poems

THE CORNER of a park, lined with fragrant jasmine-bushes. A sand-pit, well dug into, centre stage, and behind it a smeared bench of unvarnished wood. Partly hidden by the jasmine, a woodshed, into which one can see through the prised-open door. Inside are shovels, hoes, wheelbarrows, and spilt bags of something or other.

Seated on the bench is a relatively young white-haired grandpa, wearing a leather jacket and roll-top sweater. He is reading a newspaper, which he holds open in front of him. Occasionally he peers over it.

In the sand-pit relatively big children, Ilona and Robert, are playing. They have built a fairly complicated structure of sand, boards, wire, and dog dung. It reminds one of a rocket launching-site or the gardens of Semiramis.

GRANDPA (*peering over the newspaper*): They say it's going to be very windy and showery. So your fancy tricks'll be blown to kingdom come!

ROBERT: That's not really possible. An anti-cyclone is moving only above Norway. We are under the influence of considerably high barometric pressure, which is shifting slowly south.

GRANDPA (*nettled*): But it's written here!

ILONA: The structure has adequately firm foundations. We have considered all the parameters. This flange here will withstand a pressure of 50 grammes per square centimetre. The tolerances are considerable.

GRANDPA (*more nettled*): You can't make something out of nothing. It doesn't matter a hoot to me what your to . . . tol . . . tolerances are. There's going to be a real buster. That's what they say here.

ROBERT (*putting on another little piece of wood*): The information flow is often burdened with a considerable hum. It is necessary to relate the general and summary estimate to the concrete system which constitutes only a small segment of reality affected by the information frame. Namely, the microclimatic conditions of this sandpit can be defined only on the basis of physical evidence regarding the maximum parameters of regional formation.

ILONA (*adding a cake of dog manure*): More-over the essence of the artefact itself changes

reality, or rather micro-reality, to the extent that information preceding its creation cannot be fully valid, and therefore true, after it has been created.

ROBERT: The case is analogous to every anagenetic influence under natural conditions, which are never identical in relation to the new object or to themselves, as soon as the object has passed from the sphere of intellectual conception to that of physical realisation.

GRANDPA: You're crazy. Yesterday the sunset was blood-red and the birds were flying low. Here they say that in Ecuador a bridge collapsed. Wait a bit . . . not in Ecuador . . . in . . . what's it called, in Puerto Rico, no, in Malay . . . in Malay . . . no, in Belgium.

ILONA (*to Robert*): Here a few deep injections are needed.

ROBERT (*to Ilona*): Certainly. Otherwise this extension would bring about such stress that, with the given material, we would exceed the original parameters.

GRANDPA (*angrily*): You're crazy. He that mischief hatches, mischief catches. Nothing's going to change that, no matter how many of those parameters you use.

ROBERT (*straightening up, though with the patience proper to his particular age*): In substantial thinking we can certainly relate the value of being, or even the value of its actual statement, to a certain preformed model, in

relation to which the being or statement appears one way or another insufficient, inadequate, or excessive. In such a case we can make use of verbal comparisons by means of which we release the dissatisfaction or frustration caused by the immanence of the preconceived model in our thinking, however we look at it. . . .

GRANDPA: How crazy can you get!

ILONA: But he is furthermore, and in my opinion rightly, an adherent of non-substantial ontology. . . .

ROBERT (*beginning to walk about and expound in the manner of the Platonic school*): . . . for only in this way can we rise above the rigid structure of old or new anthropological reductionism and reconstruct our world both in regard to its phenomenology and to its freely and operatively substituted existentiality . . .

GRANDPA (*waving his paper*): Oh, go to . . . Here they say

ROBERT (*with mounting enthusiasm, which results in the appearance of a small flickering and sparkling halo round his head, finally becoming a permanent green glow*): . . . to

reconstruct the world in its meaningful comprehensiveness, and this, however, in consciousness of its inner being and consequently from within the field we are trying to understand, but also to a certain degree on the basis of abstracting it from its own participation, on the basis of auto-objectivisation and *ad hoc* derealisation, which of course is in fact the beginning of real and lasting realisation . . .

GRANDPA: You're crazy!

ROBERT (*his head aglow with enthusiasm enters the shed, stumbling over various kinds of bric-à-brac, and is lost from sight*): . . . so that the reconstruction of the world in the system of non-substantial ontology. . . .

From the shed comes an explosion, with pieces of flying wood and clouds of dirty black smoke. Ilona sits down on the sand construction, squashing it. Grandpa jumps up, shielding his head with the newspaper. When the noise and smoke subside, a shaken Robert, now without his halo, creeps out of the shed.

GRANDPA (*triumphantly*): See how crazy you are!

Successful young man in the labyrinth

When he had made his eighth turn he cleared his throat and shouted:
Minotaur, have some sense. I give you my word, show me the way out and I'll get you a score of lovelies.
It's a cinch, Minotaur.

Out of sight, I replied:
I wonder if you know that there are demons?

Stuff it,
he answered, don't be crazy. Believe me,
I know where you can make a fantastic pile,
fifty-fifty, it's a cinch, okay?
I'm just a normal chap,
be normal, Minotaur!

I replied:
Do you happen to know that normality
is merely a milder form
of imbecility?

Stuff it,
he shouted, don't you understand it pays
to get along with people? Working with people,
that's what pays, our sergeant used to say
as he powdered our quarters
against the bed bugs, so why be stuck up?
Here you can't raise enough to buy the baby a
new bib.

I said:
Don't you realise you live
on the point of a needle that is patching
the threadbare pants of your history?
And what is your real aim,
son?

That's the ticket,
he answered. Aim . . . I think
it's to get back. To be in the money.
And right now I'd like a copy of this labyrinth,
might come in handy,
if you take it realistically. . . .

Then I gave him to the demons
to be thrown out.
And I had the passages treated
with that powder.

No doubt he lived a long life
and made a name for himself
in greyhound racing.

Sisyphus

Unable to roll the stone into place,
stone, whatever it was, maybe gneiss, or paper,
I judged the fault was in me.
The main thing about faults is that they can be
corrected,
Mother used to say.

I judged the fault was in me.
And added as much again
to the stone's weight. Whatever it was,
maybe hate, or love.
And immediately things went better. For

there was the certainty
that eventually
it would break my neck.

Clowns

Where do clowns go,
What do clowns eat,
Where do clowns sleep,
What do clowns do,
when nobody,
just nobody laughs
any more,
Mummy?

Henry Fairlie

Transatlantic Letter to England

Thoughts of Home at Midnight

*England
with its baby rivers and little towns, each with its
abbey or its cathedral,
with voices—one voice perhaps, echoing through the tran-
sept—the
criterion of suitability and convenience. . . .*

AND THAT, in the words of the American poet, Marianne Moore, is one way in which it is most pleasant to think of it in my absence, until a spurt of irritation runs in my veins and I would like to damn—or dam—all those baby rivers, and blow a raspberry in the transept.

For the picture is no longer very convincing, as I read the newspapers and journals from England, and listen to the messages that are borne to me by the friends who manage to find me among the foothills of the Rocky Mountains or in the Hill County of Texas. The “criterion of suitability and convenience”?—it really does not sound like it any more. The “voices in the transept”?—it is hard to hear them above the shouts of protest and the explosion of bombs. And the “one voice perhaps”—the voice that was recognisably England’s?¹—how querulous it has become on the one hand, and on the other how quarrelsome: a voice that seems now to be nerveless or strident, as often as not both, as if the country is “Ending Up” as nastily as the old people in Kingsley Amis’s novel.

Perhaps both pictures are misleading, the one of the past, the other of the present; and perhaps my own reflections are based on a false impression of what has happened in my absence. But even if that were true, they might still have some value. The “character of England” used to be the subject that engrossed some of us; it is the subject of these home thoughts from abroad. My impres-

¹ I do not wish to seem to be guilty of any confusion. When I talk of “Britain”, I will mean the political unit, the United Kingdom; when of “England”, I will mean primarily, if not only, English society.

sions of that character have changed, partly as a result of my now lengthy acquaintance with a country whose character is wholly different from the character of England, and partly as a response to the inability of Britain to cope with the problems of its decline. It is my own changes of attitude, therefore, that are to some extent my subject.

FOR ONE THING, my experiences in the past ten years have forced me to consider more deeply than before the whole question of national character. The idea of national character has often been disparaged, and as often romanticised. Yet it is absurd to deny that, in its vast territory, and out of the astonishing diversity of its peoples, the United States has formed a national character, which may be recognised from Boston to Los Angeles, and from Seattle to Miami. There is so obviously such a thing as an American, his character formed in the modern age, that it makes it easier to claim that there is such a thing as the character of the Englishman, formed out of what Hugh Gaitskell called “a thousand years of history.”

Moreover, with their emphasis on the characteristics of different “cultures”, both sociology and anthropology have given more precision to the ways in which we can think of national character; and the complex studies of linguistics have reinforced the previously uncertain assumptions about the importance of national languages. The whole idea of national character, in short, seems ready to be brought out of the mists by which it has far too long been surrounded, but that is the subject for another occasion. At the moment, I wish merely to defend the idea that the “character of England” is something that exists; and that it is a subject that has been too idly discussed in the debates about Britain’s place in the world today.