

Clearing The Smog

Why write in prose, when *verse* is out of date?
I mean why not support the underdog?
Too hard? If Pope¹ or Dryden² dared, why wait?
Even if doggerel, let this be my log:

Since '89 the Smog has cleared in Prague,
But not in villages, they know their sums;
Furtively burning plastic, like a drug,
(Ash doesn't cost so, when the dustman comes³.)

The Smog, indeed. It has been many years;
Each year, each winter is more fresh, be fair,
That's what has changed the Most⁴ here, (pun, deaf ears!)
And still there's much to do, to clear the air.

The country, famed for crystal tableware,
Has lacked transparency, corruption has been rife,
And still the smokescreens drift, yet now we care
To take small steps, in every walk of life.

“So many clichés, ouch, such sophistry
Just call a spade a spade and make the point;”
Oh, come, let's try some verbal artistry
(Before we take a breather, pass the joint.)

So to begin: This land's Bohemia⁵,
So you might well expect the bonviveur,
Wine, women, song and more such trivia.
In fact here lies *the* petit bourgeois' lair.

Even the nineties' playwright president⁶,
Though looking gawky, awkward in a suit,
Was upper middle class, (hence dissident,
When the red faction brought down Stalin's boot).

When his time came to go, he signed his heart
Glowing in neon on Prague castle roof⁷,
In dubious taste, though some might call it art;
It seemed more artifice, disdain in proof.

Of course when hippies, dropouts, long-haired fringe
Assault the status-quo, the establishment.
Stoned, smoked or drunk, their intellectual binge
Fills up the air, but does not pay the rent.

I am not one, but share their sentiments,
It's just the dropout lifestyle I don't rate.
Why be an anarchist, or live in tents
And bop to techno, if it's Smog you hate?

Smug Smog of lies, self-served convenience,
Pervasive, acrid, scratching in the throat,
The canine drool of weak subservience,
Waiting for scraps that fall into the moat.

The Smog exuded by the race to win
Riding at speed across the zebra signs,
The Smog upon the brain, the thickened skin
Stifling the conscience, smudging boundary lines.

The well-to-do, who drive that message home
At breakneck speed, ignoring all the rules,
Impugn, distort, converting 'p' to 'm'
And keep themselves immune from common fools.

Elected gentry, more equal than others;
The new-found robber barons of the age,
Whose granddaughters will make the perfect mothers,
(Then ethics, morals will be all the rage.)

This is the land, where every social louse
Can be immune for life from prosecution
Once being voted in to either House,
To join the swarm within that institution.

Like Diplomats, immune, but here's the trouble:
Diplomats from our Czechoslovak era
Can't be sent home, evicted. In time's bubble
They preen and strut, we watch, the Smog no clearer.

Like that old famous film, The Firemen's Ball⁸
Which still bears on, as symbol of *this* age,
That scene, when lights go out and in the hall,
The lottery prizes vanish from the stage...

Another film, recently much in vogue,
Is also reminiscent of this State:
Lord of the Rings ('LOTR') being Czech for *rogue*.
And here's more play on words, I ruminare:

'Stát' is the Czech for State, and also stands
For standing, being still, immobile, quite;
The men who are the highest in these lands
Closing their minds to all that's out of sight.

Up in the High Chair, put there, out of action,
Sits the Arch-pragmatist, the self-aggrandised deity.
Detecting no faint whiff of putrefaction
We'll likely keep him there until he's eighty.

Some curious facts: that well loved Škoda name
(Now once again a quite sound brand of car)
In Czech means oddly "Damage", "Pity", "Shame"
So that's what we export, a joke too far.

Our drinks renowned, true Pilsner⁹, Budweis¹⁰ beer
Jan Becher bitters, Absinth, liquid glow,
In fact the Czechs, though ringed by mountains sheer
Like the Brits, see their rivers outward flow.

Back to the point: symbolic man-made Smog
Pervades the lungs and hearts of all who judge
Sitting in pubs, drinking their beer or grog
And putting up with all, there vent a grudge.

There's no smoke without fire, out it must
Fire within, searing the parched red throat
Red, where the beer turned iron will to rust
Where will to change became the spite to gloat.

There is that joke: a Czech, granted one wish
Asks that his neighbour's goat should promptly die.
Many a truth in jest: carp being our fish
We carp in stagnant pools, rather than fly.

Out in the villages, they vote far Left;
The Communists are back, the protest mob,
Untainted by the progress, swift and deft,
Of all the nouveau riches who 'done the job'.

Blowing the whistle is the greatest sin:
"Don't stir it, mate, let's leave the windows to,
It's cold outside, don't let the draught get in,
Beer keeps its head, so why the F don't you."

Joe Public's pub: The voters, unaware
Of how responsible they are for their own fate,
They'd rather acquiesce to all the wrongs they bear,
Or tear the house down round the selves they hate.

Everyone loves a winner, 'least in sport;
Icehockey, football, proud whenever *we*'ve won,
But if *they* lost (our team), we cut it short;
The pub still full, when all is said and done.

A curious streak that one, to which I own;
To deprecate, decry, put down one's kin,
To elevate oneself above the drone
Of the *vox populi*, the plebs, the bin.

That much we share, that rambling discontent,
That feeling that not all is as should be,
That one's own time and money's not well spent
When it is spent in like-mind company.

No, they're not Hypocrites, they're Christians in the heart;
None will oblige to cast the ballot-stone
To sink the bad guys; Each man plays his part,
For in his cupboard rattles many a bone.

There's honour among thieves? No, solidarity.
A generation stands in line, in shame.
Who of these yearns for utter clarity
When rain would streak the mud, mark out his name?

My country, right or wrong. It has no sea.
There's plenty here to make me want to go
Back to Old Blighty¹¹, talk there's cheap, or free,
And thoughts reign pure, unlike road driven snow...

Britain, that bastion of democracy!
Where everyone is good, and just and true;
The land of fair play, meritocracy,
Where they drive on the left, and muddle through,

The land of hope, of glory, circumstance,
The land of pomp and pop and teenage beats,
Where rich and poor pass by in tolerance,
Where football is still played on terraced streets...

Or so it would appear, from over here:
Is Albion perfidious¹²? P.C.¹³, yes!
Smogless? Not quite, but one thing's rather clear,
We're your beer garden, here you pay much less:

This is the place to which you come in droves.
Maybe it's just the beer, and maybe more.
The buildings are quite nice, and it behoves
One not to slag the natives off, I'm sure.

The place is nice, and would be nicer still
If it could be somehow repopulated
With people like the Brits, for good, or ill;
With Czechs before they were emasculated.

Three hundreds years¹⁴ have made a strong impression;
Selective bred, for spineless acrobatics,
Conforming to the mold became a passion,
(Don't cross the line, or be mobbed by fanatics).

This country I prefer, but not the people;
Or not their values, in the present tense.
But there is hope to right this moral cripple,
It's not genetic, in the formal sense.

Britain has lost its way somewhat, not ready
To be a Belgium¹⁵, or a sea-lashed Dog,
The young can't keep the helm, or themselves, steady,
Drowning their sorrows in a different smog.

There's my dilemma, in a nutshell, (which
Must be a walnut, brain-like, come to think)
Nowhere is perfect, there's the catch, the hitch,
Half close one eye, and give yourself a wink.

Maybe this country, which has much to fix,
Has at least some small chance to make the grade;
Yes, there is much to do, whitewash to mix
For this old house, whose walls to red do fade.

The major difference round me that I note
Is that the people here don't really trust
They *have* a future. They won't rock the boat -
Stowaways on the Ark don't find life just.

Making a living, clandestine and shrewd,
Like rats, inventive, bright, and underrated,
Fighting for scraps, to better feed their brood,
Being misunderstood, and if dark, hated.

Obscured, indeed. The rat within us all
Which runs this race, let loose, is hard to miss.
Here, vices can walk free and straight and tall,
Turned into royalty by Freedom's kiss.

Time has been lost. The proper scale of time;
In Smog, the short-term seems the final goal.
Corners if cut may speed the social climb,
But blunt the senses, suffocate the soul.

What is the answer? Let us raise our sights,
Taking the longer view, birds on the wing,
Let us be eagles, soar to greater heights,
And not remain inspired by tunneling¹⁶.

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*A caveat:* This land that time forgot,  
This *is* the land for me, to make it plain.  
It's far from perfect; yet, what it is *not*  
Is a lost cause. The Smog *will* clear again.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

<sup>2</sup> John Dryden (1631-1700)

<sup>3</sup> Czech municipal garbage collection is typically charged ‘per dustbin’ i.e. by volume.

<sup>4</sup> *Most* is a town in North Bohemia, the centre of the brown-coal mining industry

<sup>5</sup> from the Roman name Boiohaemum, ‘home of the Boii’ (who were a Celtic tribe).

<sup>6</sup> Václav Havel

<sup>7</sup> a controversial piece by ‘context artist’ Jiří David, installed in November 2002. (cf [comment etc](#) )

<sup>8</sup> Miloš Forman’s classic 1968 film (*Hoří, má panenko*) was banned and led to his emigration to the USA.

<sup>9</sup> *Pilsner Urquell* is the original marque of that beer type. Pilsen is the German name for the town of Plzeň.

<sup>10</sup> Budweis is the German name for České Budějovice, where this beer originates.

<sup>11</sup> WW1 popular term for Britain, deriving from a corruption of the Hindi *bilayati*, meaning foreign.

<sup>12</sup> *la perfide Albion* (treacherous Britain), a slogan popularized in the Napoleonic recruitment campaign of 1813.

<sup>13</sup> “Politically Correct”

<sup>14</sup> subjugation under the Austro Hungarian Empire, lasted from 1620 ~ 1918

<sup>15</sup> also a synonym for a more offensive word, in Douglas Adams’ *Life, the Universe and Everything*.

<sup>16</sup> One of the less salubrious words contributed to the English language by Czechs, (like *pistol, polka, robot...*)