

Informal writing situations -- texting and e-mail -- are already felt to be appropriate places for CC forms. Common Czech is heard more and more often as the broadcast media become ever more a part of daily life, and the presence of Vybíral's group and others like it may hasten these developments. The way I see it, our job as linguists should be to chart the situation and keep our ear to the ground, so that when certain Common Czech features find their way into the written norm, we will know it is time for the handbooks and textbooks to follow suit. In the meanwhile, for those of us who teach Czech as a foreign language, let's look first to our teaching methods and materials, to see if we're preparing our students adequately for the linguistic reality that will meet them when they begin to use the language in everyday conversation.

Every language, after all, presents particular problems in the relationships between its written and spoken forms -- English, for example, in its loose association between spelling and pronunciation, and its myriad of national standards -- and it would be almost miraculous if Czech did not. Foreigners need to learn to cope with a certain degree of diversity, regardless of how heavily regulated a language may be. For this purpose, books like Townsend's *Spoken Prague Czech* will continue to be an invaluable resource as long as the SC-CC divide is with us.

### The Relevance of Václav Havel for American Undergraduates

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### Introduction: Havel's Radical Hypothesis

"For Václav Havel, life under a totalitarian, communist regime was not the simple antithesis of life in a Western democracy. Communist society represented

'an inflated caricature of modern life in general' and the collective experiences of Czechs, Slovaks, and others who lived under such a regime 'stand as a kind of warning to the West, revealing to it its own latent tendencies'."<sup>4</sup>

This paragraph is taken from the first page of the syllabus for the course: *The Writings of Václav Havel: Critique of Modern Society*, which I offered for the first time in fall 2002 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. These and similar statements by Havel have largely gone unexplored -- or, at the very least, are underexplored -- in the critical literature on his writings. Political scientists seem especially averse to taking these suggestions by Havel seriously even if they are generally of the belief that Havel, as a failed political, will be remembered more for what he said than what he accomplished as President.

In this paper, I present a report on American undergraduate reactions to Havel's ideas, and particularly to his hypothesis concerning the relevance of his critique of "post-totalitarian" society for a critique of "post-democratic" society and modern life in general. Are Havel's so-called dissident essays and plays relevant to the lives of American undergraduates in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? If so, in what respects?<sup>5</sup>

### Background on the Course

The course was a literature-in-translation course taken by 23 students, 22 of whom were undergraduates. Of the 22 undergraduates, most were first-year students in their first semester of college, and the great majority had no significant prior experience with literary-critical techniques. As informal polling of the students on the first day of class showed, most enrolled in the course for various accidental reasons, one of the more popular of these being that they needed literature credits and that this course fit into their schedules. Few, therefore, had any knowledge of Havel in advance of the course.<sup>6</sup>

In accordance with Havel's belief in the grounding of all knowledge in one's own experience, we would also be trying to personalize and contextualize Havel's writing as appropriate to our own lives. Now all translations would necessarily be in agreement with Havel's arguments, and some might (and did) result from principled disagreements with him. The argument I tried to make throughout the course, and which I emphasized particularly in the beginning phase, was that translation, or reading in a true sense of the word, presupposes a

<sup>4</sup> The full syllabus for the course, along with Havel-related internet links and samples of entries from student reaction journals, is available at <http://palimpsest.lss.wisc.edu/~danaher/havel/>.

<sup>5</sup> The course was devoted primarily to Havel's "dissident" essays and plays. His presidential speeches of which we read and discussed a sampling, are more directly and obviously relevant to the contemporary scene.

<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, those students who had read some of Havel's texts prior to enrolling proved to be the most enthusiastic, and perceptive, readers and "translators" of his ideas. Several students had enrolled in the course because they had heard of Havel as a great anti-communist crusader; somewhat surprisingly, these students were unable, or unwilling, to understand Havel's critique as applicable to anything but the "communist" system. In stead of reading Havel carefully, they merely used him to justify their a priori beliefs (focused on an *anti-communist* stance); they did not, however, let themselves consider the more radical implications of Havel's thought (a focus on *existential* revolution).

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struggle with the writer's ideas in a way that makes some kind of pragmatic sense to the "translator."

This is especially true of reading Havel, who is first and foremost a playwright and all of whose texts -- not only his plays, but also his essay and speeches -- must arguably be read from a participatory, theater-going perspective, that is, as "existential encounters" with the potential to "somehow inspire us to participate in an adventurous journey toward a deeper understanding, of ourselves and the world" (Havel, *Letters to Olga*). In all of his writing, Havel deliberately tries to create a theatrical sense of immediacy and urgency; and he counts on the fact that the audience (the reader) knows more than the characters and that the experience of watching (reading) necessarily stimulates the audience's (readers') memory and imagination. If the essence of theater criticism "resides in the means by which the performance can be extrapolated to other realities,"<sup>7</sup> then all of Havel's texts are intended as performances and to the reader is given the ultimate responsibility for extrapolation.

### The Undergraduates As Pragmatic Translators

In this section I provide a sampling of "translations" that the undergraduates in the class undertook; this sampling, taken from the students' informal reaction journals, reflects some of the more perceptive and creative responses to reading Havel.<sup>8</sup> In general, several different "translating" strategies can be identified:

- (1) Students used Havel to try to make sense of their own life experiences. These tended to be highly personal, reflexive reactions to Havel rather than sophisticated, reflective evaluations. One student, for instance, made an analogy between Havel's discussion of ideological control in the post-totalitarian world and her life at home: "It occurred to me that the household that I was raised in was very similar to the communist presence in Czechoslovakia." At first glance, this seems facile if not self-indulgent, but she struggles with the analogy, citing aspects of Havel's description of ideological control in attempt to flesh it out, and then backtracks: "I realize that my home life can't compare with the harsh events and way of life that pervaded Eastern Europe." Other students used Havel's discussion of "power" in *Power of the Powerless* to examine the ways in which they felt both powerful and powerless in their own lives.
- (2) Students compared and contrasted Havel's ideas with ideas and representations familiar to them from previous experience. The thinkers, artists,

### The 2003 SVU North American Conference

On June 26-28 on the campus of Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the American Conference entitled, "The Czech and Slovak Presence in North America: A Retrospective Look and Future Perspectives" will be held. The conference took place under the patronage of Václav Klaus and Rudolf Schuster, Presidents of the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic respectively.

Conference participants enjoyed an opening reception in the National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library ([www.nscml.org](http://www.nscml.org)), located in downtown Cedar Rapids, as well as a talk by His Excellency Martin Palouš Czech Ambassador to the United States. Social Events included a chuck wagon BBQ, a Polka Dance, a banquet, and a day trip to Spillville, Iowa. The richness and diversity of the academic program was not limited to the conference theme; a full conference program with abstracts of papers is available on the web at <http://unl.edu/SVUNebraska/indexr.htmSlavCognBibliography.htm>

and politicians to which Havel was compared, productively or not, ran the gamut from the rappers Ice Cube and Eminem to Plato, Ronald Reagan, Jesse Ventura, and the painter Escher. The student who invoked Escher was trying to explain how she felt while reading and reflecting on Havel's play *The Garden Party*. She wrote: "Many issues in the play seem, at first, to move forward, but they're actually in an endless cycle. It brings to mind the images in Escher's works, particularly the one where the stairs lead to a certain destination that lead only back to the beginning of the stairs that lead to that destination."

Another student tried to understand why Havel privileges subjective, narrative knowledge over objective, scientific knowledge. He cited a Walter Benjamin passage he was reminded of while reading Havel and then he speculated: "Imagine the experience of accidentally banging one's head on the corner of a hard surface. The subsequent pain can be scientifically explained, the stimulation of nerve endings can be measured, and increase in blood-pressure monitored. The experience of pain, however, the dilemma of being a creature in pain, the pain's interruption of identity -- none of this can be accounted for by a mere [scientific] explanation of pain. It is what is unexplainable about pain that gives it significance."

<sup>7</sup> This citation is from Augusto Boal, *Legislative Theatre*, New York: Routledge, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> More samples can be found on the web at <http://palimpsest.lss.wisc.edu/~danaher/havel/journals02.html>



A few of these comparative discussions led to a third distinct kind of strategy, namely:

- (3) Using Havel's writing to stimulate more sophisticated thinking about the nature of the society in which they live and their own identity within it. Not surprisingly, much discussion of this kind focused on language, a major theme in Havel's intellectual career. One student wrote: Havel's essay, *A Word about Words*, "made me think about all the words whose use in our society should perhaps be questioned, or words that maybe should be redefined. We discussed many politically related words in class, but I was interested in everyday words. I came up with several: *Beautiful...*, *Smart...*, *Educated...*" Another student, focusing more on behavior than language, questioned the seeming absurdity of Havel's play *The Memorandum* by writing: "As funny as the play is, this is not that far from the reality of American business. My work for a marketing company this year had a striking similarity to Havel's comical play."

The notion that generated the most intellectual musing in the students' journals as well as in class discussions proved to be Havel's understanding of ideology. Students struggled with Havel's exploration of this term, and many never seemed to quite grasp the distinction Havel tries to make between a flexible, honest rigid, and a rigid, aggressive ideology (representative of a "life in lies.")

One particularly provocative student, however, who as a senior pursuing a double major in English literature and philosophy, took up a discussion of ideology with a vengeance:

"Certainly we all sympathize with Havel's particular cause, and inasmuch as we also live under and confront a large, super-powered political regime, we are inspired by his courageous articulation of heretofore-unnamed experiences. The story of the greengrocer and the sign in his window helps us understand the nature of the recent plastering of the American flag all across public space. Still there is a difference, but the difference

is not that the American gesture is more authentic, more spontaneous, or more free... On the contrary, a Havelian critique of current American Ideology would have to be, to my thinking, more sophisticated in its unraveling of many threads... Instead of the metaphor of the bridge, consider ideology as a cable news channel: you are allowed -- even welcomed -- to speak out, speak your opinion, no matter how controversial, as long as a mediator has the power to intervene, interpret, explain away. The binaries of conservative/liberal of democrat/republican also serve as mediating categories in that they stereotype ideas. This is how freedom of speech does not translate into the freedom to be understood. Ideology is not the power to say this or that, but the power to edit -- not the power of content but of form."

Another student, a first-year, wrote more modestly, but not less perceptively, on ideology: "There is a tendency among political parties to move from a system of beliefs to an ideology. Ideas [can] become ossified in our minds, they are built upon and built upon until it seems they are the only right answer... We no longer have the curious eyes and open mind of a child, but instead we become set in our ways... This tapering of our minds is dangerous."

In trying to grasp Havel's understanding of ideology, some students found it useful to keep a list of all the metaphors he uses to try to give us a feel for it: for example, the image of the bridge that people step on and thereby become part of the system or the image of a mental short-circuit. Some also found it useful to come up with a list of all the potential symptoms of ideological thinking (for example, an aggressive refusal to give priority to *reality over beliefs about reality*) and then try, doctor-like, to find similar manifestations in modern American society that might be taken as diagnostic signs of full-blown ideological infection.

In order to avoid giving you the false impression that it was only the *content* of Havel's writing that stimulated the students to translate, I will close this section with three delightful pastiches of Havel's *antikódy*.

(1) sPoRiOuBtLiEoMn

(2) ReasonWar

(3) Money

Money

Money

people Moneyhappiness

Money

Money

Money

The Czech Language Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences is pleased to announce the international conference Words and History 2004, organized in honor of the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of PhDr. Igor Němec, DrSc., editor-in-chief of the Old Czech Dictionary, an outstanding lexicologist and lexicographer, leading Bohemist and Slavist.

The conference will be held in Prague, 28-30 June 2004.

For further details please see the following links:

<http://gebauer.ujc.cas.cz/?0=konference>

<http://www.ujc.cas.cz/akce>.



## Summary: How Is Havel Relevant?

Havel's analysis of post-totalitarian Czechoslovak society, while not applicable wholesale and without qualification to contemporary American reality, does resonate to a surprising degree with us as inhabitants of a post-democratic society. American undergraduates, even those with a little prior experience in the critical reading of texts, can and do provocatively translate from Havel's ideas to their own contexts. The translations they make are not oriented toward the details, but are rather structural analogies that extrapolate underlying schematic relationships from the reality described by Havel to the American realities in which they live.

The students found it useful to think of this process in graphic terms as below:

*A conventional pre-Havelian view*

**COMMUNISM ≠ CAPITALISM**

*Havel's view*

**HUMANITY IN EXISTENTIAL CRISIS**

**POST-TOTALITARIAN  
SYSTEM**

**POST-DEMOCRATIC  
SYSTEM**

In the pre-Havelian view, which is arguably the conventional understanding of most Americans even today, "communism" and "capitalism" were (are) opposites: they share nothing in common, and so Havel's critique of "communism" cannot be in any way applicable to American society. In Havel's view, however, both a post-totalitarian and post-democratic system are different, but related manifestations of humanity in existential crisis; it is in this sense that the former can be understood as "a convex mirror of all modern civilization and a harsh, perhaps final call for a global recasting of that civilization's self-understanding" (Havel, *Politics and Conscience*.) As some students were able to understand, Havel's hypothesis about East and West can be productively pursued only indirectly through the mediation of his and our understanding of this existential crisis.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout his whole career, Havel has implicitly advanced the argument that an aesthetic or literary-critical sensibility can (and ought to) serve as a form of meta-analysis. Havel deals in poetry, not science; in unique events, not statistical regularities; in stories and

**The University of Wisconsin-Madison Announces  
Launching of Fund to Support Czech**

The November Fund was launched in December 2002 with a gift from an anonymous donor. The Fund's mission is to support the teaching of Czech language, literature, and culture at the University of Wisconsin. It was created as an open fund with the understanding that active efforts to increase the initial donation would be undertaken by the faculty in Czech at UW-Madison.

In this spirit, the initial donor has agreed that anyone contributing \$100 to the fund by January 1, 2004 will be listed among the Founding Members of the fund.

In keeping with T.G. Masaryk's notion of small-scale work. Also, the fund welcomes contributions of any amount. All contributors will be gratefully acknowledged as Supporters of the Fund.

Further information regarding the fund's mission as well as the Czech program at UW, a listing of current founding and supporting members, and instructions on how to make a donation are available via the web at [www.novemberfund.org](http://www.novemberfund.org).

\*All donations to the November Fund are tax-deductible!

myths, not formulas. In both post-totalitarian and post democratic societies, the literary-critical sensibility tends to be grotesquely undervalued, ridiculed, or at worst, brutally suppressed. American undergraduates (like political scientists?) struggle with "translating" Havel at least in part because they have not been educated to see the value of his analytical work.

What all the students' successful translations, and all three translating strategies, share is a willingness to struggle with Havel's ideas, to believe that Havel's hypothesis *might* be true and to pursue, not uncritically, the special logic of it. Havel's texts are deliberately crafted performances which compel the reader to struggle with their meaning and extrapolate their significance to our own personal realities. Meaning is not objectively given in words, but co-created in a struggle with the words; we engage with our texts and, in this regard, words are never neatly divisible from actions. Thus the statement that Havel will be remembered more for what he said than what he accomplished implies a division between Havel's words and his accomplishments that is not faithful to Havel's own insights or born out by my students' existential encounters with his texts.

**Conclusion: Experiences of East and West**

I would like to close with an anecdote. During the course of the semester, we had the pleasure of hearing

<sup>9</sup> Those students who enrolled in the course because they saw Havel as an anti-communist crusader remained trapped in the conventional view.



## Articles & News from the Profession

several guest speakers on various aspects of Czech political history and Havel's thought. During a talk on the Havel/Kundera polemic, one of those speakers, a native Czech who had emigrated to the US from Prague in the late 1970's, suggested in an aside that Havel's essays and plays no longer seem particularly relevant today: According to the speaker, they read like period pieces whose value consists primarily in the way in which they bear witness to the trials of a by-gone era. I was initially shocked to hear this statement, and it certainly did nothing to support the argument that I had tried to make in the course syllabus, not to mention the class itself. Shortly after the speaker left campus and after an in-class discussion of her statement, I began to think that it is perhaps more difficult for Czechs or Slovaks who lived under the system so painstakingly described by Havel to "translate" his ideas into a context—21<sup>st</sup> century America—that is on the surface, as well as in very real ways, so different from the one in which his ideas came into being. Their experience of reading Havel is the experience of having lived in the society he describes, and there is nothing terribly surprising about that.

I am happy, however, to report that the speaker's offhand comment was, in the final analysis, incorrect. If my experience of teaching Havel was at all typical, and there is no reason to suggest that it was not, Havel is continually relevant, and he continues to accomplish great things through the influence his words have on all those who read them and struggle to domesticate their meaning.

### Teaching Czech with Jára Cimrman by Craig Cravens

In the late 1960s, Ladislav Smoljak and Zdeněk Svěrák introduced to the world the work of the obscure Czech playwright, inventor, pedagogue, and linguist Jára Cimrman (c. 1857- ?). Smoljak and Svěrák's work inaugurated a torrent of interest in Cimrman, which continues to the present day. Václav Havel himself has been quoted as saying, "*Si n'existait pas Cimrman, il faudrait l'inventer.*"<sup>10</sup> And that is precisely what Smoljak and Svěrák have done.

Now, with the Czech Republic poised to join the European Union next year and thereby reenter the historical and cultural consciousness of Western Europe, it behooves us to reexamine the contribution of Jára Cimrman to European culture and employ his *oeuvre* as best we are able in our Czech pedagogical activities. Cimrman's Czech is, to be sure, somewhat unusual and often downright unintelligible, but are not the results of our classroom endeavors to impart a knowledge of Czech to our students likewise often unintelligible? A self-taught Czech linguist and neologist, Cimrman did not collaborate directly with Josef Jungmann on his monumental five-volume *Slovník česko-německý* (1834-1839), but he did suggest several Slavic-based neologisms

of his own to the editors of the second revised edition of 1895, none of which, unfortunately, were deemed worthy of inclusion. He also composed a "respectful" parody of Jungmann's translation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, written from the point of view of Satan called *Ráj zatracený*.

In my pedagogical activities at the University of Texas at Austin, I have taught two 3<sup>rd</sup> year Czech courses based on the writings of Cimrman, much to the exasperation of my students. The educational benefits of employing a play performance in a language course are considerable. Not only do students invariably succeed in memorizing dozens of pages of Czech dialogue, more importantly they lose their Czech-speaking inhibitions, for it is highly unlikely that they will ever again be compelled to speak a foreign language on stage before a crowd of fifty to a hundred people.

Cimrman's work is also a wellspring of Czech cultural knowledge. His "fairy tale that failed among children," *Dlouhý, široký a krátkozraký* required an acquaintance with the original *Dlouhý, široký a bystrozraký* as well as several others. By performing Cimrman's operetta *Hospoda na mytince*, students acquired first-hand knowledge of the importance of the beer pub in nineteenth-century Czech national aspirations.

There are, however, several drawbacks to using Cimrman in the classroom, the most obvious being the patent ridiculousness of his work. Even after memorizing an entire play, it was clear that at least one student was only dimly aware of the semantic aspect of her words. Another problem is translation. Our performances were accompanied by English supertitles projected on a screen at the back of the stage using Microsoft Power Point. Much of Cimrman's humor involves wordplay which is invariably lost in translation. Concocting creative solutions in English could conceivably be an effective teaching tool used to develop student's awareness of style in both Czech and English. In my own experience, however, requests (even threats) to devise English equivalents to Cimrman's puns resulted in blank stares and often outright hostility.

In the end, however, despite minor bloodshed, the benefits far outweighed the drawbacks. Both of our performances were enormous successes with students, audience members, and even the Czech press. Besides a write up in *Lidové noviny*, news of our Cimrmanological activity was broadcast on Czech radio, and Smoljak and Svěrák themselves decided not to sue for royalties and even invited us to perform in Prague. The greatest benefit, however, was completely material and mundane. Our plays were so popular among students that we will have a record ten students this year signed up for our Czech play performance course, and I am assured another year of employment.

<sup>10</sup> Václav Havel, "Český úděl?" *Listy*, December 1968.