

The “restlessness of transcendence”: Václav Havel’s genres

Introduction

The existing critical literature on Václav Havel is remarkable as much for what has not been written about as it is for what has. Particularly lacking has been a unified approach to reading Havel across the many genres – literary and other – that he engaged in throughout his life. The question of how these various faces or incarnations of Havel cohere with one another has generally not been raised, or rather Havel’s cross-genre productivity has been taken purely at face value, and the unspoken assumption has been that it does not say much about him as a writer or thinker. In her book on Havel’s life in the theater, Carol Rocamora has written that “Havel clearly loved to ‘exercise’ his ideas in a variety of genres” (Rocamora 2004: 141). The question that I will be asking here is: What was and is the significance of this “exercise”, a proclivity on Havel’s part that seems to have been as much about intellectual need as it was about personal preference?

Luboš Pistorius (1997) has noted that Havel himself once wrote a critical study about another Czech cultural figure with the same genre-crossing profile.¹ Josef Čapek was a painter, prose writer, playwright, stage designer, art critic and theorist; like Havel, he was also a leading actor in the cultural life of his time. Havel felt that Josef Čapek had been undervalued as an artist – somewhat paradoxically – precisely because of his artistic versatility (*mnohostrannost*): given the great variety of his endeavors, critics have proven incapable of a holistic evaluation of his artistic personality (Pistorius 1997: 105). Havel himself wrote: “Josef Čapek is more than just the creator of this or that painting or the author of this or that book; his oeuvre is more than just the sum total of his individual works...”: Čapek’s individual works acquire their true meaning (*pravý obsah*) only through their relation to one another (cited in Pistorius 1997: 105-6).²

The question of Havel’s cross-genre productivity is therefore not an idle one, but rather goes to the heart of how we read and understand Havel. Do we fragment his oeuvre by treating the various faces or incarnations separately from one another? Despite the occasional nods to the contrary, this has, in fact, been the approach undertaken by the great majority of Havel’s English-language commentators during his lifetime: Havel-the-playwright is considered separately from Havel-the-essayist, and Havel-the-politician is

typically put in a different category altogether.³ Despite the obvious thematic continuity across genres (the theme of human identity in the modern world, as Havel himself noted on more than one occasion, looms large), we tend to reduce the genre versatility to a mere formal and personal “exercise”. But what if the very process of genre-crossing is itself key not only to how we should read him but also to Havel’s thinking, and what if the value of it has even wider significance as a technical expression – a rhetorical and intellectual enactment – of a certain *neklid transcendence* or “restlessness of transcendence”? The import of the question then becomes not just a matter of how we read and understand Havel, but perhaps also how Havel suggests that we read and understand ourselves.

My goal in this contribution is to provide a sketch of the genres in which Havel engaged during his lifetime. This is of particular importance for English-language readers of Havel, if not also for other non-specialists in Czech literature and history: most of Havel’s works in his earliest genre have proven inaccessible to readers who come to him without knowledge of Czech, and they have therefore been largely ignored by commentators on Havel in the non-Czech-speaking scholarly community. After providing an outline of Havel’s genres, I will note commonalities in form and emphasis across genres as well as argue that Havel’s case represents not merely an example of cross-genre productivity but an almost obsessive need to redefine the conventions of nearly all the genres in which he engaged. In other words, Havel’s “restlessness of transcendence” was rhetorically manifested in more than one way. I will conclude with thoughts on the implications of this approach for reading Havel, if not also for reading ourselves.

Havel’s genres

Havel arguably engaged in nine written genres during his lifetime. I will introduce, situate chronologically, and briefly describe each of these genres below. My aim is not to provide an exhaustive description of each, but rather to note features that are relevant for discussion of Havel’s genre-crossing proclivities.⁴

(1) Literary-critical essays (art criticism): 1950s and 1960s. These are the least known of Havel’s writings outside, perhaps, of the Czech context. Few of these works

have been translated into English, and they are rarely referenced by English-language scholars writing about Havel's later genres. They do not represent criticism for criticism's sake, but always speak to Havel's broader concern with the role that literature and art play in the formation of human identity and in society – culture not as a superstructure, but as the groundfloor of social consciousness.

Perhaps the most well-known essay from this period, internationally speaking, is the 1966 “Anatomy of the Gag” (Havel 1999, 3: 589-609 and Havel 1984), which is an analysis of the cinematic gag that was so characteristic of a certain age of film, and it can be taken as a representative example of this early genre. In this essay, Havel analyzes gags from films by Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton as special forms of defamiliarization that comprises a two-stage process: in the first stage of the process, a “dehumanizing automatism” (Chaplin working slavishly on a factory production line in the opening sequence to the 1936 film *Modern Times*) is introduced, and in the second stage this first automatism is defamiliarized by a “humanizing automatism” (the production line must be stopped so that Chaplin can brush a bug away from his face and scratch his ear). Havel cites another example from Chaplin's 1931 film *City Lights* in which a Statue to Prosperity is being unveiled at a public gathering of wealthy and politically powerful dignitaries: “The unveiling of the Statue of Prosperity is not a gag. Chaplin asleep is not a gag. But when upon the unveiling of the Statue of Prosperity it is suddenly discovered that the beggar Chaplin is sleeping in the arms of the statue – that is indeed a gag” (Havel 1999, 3: 589-590 and Havel 1984: 13).

This two-stage process of defamiliarization characterizes the cinematic gag, but Havel is not content to end the analysis there. The initial literary-critical argument sets the stage for Havel's real aim: to argue that the gag actually represents a form of modern-day aesthetic catharsis. Chaplin and Keaton makes us laugh at our modern-day predicament, and the humanizing automatism that triggers the defamiliarization cleanses us and allows us to recapture or rehumanize our sense of self.

In Havel's treatment, which is typical of the great majority of Havel's literary-critical essays from this period, the wall between art and everyday life is knocked down or pushed through: literature and art are treated as foundational to personal and social identity. This anticipates Havel's later emphasis on culture, developed in the essays

“Letter to Husák” and “Power of the powerless”, as a “pre-political” phenomenon. We might also note Havel’s obsession with seemingly incidental or self-contained phenomena – ostensibly small details – that come to have a much larger meaning: the cinematic gag becomes an enactment of existential catharsis.⁵ Havel’s analysis of the gag, and this is again true of most of the literary-critical writings, suggests a writer and thinker with a strong pragmatic (in the philosophical sense of the word) understanding of the world: meaning both has a would-be character (the meaning of any phenomenon lies in the pragmatic consequences that follow from it) and is essentially relational in nature (there are two parts to the cinematic gag, but what is important is their relationship).

The very title of the essay – the “anatomy” of an artistic device – also points to Havel’s understanding of ideas and concepts as living organisms or agents in the world that interact with us in the co-creation of meaning. Havel used the title “Anatomy of...” for several other works, and we might consider Havel’s writings writ large as focused on the “anatomy” of human identity in the modern world.

Martin Putna has noted that the motifs and themes from this early period of Havel’s literary engagement anticipate his more mature writings. In commenting on several texts from the early 1950s, he writes: “To be sure, these are not the works of a great thinker but the texts of a seventeen-year-old adolescent. In them, however, one finds ideas and motifs that attest to Havel’s continuity with inherited traditions – they also anticipate several of the ideas and motifs characterizing his ‘more mature’ period” (Putna 2010: 360; see also Putna 2012: chapter 3). I would make the same point perhaps more forcefully: considered as a whole, Havel’s early literary-critical writings are foundational to Havel’s later development. They anticipate key themes and motifs that Havel will relentlessly pursue in his future writings, and they reveal Havel as a process-oriented and pragmatic thinker, one of whose main concerns – and this is true of Havel in all of his incarnations – was with the relationship between form and meaning. The ends cannot be separated from the means, the meaning of the whole is grounded in but not reducible to its parts, the essence of the *what* or *who* is a function of the *how*.

(2) The visual poetry of the *Anticodes*: 1960s. Havel’s playful typographic poems – he wrote hundreds of them – were originally written to amuse himself and

friends (Rocamora 2004: 57). One critic has called them “engaged articulations of absurdity” (Hiršal 1993: 5). Havel was first exposed to typogrammy by Jiří Kolář, an early and influential mentor, and this visual poetry, in which form is inseparable from meaning, represented “an attempt to release poetry from its traditional form” that was also “consistent with a search for new forms” (Rocamora 2004: 57). The *Anticodes* mix highbrow themes (aspects of the existential crisis of modern man) with playful form. Most are schematic in nature: they suggest a template that can have multiple applications to real-world experience, both personal and social, and their meaning is not reducible to a single “correct” interpretation. They are additionally characterized by an imagistic representation that is maximally memorable or that, in the words of one critic, can easily “dig into the mind” (Hiršal 1993: 8).

Given that Havel had them published as a separate book in 1993 (Havel 1993a), Peter Steiner has argued that he likely did not consider these playful poetic efforts “episodic or unimportant” (Steiner 2008: 209). They represent a strategic application of the themes and strategies in Havel’s literary-critical essays while at the same time they prefigure the plays. It has been noted that the message of each poem functions like a provocation or an appeal (Hiršal 1993: 9), and that many of the poems exhibit latent dramatic tension: they could easily be reworked as visual performances or mini-dramas.⁶

(3) **Plays: 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 2007.** Much has been written about Havel as a playwright⁷, and I will not attempt a succinct summary of the critical literature here (if that is even possible). I will instead briefly characterize the theatrical genre as Havel himself understood it. In the first place, and somewhat surprisingly, Havel stated in several different venues that he became involved in the theater partly through a bit of luck and not because he was fated to do so. He was not, in other words, a born playwright or theater-person (*divadelník*), but the theatrical form did seem to provide him with a vehicle most appropriate to his needs. If another genre had offered him more fertile ground for the cultivation of his ideas, he would have taken it up (Havel 1983a and 1983b: letter 102). In other words, he chose playwrighting for his main calling as a by-product of his keen awareness of the form/meaning relationship and as a result of his search for a form (*a how*) that could most fully represent the meaning (the *what*) that he

wished to convey. The meaning of Havel's plays is inseparable from the form in which they are created.

This was true for Havel-the-playwright on both a small and large scale. On a small scale at the level of a single play, the structural devices that typically come to mind when one thinks of Havel's dramatic style – repetition and circularity, highly rational and often mechanistic patterning of dialogue, tightly choreographed entrances and exits and gestures (both verbal and physical) – are not deployed as ends in themselves, but rather as means that are appropriate for exploring the larger questions that Havel's plays are designed to raise (Havel 1983a and 1983b: letter 80). On a much larger scale, Havel understood the potential of theater as a genre in ambitious terms: the dramatic form makes it possible to “uncover something like the structure of Being [*odkrýt cosi jako kostru bytí*], to display in vivid terms its internal weave, its hidden structure, and its real articulation” (Havel 2007: 277 and Havel 2006: 193). A play is like “a concentrated picture of the structure of Being, the world, life” in which “everything is related to everything else” (Havel 2007: 286, Havel 2006: 199). For Havel, to attend a performance of one of his plays ideally meant to participate in an “existential encounter” that would certainly prove to be entertaining but at the same time also *zneklidňující* (“disturbing”). His plays were not intended to pedantically instruct or provide easy answers as much as they were designed to provoke the audience to introspection and self-reflection (Havel 1983a and 1983b: letters 103 and 104).

Although his plays have been characterized as absurdist in the tradition of French theater of the absurd (Eslin 2001), Havel himself was not particularly interested in this formulation (Havel 1983a and 1983b: letter 116). He did, however, recognize a shared agenda with French absurdism and acknowledged that the absurdist form facilitated the kind of discussion that he wanted to have: “Absurd theatre, in its particular (and easily descriptably) way, makes the fundamental questions of the modern human dimension of Being its themes” (Havel 1991b: 54 and Havel 1990: 50). A more fitting characterization of Havel's style would be theater of the appeal (*divadlo apelu*) or absurdist theater of a special kind in which the formal techniques associated with absurdism are deployed to provoke the audience by creating within the play an empty space for audience self-reflection. In Jan Grossman's definition, theater of the appeal is a performance that “calls

into being [vyzývání] and leaves a space open for conjecture and inference” (Grossman 1999: 90). Ivan Vyskočil defined *divadlo apelu* as theater that aims “to engage the intellect and the imagination of the spectator in order to force him to agree, disagree, compare, and view a subject matter from various angles” (cited in Trenskey 1978: 105). Like the cinematic gag, the formal devices of the theater of the appeal have “anatomy”: they energetically act upon the audience, provoking and inviting – or at least providing necessary space for – catharsis.

Havel’s plays have something else in common with both his literary-critical writings and his visual poetry: they do not promote art for art’s sake but rather make use of aesthetic strategies to engage with the world. Havel understood theater as a “seismograph” of its time and place, which is one way of metaphorically imagining the larger cultural role that he assigned to it: “Theatre is always a sensitive seismograph of an era, perhaps the most sensitive one there is; it’s a sponge that quickly soaks up important ingredients in the atmosphere around it. These movements in the theatre have to be seen against the wider background of the general climate of those times” (Havel 1991b: 51 and Havel 1990: 47).

(4) **The essays: the 1960s through the 1980s.**⁸ Along with the plays, the essays are, generally speaking, the most well-known of Havel’s writings. It would be fair to say – although no one has done a careful study of this – that Havel’s ideas were worked out first in dramatic form (and perhaps also in literary-critical and poetic form) and then given more concrete and rational expression in the essays. Rocamora notes, for example, that essays like “Power of the powerless” and “Politics and conscience” seem to “serve as explication[s] du texte” for the plays (Rocamora 2004: 376). While the plays are focused on *understanding*, the essays are, for the most part, concerned with *explaining*, and this is a distinction that is key for making sense of Havel’s genre-crossing.

The essays are traditionally considered political texts to the extent that many of them present Havel as anti-totalitarian “dissident” who keenly analyzes the power structure of a totalitarian regime. While not untrue, this generalization ignores the point that Havel undermines conventional understandings of “politics” and “political power” even in the most overtly political essays and also that by no means all of the essays are

political in a traditional sense of the word. As an example of the latter, the 1984 essay *Thriller*, which takes its title from Michael Jackson's song and video, is a lyrical meditation on modern human identity that opens with a collage of modern news reports. Havel uses this news collage as a ground for a meditation on what humanity in the Age of Science and Rationality – the age of hyperrational framing of identity, a great age in human history that is approaching its end – has lost and the consequences of that loss. In *Thriller*, Havel is concerned with the wider sociohistorical and cultural frame against which modern politics – totalitarian and otherwise – plays out, but the same could also be said of his treatment of politics and power in the more traditionally “political” essays like “Power of the powerless” and “Politics and conscience”. At the very least, it must be admitted that in the essays as a whole Havel portrays political (and economic) matters as secondary phenomena to cultural and moral questions: the latter define the frame against which the former acquire their concrete form and meaning.

In comparing Havel's writing across genres, it would be relevant to note one more feature of the essays that has escaped the attention of commentators on Havel: almost every essay has at least one central image that captures its main argument or point. In “Politics and conscience”, we have the image of the factory smokestack (*komín*), and “Power of the powerless” features the story of the greengrocer hanging his propagandistic sign in the window of his shop. We are reminded here of the *Anticodes*, which are memorable at least in part because their very form provides us with an image that imprints itself on our minds.

(5) **Letters from Prison (*Letters to Olga*): 1979 to 1983.** These letters were ostensibly written to his first wife Olga, but not exactly: Havel was only permitted to write to members of his immediate family, and he used the letters to Olga to conduct a philosophical dialogue with other dissident intellectuals.⁹ As Havel noted in the introduction to Balabán 2009 (11), the letters were his only opportunity to be creative while in prison, and they had a deep spiritual meaning for him as such. Putna describes Havel's letters from prison as “one of the most important works in his creative trajectory” (2012: 181).

As part of an intellectual dialogue, the letters contain a core philosophical vocabulary: Being, faith, conscience, responsibility, spirituality, the absolute horizon.¹⁰ They also contain Havel's most extensive meditations on the nature and meaning of theater, or rather of his own particular dramatic style. Havel's philosophizing in the letters is neither systematic, nor scholarly: he is purposefully ecumenical and non-sectarian in a conscious effort to "open up" his ideas to everyone (Balabán 2009: 22). It is a kind of "private philosophizing" (Z. Neubauer 2010: 78) grounded in Havel's personal experience but at the same time transcendent of his particular circumstances (Z. Neubauer 2010: 64). The letters focus on understanding the dilemma of life in the modern age with the prison experience as an especially concentrated variant of that existential dilemma. Zdeněk Neubauer has argued that the value of the letters as philosophical discourse may well lie in their informal or non-professional presentation: "And so we should listen very carefully indeed: that to which we are witnesses, is a true *ortus philosophiae* – an emergence, the sprouting of love towards wisdom" (Z. Neubauer 2010: 66). James Pontuso notes that while Havel's philosophizing is not philosophy in the traditional sense – it is "confused, inconsistent, and poetic rather than rigorous and rational" (Pontuso 2004: 15) – still his search for himself is "surely more penetrating than any 'systematic' philosophic text" (2004: 16).

We might conclude, then, that these letters are philosophical but in a special Havelian sense, and it can be added that the same could be said of nearly all of Havel's writings. Ivan Dubský has described Havel's presidential speeches as philosophical not in the sense of philosophy for philosophy's sake (not as a technical exercise in philosophical theorizing), but instead as expressions of practical concern for how to care for the world; in this respect, the speeches represent philosophy as "a caring look around oneself" (Dubský 1997: 10). The letters – despite the often odd stylings necessitated by trying to guarantee that they would pass the prison censor – read similarly.

Havel's prison letters were written instead of plays and essays, but they were both preceded and followed by extremely productive periods in these two other genres. This raises a question: If the essays function as *explications du texte* for the plays, then how might we characterize the prison letters in regard to the plays and the essays, if not also in relation to Havel's other writings? In an abstract sense, the prison letters function as

explications du texte for all the rest of Havel's writings. They are a meta-version of his other texts, the underlying code for the more concrete and context- or genre-specific manifestations of his thinking. We might, for example, try to understand the relationship between the essays and the plays by using the meditations in *Letters to Olga* as a mediating frame or grid, a philosophically schematized reduction of Havel's understanding of human identity.

The letters are not, of course, all philosophy all the time. Many begin and end with prosaic references to Havel's physical health and comfort, with Havel's requests to Olga to write him more often or more specifically about certain matters, or with lists of items to include in prison care-packages. So the letters themselves are decidedly a mix of styles, and this is reminiscent of those frequent moments in Havel's plays where petty pre-occupations – eating, brushing one's hairs, going out for groceries, smoking – always seem to interrupt, and inexplicably at that, ostensibly much grander goings-on. Mundane references to everyday human existence provide a frame for the philosophical meditations and give them value as personally meaningful expressions of Havel's spiritual search.

I would note once again Havel's frequent use of central images that encapsulate the dominant messages in this or that letter. Some of the more memorable images include: the tree outside the prison wall, the view of which provides Havel with a privileged poetic moment and a momentary feeling of total harmony with the universe (Havel 1983a and 1983b: letter 91); the TV weatherwoman, caught unaware when the sound cuts off on a broadcast, who must stand, helplessly and wordlessly, in front of the national television audience and for whose embarrassment Havel experiences a pained empathy (letters 130ff); the junkyard left by astronauts who landed on the Moon and threw their trash outside their rocket's landing site (letter 134); and the empty tram at night that triggers an introspective reflection on whether one should pay the fare or not (letter 137).

(6) Collaborative autobiographical essay (*Dálkový výslech* or *Disturbing the Peace*): 1990. This book with the playful Czech title may well represent a genre in its own right, created by Havel in collaboration with the Czech journalist and writer Karel

Hvížd'ala. In the mid-1980s, Hvížd'ala, who was living in exile in Bonn, sent Havel written questions on a wide range of topics — personal, political, polemical, artistic, philosophical — and Havel answered these questions, or many of them, to produce a book-length collaborative interview that reads more like an autobiographical essay and intellectual/spiritual (self-)portrait. Themes from Havel's essays, his letters from prison, and his plays are taken up in a different form: the tone is purposefully conversational, even though the questions were submitted and answered in written form.

Published in 1990, the book was used to introduce Havel to the Czech public. Its form — both as a kind of collage and, in part, as the product of a collaborative interview with Hvížd'ala — is echoed in Havel's later political memoir, *Prosím stručně*, which also has a playful title in the original Czech (see below).

(7) Personal political testament that presents Havel's vision for a subsequent term as president (*Letní přemítání* or *Summer Meditations*): 1991.¹¹ Putna describes this book as a collection of meditations on the process of transforming the Czechoslovak state and the development of that process as Havel sees it (2012: 280). The book is framed as necessary given that Havel was about to declare his renewed candidacy for the presidency, and it could be viewed as the product of a political campaign, or the launch-strategy for just such a campaign, in that it contains Havel's thoughts on politics and policy in the Czechoslovak historical context of the early 1990s. At the same time, however, as Putna also notes (2012: 283), Havel's musings on sociohistorical specifics are framed by a broad philosophical and ethical vision. I would add to this that while Havel explicitly tries to discuss policy in a brief manner (that is, *stručně*, a term which resurfaces in Havel's later memoir), he makes it clear that policy specifics must be contextualized against the much larger background of human moral responsibility in the modern world. *Letní přemítání* is thus a political testament, but a non-traditional one in that it frames policy in terms of values and vision: Havel's politics is endowed with a moral or spiritual component.

Although atypical for Havel's writing in that its focus on technical policy measures in the Czechoslovak domestic scene makes it arguably less philosophically or aesthetically engaging than his other prose texts, *Letní přemítání* nonetheless has features

of Havel's style that we have already noted and will see again. It is deeply political, but more in the special sense of the politics of the essays than not. Like the *Anticodes*, Havel seems to be offering a template or schematic vision not just for the future of the Czechoslovak state, but perhaps also for humanity as a whole; this generally applicable moral vision is facilitated at certain moments in the text by the semantic ambiguity of the Czech word *země*, which can refer to both an individual state (that is, Czechoslovak domestic politics) or the whole planet (the future on politics on the earth as a whole). Havel also makes use of a central image in the book, which he introduces early in the text to prefigure his discussion of the Czechoslovak "national principle": his well-known discussion of the "circles" or "layers of home" that define human identity in the modern world (Havel 1999, 6: 409ff; 1993b: 30ff); this image then serves as a touchstone for Havel as he develops his vision of the future of the Czechoslovak state. Finally, it can be noted that Havel's political testament has, just like his plays and in the dramatic sense, a purposeful and strong appeal component.

(8) **Presidential speeches: 1990 to 2003.**¹² Havel wrote hundreds of speeches as president and considered them a thematically coherent collection. The speeches build upon one another, developing similar themes from different perspectives and in different directions, and in this respect they are like the letters from prison. They ought to be considered thematically coherent with Havel's pre-1989 essays in that they develop the same themes but from the perspective of the post-1989 world. The speeches might also be considered a hybrid genre in that they are micro-essays while also being, to a certain extent, performative play-like pieces that were written for a specific audience and occasion (Ceplina 2009). Also like the plays, they have clear and deliberate dramatic *apel*: James Wilson (2000) has argued that Havel's speeches offer a vision of how rhetorical practice can be used to create and foster civil society.

Like Havel's works in other genres, the speeches also often contain one memorable image that serves to define the message. One vivid example is from Havel's 1994 speech upon receipt of the Philadelphia Liberty Medal where he asks us to think of post-modern human society – as he argues in the speech, the current "state of mind" of the globalized world – in the following terms: "a Bedouin mounted on a camel and clad

in traditional robes under which he is wearing jeans, with a transistor radio in his hands and an ad for Coca-Cola on the camel's back". Like other genres, the speeches are thematically and stylistically mixed: many, or parts of many, are explicitly devoted to political matters, but there are also speeches on philosophical and spiritual themes that are essentially extensions of his prison meditations as well as on the theater, literature, self-doubt. As with the essays, this mixing cannot be considered incidental.

One of Havel's main strategies in the speeches could be termed rhetorical frame-shifting: he defamiliarizes an issue that is seemingly already quite familiar to us by framing the issue in a consciously unconventional way. With the shift in frame comes a shift in values and roles within the frame, and the issue presents itself to us in a new light. A frequent result of Havel's frame-shifting is this: questions which may have previously seemed predominantly political or economic become understood in Havel's framing as fundamentally moral or spiritual. In probably his most famous speech, his first as president in the New Year's Address to the Nation in 1990, Havel started with a dramatic frame-shift of just this type: "For forty years you heard from my predecessors on this day different variations on the same theme: how our country was flourishing, how many million tons of steel we produced, how happy we all were, how trusted our government, and what bright perspectives were unfolding in front of us. I assume you did not propose me for this office so that I, too, would lie to you". Although frame-shifting of this sort is particularly evident in the speeches, it is a strategy characteristic of many of Havel's genres: note, for example, Havel's coinage, in "Power of the powerless", of the term "post-totalitarian" to describe the power structure of "normalized" Czechoslovak society in the 1970s, which is a deliberate strategy that sets Havel up to pursue a reframing of our understanding of the value of "politics" and "power".

(9) Political memoir (*Prosím stručně* or *To the Castle and back*): 2006.¹³

Havel's political memoir is traditional to the extent that he addresses aspects of his presidency that one would expect him to and at the same time manages to settle a number of old political scores (chiefly with his rival, Václav Klaus). The overall effect of the memoir, however, is to force a radical reconsideration of what politics means and who a politician (in this case, Havel) is. The book grounds itself in a given form while

transcending that form – frame-shifting away from that form – in order to make the point that conventional ways of relating to politics and politicians are not always adequate to clarity of understanding.

The frame-shift derives from Havel's use of a conscious collage format to write the memoir. Havel notes in the book that he chose to write a literary collage because it represented "one of the ways to touch on [the] hidden fabric of life" in which "everything is related to everything else; anything from a particular period points to something from the period that preceded it or the period that followed; everything is linked together in all kinds of ways..." (Havel 2007: 286 and Havel 2006: 199). The collage technique allows for a focus on combining "things that, on the surface, are unrelated, in such a way that they ultimately tell us more about the connections between them and their real meaning than any mechanical chronology could, or any other ordering principle that suppresses accident" (Havel 2007: 286 and Havel 2006: 199). Putna describes Havel's use of the collage technique as a special kind of synthesis through which he attempts to "capture unity through a kaleidoscope of fragments" (2012: 317) and argues that the memoir is, after *Letters to Olga*, Havel's second most spiritual work (2012: 320). One reviewer of *Prosím stručně* noted that the collage form also exerts a certain "poetic charm" on the reader (Šlajchrt 2006: 22).¹⁴

There are three strips to Havel's literary collage or three distinct voices in the memoir, and these are interlaced throughout the book. There are reminiscences written post-presidency: these are lyrical, at times melancholy in tone, and deeply personal. The second strip consists of selected memoranda written by Havel to his presidential staff, and these are mostly arranged in chronological order. As the book progresses, some of the more absurd memoranda (for example, the need for a longer garden hose to use in the gardens of Prague Castle) become playfully repeated motifs. Finally, there are analytical mini-essays written as answers to questions from Karel Hvižd'ala, the same journalist who interviewed Havel in his pre-presidential incarnation (Havel 1991a and 1991b). With the return of Hvižd'ala, Havel's conscious use of collage transcends the book itself and suggests that the various periods of Havel's life – his pre-1989 dissident and his post-1989 presidential faces – ought perhaps to be interpreted also as a collage, and this suggestion is reinforced by the Czech title of the

book, the abbreviation of which establishes the book as a PS or post-scriptum on Havel's literary and political life.

The three strips that comprise the book represent a formal and stylistic mix that we have noted is characteristic of Havel's works in general: the mundane is juxtaposed, often playfully, with the grandiose, and dramatic tension between the parts of the book results. One effect of this is to challenge what we think we already know about the practice of politics or to force us to rethink our conventional framing. The interpretative process triggered by collage – the shift or displacement that the collage form causes – has less to do with a logical or rational thinking and more to do with feeling (Taylor 2004: 105). In other words, interpretation of a collage is not computable or rationally systematizable: making sense of a collage requires an appeal to personal experience that leads to conjecture or inference about the possible meaningful relationship between the strips of the work. Collage as an art form is thus anti-system and anti-mechanical: it is a kind of ordering that transcends order, and we must consider this an essential part of the memoir's – of Havel's – message.

Much like his plays, Havel's literary collage can also be read as an *appeal*. Resolving the collage requires active interpretation on the viewer's (or, in this case, reader's) part. The collage, like a puzzle, invites us to solve it, which is also the essence of the art of the theatrical appeal: the audience must participate in confronting and resolving the dramatic tension brought into being by the play because the play's "empty space" calls out to be filled with meaning. Like the presidential speeches, then, the memoir itself offers a rhetorical enactment of participatory engagement in political life.

Political engagement as a tenth "genre"

At this point we might pause to consider a more general question suggested by a few of the genres – in particular, *Letní přemítání*, the presidential speeches, and the political memoir — but also potentially relevant for all of Havel's writing: Are all Havel's texts inherently political? On the one hand, this seems like an absurd question to ask since the default assumption is that the essays and plays – and, it ought to go without saying, *Letní přemítání*, the political speeches, and the memoir – are naturally so. I have already argued, however, that this generalization is problematic with regard to the essays,

and I would further argue that it proves equally problematic for the plays and also, somewhat paradoxically, for the ostensibly “political” texts.

In regard to the plays, Alena Štěrbová has argued that they are not political in the direct sense of the word; that is, they are not grounded in one political situation or in a specific set of political circumstances (Štěrbová 2002: 25). Havel had a strong interest in the “political aspects” of his reality (Štěrbová 2002: 25), but this is not the same thing as saying that the plays represent “tendentiously political” texts (Štěrbová 2002: 31). Havel was, in fact, clear that his plays did not relate specifically and only to socialist totalitarianism: they can be read as parodies of or commentaries on the socialist context in which they were written, but this does not exhaust their interpretation. Havel’s plays were written to resonate beyond the borders of the socialist bloc, and they did indeed enjoy (and often still do) wide popularity in the non-socialist world: their themes and their form of presentation resonate with audiences who know little to nothing about life in a socialist-totalitarian society. In light of this, Štěrbová’s focuses on the plays’ “openness” to various readings: Havel intended them as “open” texts, and this is in fact their strength as dramatic works (Štěrbová 2002: 26).

Following Jiřina Šiklová, we might understand Havel’s writings as “political” in a different and decidedly less tendentious sense – as forms of “action” that were meant to engage a community of people (friends and fellow intellectuals, readers of the samizdat essays, theater-goers) in purposeful reflection that could perhaps lead to more traditional forms of political involvement. The texts are, in this view, political, but in a pre-political sense. About Havel, Šiklová writes: “All his life he needed not only to reflect, not only to write, but also to become directly involved in the goings-on around him [*přímou zasahovat do dění kolem sebe*], and he in fact always did as much from his adolescent years onward” (Šiklová 1997: 129).

Citing Hannah Arendt, Martin Palouš (1997) offers a reframing of Havel’s “politicalness” in terms similar to Šiklová’s. Arendt made a distinction between an instrumental and communicative understanding of politics and politicians: “In the instrumental framework, political actors strive for the success of their own political agenda and their goal is the implementation of their political will *in opposition to* the will of their political opponents; in the communicative model, however, political activism is

motivated by a need to achieve consensus among actors looking on the same political questions but from differing viewpoints” (Palouš 1997: 133). A communicative politics is not teleological or end-focused. It is not “power” politics in a traditional sense, but a politics of process in which the very process itself is the end-goal (Palouš 1997: 133). Palouš notes that Havel was suspicious of the instrumental model and, as a political thinker and politician, much closer to the communicative model and understood, along with Arendt, that the latter is not a relic of the ancient past, but a key to confronting totalizing forms of political power in the modern age (Palouš 1997: 136).

Havel then, was not, in his own words, “tendentiously political” but rather “authentically political” in all of his writings (Štěrbová 31) – even the texts considered most overtly political should be read as manifestations of the latter, not the former, tendency. We can perhaps best understand what is meant by Havel’s phrase “authentically political” in Šiklova’s and Palouš’ terms: reflection and writing are forms of “pre-political action” that are both grounded in and have as their ultimate goal a communicative, but not an instrumental, model of politics.

These considerations on the “politicalness” of Havel’s written genres lead me to add a tenth genre – albeit a not (entirely) literary one – to the list of genres that Havel engaged in during his lifetime. For lack of a better term, it could be called the genre of political engagement. While political engagement is not traditionally understood as a “genre”, there are good reasons for claiming that it was in Havel’s case and advantages to seeing it as such. Moreover, understanding it in these terms helps to bridge the divide between Havel’s pre-1989 “dissident” engagement and his post-1989 presidential engagement. Many commentators on and critics of Havel place his post-1989 political incarnation in an almost entire separate category from the other genres that I have outlined and also see it at odds with his “dissident” activism. In other words, it is frequently assumed, despite Havel’s obsession with genre-crossing, that there is no relationship between Havel-the-writer and Havel-the-politician or that the relationship has a rather negative character: there is an implied or assumed disjuncture between the pre- and post-1989 Havel. Havel himself did not consider his transition to the presidency to represent a radical disjuncture, and if we understand Havel’s presidency as yet another genre in an already long list – and reflect on how and why genre-crossing defines Havel

as a thinker – then Havel’s political incarnation takes the form of a natural extension of his “pre-political” literary endeavors.

Cross-genre commonalities

To the extent that critics comment directly on Havel’s cross-genre productivity, they do so only matter-of-factly and superficially: Havel’s proclivities in this regard are seen as rhetorical “exercises” that correspond to his personal preferences. However, a sketch of Havel’s nine written genres – along with the tenth “genre” of his political engagement – demonstrates that the genres are tightly integrated thematically and conceptually as well as rhetorically. His genre-crossing cannot therefore be viewed as incidental: the *how*, especially in Havel’s intellectual world, is never separable from the *what* or the *who*. Havel’s artistic and literary versatility as well as his role as a leading actor in the culture and society of his time – like Josef Čapek’s before him – ought to have a direct bearing on how we read him. In order to make sense of Havel as a writer and thinker as well as of Havel’s legacy, we need to a holistic evaluation that does not fragment but integrates his cross-genre engagement.

A clue to the value of genre-crossing for Havel is found in one letter to Olga (letter 62) in which he frames the question of modern human identity in crisis in terms of how we understand responsibility (this focus on the relationship between identity and responsibility develops into a central theme of the prison letters). Havel concludes his musings in letter 62 by qualifying them. He asks that his readers not take him too literally because he is not a philosopher and his ambition is not to build a systematic theory of meaning. He admits that he is, in fact, always contradicting himself and never manages to explain everything, or rather that he explains things – and this is the crux of the matter – in very different ways. We might take this as one way of understanding the import of Havel’s genre-crossing: as an attempt, or even a compelling need, to continually explain the same things but in different terms. All ten genres – Havel’s political activism included – might best be seen in this light.

At the same time that the genres represent ways of “explaining things in different ways”, there are commonalities that cut across the genres that reinforce an integrative approach to Havel’s genre-crossing, and some of these have already been mentioned. In

the first place, Havel treats the same themes across all the genres, and these all fall under the rubric of reflections on the modern crisis of human identity. Moreover, throughout his intellectual career, he treats these themes, or this broad topic, in a remarkably consistent way. From the earlier literary-critical Havel to his political incarnation as president in the speeches and beyond, Havel-the-intellectual does not fundamentally alter his positions. He develops his ideas as the circumstances change, but the development takes place consistently within the same broad intellectual framework.

The underlying rhetorical strategies that Havel uses in his treatment of these themes are also remarkably consistent, although their surface manifestations vary given the formal demands of each genre. One strategy, for example, that Havel uses in a number of the genres – particularly in the *Anticodes* and the plays – is to provide a template or conceptual schema that has multiple applications to human experience: in Štěrbová's words, the texts are characterized by their interpretative “openness”. The anticodes and plays have no single “correct” interpretation, but are rather conceptual skeletons that can be fleshed out variously.

Another common strategy that cuts across genres is, as we have seen, Havel's use of a central image that becomes a vivid and memorable symbol – a condensed representation – of the broader argument of a given work. The *Anticodes* represent this in its most reduced form: the image is, to a great extent, also the argument. But central images also play a key role in many of the other texts – the essays and prison letters as well as the presidential speeches. The plays represent the most special and developed case of Havel's image strategy since the whole performance – and Havel's theater is oriented to performance – becomes the symbol: the very enactment of the play is the argument, and the members of the audience do not so much process the argument in an abstractly intellectual way as they *experience* it live.

Mixing of levels and styles is also, as we have seen, a common cross-genre strategy that must not be considered incidental but intentional. The political memoir might be read as the work in which this particular strategy reaches a culminating point. The strategy is pushed to one possible logical end in the explicit writing of a literary collage: highbrow concerns (the need to write a new federal Constitution or the planning of state visits to foreign countries) are juxtaposed with expressions of personal

melancholy and self-doubt as well as seemingly petty details related to practical administration (the length of the Castle's garden hose). A plaintive, lyrical tone is stylistically juxtaposed with analytical and rational argumentation characteristic of Havel-the-essayist as well as with the bureaucratic style of the office memoranda.

All three of these strategies – schematizing, using a central image, and mixing of levels and styles – work together to create a strong appeal component in the great majority of Havel's texts. Normally associated only with the plays (as quintessential theater of the *apel*), this component is also present in the essays to the extent that their aim is to raise questions – frame-shifted questions that run counter to conventional understandings – rather than provide concrete answers in the form of policy positions for effecting change. It is not accidental that two of Havel's earliest essays – the letter to Alexander Dubček (1969) and the letter to Gustáv Husák (1975) – are, as nominal letters, direct appeals to individuals, nor is it incidental that the later “Politics and conscience” (1984) ends with a dramatic appeal in the form of a rhetorical question.

In relation to the appeal, it is instructive to refer to one of Havel's letters from prison (Havel 1983a and 1983b: letter 92) in which he suggested that anything useful that has ever been said on the question of the meaning of life has the nature of a *call*, *challenge* or *appeal*. Havel uses two Czech words here, the second of which is the familiar *apel*. The first word he uses here is *výzva*, the meaning of which is, in Havel's usage, roughly synonymous with the meaning of *apel*, but which has a broader range of usage in everyday Czech than the more abstract and domain-specific *apel*. The word *výzva* proves to be a touchstone term for Havel in both *Letters to Olga* and also in the later presidential speeches.¹⁵ A *výzva* is characterized, Havel explains, by its dramatic openness and incompleteness (*nehotovost*): it is “something that is living, something that overwhelms us or speaks to us, obliges or excites us, something that is in concord with our innermost experience and which may even change our entire life from the ground up but which never, of course, attempts to answer, unambiguously, the unanswerable question of meaning” (Havel 1983a: 214 and 1983b: 225). In his explanation of the meaning of *výzva*, he cites Josef Šafařík on the difference between information and truth: the former is concrete, objective, discrete, and freely transmittable, but the latter is more complicated and more elusive. To conceive of truth as consisting of discrete bits of

information that simply need to be transmitted to other people, Havel asserts, has been one of the most dangerous currents in human history. Authentic human meaning is not informational: it is not transferable, not objective, not concretizable, not discrete.

It is not, in Havel's words, a stopping point that exists beyond or apart from life (not "a full stop at the end of life"), but rather a starting point for a deeper experience of life. If we take the prison letters as meta-texts or the underlying code for Havel's thinking, then his mediations on meaning, life, and the appeal in letter 92 suggest a framework for reading all of his genres.

There is a final commonality that cuts across all of Havel's genres – including his political engagement – that further clarifies Havel's "exercises" in genre-crossing. Havel did not merely cross over from one genre to another, but he also tended to challenge the formal conventions or constraints of each of the genres in which he engaged, effectively attempting to redefine the contours of each in order to suit his own purposes. The literary-critical writings are not examples of insular and self-contained art criticism, but approach artistic "devices" as a starting point for critical thinking about personal and social identity; the anticodes redefine poetic form to special effect; the "political" essays undermine traditional political notions; the "philosophical" letters from prison represent a particularly Havelian spirit of philosophizing; many of the presidential speeches are like no speeches that any other president would ever give; and Havel's collaborative interview/autobiography with Hvižd'ala is a completely new genre unto itself.

Havel's political memoir is also a radical reworking of the traditional genre: it is, in the words of Havel's translator Paul Wilson, structurally unlike anything that a former head of state has ever written (Wilson 2006: 15). This was, of course, Havel's point: by redefining the formal conventions of political memoir, he effectively reframes our understanding of politics. This may well have been what he was attempting to do also while serving as president and perhaps why the significance of his political engagement – as a challenge to the conventional framing of the genre – has yet to be adequately appreciated.

Havel, in other words, employed frame-shifting in his genres as both a localized strategy (in the details of this or that text) and as a global strategy (by reworking the conventions of the genres themselves). Havel's case is therefore not merely one of genre-

crossing but of genre-transcending and genre-problematizing. This is not surprising given that Havel admitted to being particularly taken with everything and anything “that escapes order and makes it problematic [*co se vymyká řádu a co ho problematizuje*]” (Havel 2007: 335 and 2006: 239). Frame-shifting, along with the problematizing of conventional forms that often comes with it, becomes for Havel an almost necessary component of critical thinking. Genre-crossing and genre-transcending do not represent ways that Havel “exercises” his ideas, but rather they strategically enact his search for authentic forms of meaning.

An authentic response to life’s call requires both “explaining things in different ways” as well as realizing that “true meaning” emerges from the relationships among different forms. The confrontation of one form with another represents an *apel* or *výzva*, and the proper response requires not fragmentation or atomization, but integration. This principle is at work in and among Havel’s nine literary genres and is equally active within and for the tenth genre of political engagement.

Havel’s audio-collage and the “restlessness of transcendence”

By way of summing up a sketch of Havel’s genre-crossing, we might consider yet another genre – a one-off bonus genre – that illustrates well the features and the relationships that we have been discussing. In 1968, Havel created an audio-collage for a contest that Czechoslovak radio held to mark the 50th anniversary of the founding of the first Czechoslovak Republic in 1918. Havel composed an audio-collage that included recorded excerpts of famous speeches from Czech politicians in the democratic tradition that included Masaryk, Beneš, and Dubček. These recordings alternated with excerpts from Bedřich Smetana’s opera *Libuše*, a symbol of Czech nationhood. But there is also a third sound layer on the recording, that of a man wordlessly having lunch. As Carol Rocamora writes: “The sense is that of ‘the common man’ eating and drinking, oblivious to the speeches and their meaning. As the tape is played, the musical excerpts get shorter and shorter; the last speech to be heard is Dubček’s on the futility of defending his country against foreign armies. Dubček is weeping” (Rocamora 2004: 100). Havel won the radio contest, but his audio-collage was not broadcast until after the Velvet Revolution.

Given the strategies that Havel typically employed in his other genres, we must see this work as quintessentially Havelian; it is not an odd one-off “exercise” but rather a particularly compacted form of the Havelian prototype. It has an explicit collage structure that mixes and juxtaposes high- and low-brow forms, and it has a strong image component (in this case, an audio-image) that is the thrust of the whole “argument” of the work. It is political, but in Havel’s understanding of authentically communicative politics. In other words, the question raised by the collage is not one of a technical political response, but a matter of human identity and morality at a pre-political level. The collage does not appeal to reason as much as it evokes – in a dramatically tense but at the same time playful way – a powerful feeling that becomes the crux of its *apel*. Finally, the meaning of the audio-collage is fundamentally relational and derives from this appeal: it emerges and takes concrete form in the listener’s mind from the interaction between the individual strips.

The feeling that is evoked by Havel’s audio-collage as well as by many of Havel’s works across the genres could be described via the Czech word *neklid*. Havel’s is a special kind of *neklid*: a disturbing feeling that leads – through provocation and appeal – to a kind of transcendence beyond conventional ways of being in the world. This kind of *neklid* represents a running theme in Havel’s prison letters (Havel 1983a and 1983b). In letter 141, for instance, Havel argues that a constant “restlessness” or “turbulence” of the soul is necessary for developing an authentic sense of self that leads to genuine responsibility: “Something that might be called a constant, deepening turbulence of the mutual illumination, verification and augmentation of everything primordial, everything that has been achieved, everything intended and acted upon, spontaneously felt and worked out by the mind; a kind of unceasing dramatic confrontation between primordial vulnerability and achieved experience” (Havel 1983a and 1983b: letter 141). *Neklid* as turbulence or restlessness of the soul is also arguably the starting point for Havel’s understanding of both “living in truth” and dissidentism: both are characterized by going beyond or transcending an existing conventional form or order, and both are oriented toward *neklid* as a process, not necessarily as an outcome.

Havel’s most famous use of the term *neklid* – in the phrase *neklid transcendence* or the “restlessness of transcendence” – occurs in his 1975 *Letter to Dr. Husák* where he

contrasts the demands of life with the leveling conformity required by authoritarian systems:

Life rebels against all uniformity and leveling; its aim is not sameness, but variety, the restlessness of transcendence, the adventure of novelty and rebellion against the status quo... On the other hand, the essence of authority... consists basically in a distrust of all variety, uniqueness, and transcendence; in an aversion to everything unknown, impalpable, and currently obscure; in a proclivity for the uniform, the identical, and the inert; in deep affection for the status quo. (Havel 1999, 4: 93-94 and Havel 1991: 71).

This passage comes toward the end of the letter where Havel is envisioning the dissolution of Husák's regime by means of life itself. The language of the letter becomes more and more metaphorical as the essay progresses and culminates in competing images of *klid* and *neklid*. Life, Havel asserts, is the restlessness of transcendence, and attempts by authoritarian systems to stifle life by imposing an artificial order upon it are ultimately doomed to failure. Life cannot be boxed up or forcibly shaped into preconceived ideological forms. Life transcends all of our attempts to systematize and "order" it.

Conclusion

Havel's obsessive genre-crossing and genre-redefining rhetorically enact the restlessness of transcendence. He moves from genre to genre because he understands that one form alone is inadequate for expressing his meaning or, for that matter, any deeply human meaning – just as life itself in all of its richness cannot be boxed up and contained by the dictates of one particular ideological -ism. Moreover, he purposefully pushes through the conventional constraints of each genre in yet another enactment of formal and conceptual transcendence.

If we take Havel at his word in *Letter to Dr. Husák* and *Letters to Olga*, then we must consider that such spiritual restlessness is not, however, just a feature of Havel as a writer and thinker. Rather it may well provide a framework for understanding human meaning and meaningfulness writ large. How Havel wrote models not only how we

should read him, but also serves as a model – in the sense of Havel’s *výzva* – for how we might read ourselves.¹⁶

Notes

¹ See also Putna 2012: 120.

² All translations are mine unless otherwise referenced.

³ This statement is generally valid for non-Czech commentators on Havel; Czech scholars of Havel (for example, Putna 2012) do not fall into this trap. For an extended discussion of how Havel’s faces or incarnations have generally been fragmented and the misreading of Havel that results from this approach, see Danaher 2007a.

⁴ Excluded from my list of genres is Havel’s radio program as president, *Hovory z Lán*, as described by Putna (2012: 281ff). Putna’s description suggests that this program would also fit well into the analysis of Havel’s genres that I present here.

⁵ I have taught literature-in-translation monograph course on Havel’s writings for the last decade (<http://havelcourse.tumblr.com/>), and I regularly ask my students to react to Havel’s texts. Reacting to “Anatomy of the Gag”, one student wrote: “You’d think a gag is just gag, but it’s much more complicated”. For more on my monograph course, see Danaher 2008a.

⁶ The dramatic tension inherent in many of the *Anticodes* was noted by Chris McKim, a student in my monograph course.

⁷ For book-length studies of Havel-as-playwright, see Rocamora 2004 in English and Štěrbová 2002 in Czech.

⁸ English translations of many of Havel’s most important essays appear in Havel 1991a. Czech versions are collected in Havel 1999. For the purposes of this sketch, I daringly lump all of Havel’s essays, which exhibit a wide range of styles and concerns, into one genre; further subdivisions in the essay genre could obviously be made.

⁹ A volume entitled *Letters from Olga* (I. Havel et al 2011), representing the other voices in the dialogue, has recently been published in Czech. For an extended contextualization of Havel’s letters from prison, see Putna 2012: chapter 6.

¹⁰ We ought to consider some of these words core words in Havel’s vocabulary even beyond the letters. For a discussion of *conscience* and *spirituality* as such, see Danaher Forthcoming and Danaher 2010b respectively.

¹¹ The text of *Letní přemítání* is in Havel 1999, volume 6; its English translation is Havel 1993b.

¹² Havel’s speeches and other texts as president are available online in Czech at <http://old.hrad.cz/president/Havel/speeches/index.html>. Most have been translated into English are also available online (http://old.hrad.cz/president/Havel/speeches/index_uk.html).

¹³ For a review of the memoir in English, see Danaher 2008b. For reviews in Czech, see Chuchma 2006 and Šlajchrt 2006.

¹⁴ In this connection, it is worth noting Jiří Kolář's influence on Havel as an artist (Kosatík 2006: 42) and specifically Havel's fascination with Kolář's work in collage and montage (Kosatík 2006: 49).

¹⁵ Other touchstone terms or key words in Havel's thinking are explored in Danaher 2010a and Danaher 2010b. Danaher Forthcoming discusses the relationship between Havel's understanding of *výzva* and the "voice of conscience".

¹⁶ I am grateful for the insightful commentary and suggestions provided by two anonymous evaluators of this manuscript. Any errors that remain in the final version are my own responsibility.

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