

David S. Danaher

Description of Book Project Tentatively Entitled *Reading Havel*

Existing critical literature on Václav Havel falls largely into the following types: *biographizing* criticism or reading Havel through the events of his fairy-tale life, *historicizing* scholarship or reading Havel's works in relation to the historical context in which they were written, and *intellectualizing* criticism or situating Havel's thinking in its intellectual and cultural context. Each of these critical approaches suggests a frame for reading Havel, and the readings that result are strongly influenced by the frame in question.

In my book, I will argue that these ways of framing Havel, while valuable in their own terms, fail to capture the essence of Havel's moral and existential relevance in the modern world. At the very least, they have failed to directly address how and why Havel's writings resonate deeply even with readers who know little of its biographical, historical, or intellectual ground, and, at worst, Havel's contemporary relevance ends up being merely implied in critical works of these three types because it seems to be located somewhere outside of all of these frames. The book is informed by a monograph course on Havel's writings that I have taught at the University of Wisconsin-Madison since 2002 (<http://web.mac.com/pes/havel/syllabus.html>) as well as by an approach to literature that might be described as an emphasis on responsible subjectivity in critical reading, a version of which is described in Mark Edmundson's 2004 book *Why Read?*.

In the book, I will address the following questions, each of which is essential to reading Havel through the lens of his contemporary relevance and resonance:

(1) How should we understand these common statements concerning Havel that have become clichés in the critical literature: "Havel will be remembered more for what he said as a writer than what he accomplished as a politician" and "Havel is primarily a playwright"? Both of these deserve to be unpacked and not taken merely at face value.

(2) How can we make sense of Havel as a prolific and successful cross-genre who feels the need to rewrite or redefine each genre that he engages in? A corollary question here is whether there is a radical break in Havel's thinking post-1989: does Havel change significantly after the Velvet Revolution or, put another way, is there a radical disjunction between Havel-the-dissident-playwright and Havel-the-politician? I will argue that Havel's cross-genre proclivity is key to understanding his thinking, and that his thinking is coherent across time-periods. In other words, Havel is consistent across his various incarnations or faces, and the implications of this consistency have been vastly undervalued in the critical literature.

(3) Are there privileged conceptual strategies that run throughout Havel's works and cut across both genres and time-periods? To answer this question adequately, we must remember that before Havel was a playwright, he was a prolific literary and film critic—and a surprisingly accomplished one considering how young he was at the time. Most of Havel's literary-critical works are not readily available in English translation,

and they are generally ignored in the existing critical literature. I will, however, argue that the conceptual strategies that inform Havel's thought derive from a literary-critical worldview, and that to understand Havel's consistency of thought, as well as his modern relevance, requires us to return to his early writings.

(4) What is the status or value of Havel's hypothesis that we currently find ourselves in transition from one great age of humanity (the modern technological age) to another (as yet unnamed)? This is an overarching assumption in Havel's work from the early (pre-theater) period to the present, and yet it is for the most part ignored in discussions of Havel's works. Havel's belief in this regard leads him to the conclusion that post-totalitarian East and democratic West are two sides of the same modern coin, and this secondary hypothesis has yet to be taken as seriously as it deserves to be by commentators on Havel. Indeed, it is usually completely ignored in the critical literature, despite the fact that it is a key part of the argument in many of his "dissident" works, the background assumption of his plays, and a central thematic thread in his presidential speeches.

(5) What is the status of collage in Havel's oeuvre? This may seem like an odd question until we take into account that one of Havel's early intellectual mentors was Jiří Kolář, known for (among other things) his contributions to collage, and also that Havel's 2006 political memoir is explicitly written as a literary collage. More generally, we could take this question as a way to explore Havel's understanding of the relationship between form and content not only in art but also for an understanding of human identity.

One chapter in the book will treat the meaning of recurring words in Havel's writings that have a different conceptual resonance in Czech than in English, and these words include *klid / neklid* ("peace, rest / disquiet, restlessness"), *domov* ("home"), and *svědomí* ("conscience"). It could be said that these are key words in Havel's thought, but their import in this regard has not yet been analyzed. I will argue that Havel uses the resonance of these concepts to bring together several different levels of their meaning: the historical level (how they resonate in the context of Czech history), the intellectual level (their relation to Czech philosophical thought), and the personal level (their meaning in relation to everyday life).

Another chapter will be devoted to a critical rereading of *The Power of the Powerless*, perhaps Havel's most widely read work. It is usually read for its historical value as one of the most influential "dissident" essays of the post-totalitarian period. While not denying its value in these terms, I will argue that, in light of the overall argument presented in the book, historicizing *Power* results in a misreading of its original intent and its potential significance. Through a historicizing reading alone, we cannot understand its relationship to other texts written before and after it (particularly the essay *Thriller*), nor its connection to Havel's plays or his presidential speeches. To make sense of *Power*, we must adopt an explicitly cross-frame approach to reading.

I have already written two articles (and am at work on a third) that will become key parts of the book (these articles, "Teaching Havel" and "Framing Havel", can be

downloaded at <http://cokdybysme.net/publications.html>), Moreover, I have completed much of the background research for the book as a whole. My focus over the next year and a half will be on writing with supplemental research as necessary. I hope to have substantially completed a draft by the end of summer 2009.