

Description of Book Project: *Reading Havel*

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Václav Havel – writer, anti-totalitarian “dissident”, Czech(oslovak) president from 1990-2003, and one of the most influential intellectuals of our time – died in December 2011. With his death comes a responsibility to define and honor his legacy. The contention of my book is that Havel has largely been misread by critics and commentators who often reinvent Havel in their own image. The goal of the book is to focus attention on what Havel actually wrote and how he asked us to read him. This, in turn, provides a model for how we might – following Havel’s lead – also read ourselves.

Existing critical literature on Václav Havel falls into the three broad 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 scholarship attempting to situate 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. Moreover, each of these approaches tends to fragment Havel’s writings: there is little sense that the various genres that Havel has engaged in (art criticism, visual poetry, plays, philosophical essays, letters from prison, presidential speeches, political memoir, political activism) represent coherent parts of a larger intellectual or life mosaic.

Biographizing, historicizing, and intellectualizing scholarship tends to totalize or fix our reading of Havel. In these readings, we read Havel’s writings and appreciate his political engagement from an admiring distance: his life and work speak to a place and a time – a particular sociopolitical and historical -ism – that has little to do with the United States in 2012. This is most emphatically not how Havel wished to be read, and in this respect the book suggests a radical reconsideration of the value of Havel as a thinker.

The book is informed by over a decade of teaching a monograph literature-in-translation course on Havel to undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, *The Writings of Václav Havel: Critique of Modern Society* (<http://havelcourse.tumblr.com/>). My published or forthcoming scholarship on Havel includes seven articles on aspects of

Havel's writing and his life, and these also inform the book: some of the chapters outlined below will represent reworked and expanded versions of this scholarship (for scans of the articles, see <http://cokdybysme.net/publications.html>).

CHAPTER SKETCHES

INTRODUCTION [10pp]

Why do we read great literature? In his 2004 book *Why Read?*, Mark Edmundson lists what he considers the core questions of the humanities: "Who am I? What might I become? What is this world in which I find myself and how might it be changed for the better?" (5). He goes on to note: "We ought to value great writing preeminently because it enjoins us to ask and helps us to answer these questions, and others like them. It helps us to create and re-create ourselves, often against harsh odds" (5).

Havel is not read in this way despite the fact that this is precisely how he asks us to read him – both as a writer and as a politician – and despite the fact that he resonates powerfully with naïve readers in exactly the way that Edmundson suggests. Havel's writings should not be treated as museum pieces: they are not, in Edmundson's words, historicized "symptoms of [a] moment" (17). Havel provides readers with a set of tools – a conceptual toolbox – to navigate the complex labyrinth of human identity in the modern age. Critical analysis of this toolbox of strategies for understanding the dilemma of modern human identity consists in a humanities reading of Havel as a process-oriented thinker.

A key part of Havel's challenge to us is his radical reframing of the story of the Cold War. In the conventional story, East did not equal West: totalitarian socialism was the antithesis of democratic capitalism. In Havel's reframing, post-totalitarian East and post-democratic West become two sides of the same modern coin or two manifestations of a global consumer-industrial society in moral crisis. East, according to Havel, must be read as an "inflated caricature" of the West, demonstrating to the West its own "latent tendencies". Though different systems, Havel argues that East and West are both part of the turbulent end of a great era of human history – the Age of Science and Rationality –

and the beginning of a transition to a new age, which as yet remains undefined. East and West cannot be compared directly, but only through this mediating structure.

All of Havel's "genres" – his literary genres as well as the additional genre of Havel's political activism – must be read through this reframing. In doing so, we open up the meaning of Havel's texts instead of shutting our reading down by containing it within one specific interpretative box (biographizing, historicizing, intellectualizing). This approach allows us not just to read what Havel wrote and to analyze it in its own terms, but it also creates the potential to allow ourselves to be read. Havel's legacy does not represent so much a critical problem to be solved within a given historical or intellectual framework as much as it does a challenge to us to rethink who we are and how we might change the world for the better.

CHAPTER 1: *Havel's Faces* [40pp]

The first chapter treats the various faces or genres of Havel during his lifetime. What genres did Havel engage in and how can we arrive at an integrative reading of these genres? I argue that there are seven literary genres that we must consider: the early literary-critical writings (most of which are available only in Czech), the visual poetry of the 1960s that Havel called *Anticodes*, the plays that combine French absurdism with Czech theater of the appeal (*divadlo apelu*), the pre-1989 "dissident" essays, the philosophical letters from prison that can serve as meta-texts for reading Havel, the presidential speeches, and the political memoir. I provide a description of each of these genres along with a consideration of the thematic and rhetorical commonalities that cut across all of them. The question of whether or not these literary genres ought to be considered "political" also arises, and I offer an affirmative response with the qualification that we must first redefine what we mean by "political". This leads to the hypothesizing of Havel's political activism – his post-1989 role as Czech(oslovak) president – as his eighth "genre", which is coherent with both the pre-1989 Havel and all seven of his literary genres.

What is Havel's primary genre? It is usually assumed that Havel is "primarily a playwright", but this cliché has not been unpacked. We need a clear conceptual definition of why the dramatic form serves as Havel's primary genre, and to arrive at this we also

need a new understanding of human meaning and meaningfulness. Plays were Havel's primary genre because they represent a condensed and concentrated form of his larger intellectual project. In this connection I focus particularly on the meaning of the appeal component in Havel's theater of the appeal and demonstrate that for Havel *apel* or *výzva* (a Czech synonym of foreign-derived *apel*) is the ground of all human meaning.

My final move in this chapter is to enunciate a general principle for reading Havel, which I call the mosaic principle: Havel's various genres must be understood as individual tesserae in a mosaic in that they both reflect and enact aspects of a larger whole. Traditional Havelian scholarship fragments the eight genres and fails thereby to appreciate the essence of Havel's mosaic project. Only an integrative reading – that is, reading Havel across all of his genres – leads productively beyond a boxed-up or closed-down understanding of Havel's legacy. Analysis of texts in the remainder of the book will enact or model the mosaic approach to reading Havel.

CHAPTER 2: *Framing Havel* [30pp]

The focus of this chapter is Havel's overarching hypothesis – which is active in his thinking from his earliest literary-critical writings through his speeches as president and political memoir – that the post-totalitarian East was a grotesque form of the modern world's spiritual or civilizational crisis. Even though Havel makes this hypothesis quite clear in his essays and speeches, traditional criticism generally ignores this fundamental framing that informs all of his thinking. When critics do directly engage with the hypothesis, the tendency is to dismiss Havel's thinking in this regard as naïve.

My argument is that Havel's main intellectual contribution is not his inspiring essays about totalitarian society or his "life in courage" as a dissident playwright, but consists in this radical redefinition of the meaning of the Cold War as well as the meaning of our turbulent post-1989 age. The ideologized way of being that so dramatically characterized the totalitarian society that Havel lived in did not end with the fall of the repressive Soviet-bloc regimes: it lingers on – indeed, it flourishes – in a more subtle and insidious form.

If we are indeed transitioning from one great age of humanity to another, then the challenge that faces is not primarily political or economic, but spiritual and moral. Havel

asserted this again and again throughout many of his genres. To explore this theme, I focus particularly on those texts that tend to be given only cursory consideration in traditional scholarship but that must be, in light of Havel's overarching hypothesis, be reread and re-evaluated. Three of these texts are the essay *Thriller*, written in 1984 in homage to Michael Jackson's song and video of same name; the letters from prison (*Letters to Olga*), which serve as the underlying code or the meta-text for Havel's thinking; the Havel's 1984 play *Temptation*. This theme becomes a key motif in Havel's presidential speeches, and the only way to understand the post-1989 speeches as coherent with the pre-1989 writings is through the mediation of the overarching East-West hypothesis.

CHAPTER 3: *Explaining and Understanding* [30pp]

Are there privileged conceptual strategies that run throughout Havel's works and cut across the genres as well as his pre- and post-1989 incarnations – the “dissident” intellectual and the president? The opposition between *explaining* and *understanding* is one of the main tools in Havel's conceptual toolbox for comprehending modern human identity. This opposition is not uniquely Havel's: for example, Hannah Arendt in her seminal book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* argued that it is not enough to *explain* the technical mechanisms of totalitarianism, but that we need to *understand* the human dimensions of this political phenomenon, and she applies the same analytic framework to her treatment of Adolf Eichmann in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

The *explaining/understanding* dichotomy does not represent just a theoretical or intellectual opposition, but also a practical and pragmatic one: it speaks to us about our daily lives, our personal as well as our social identities. On the one hand, *explaining* is associated with the Age of Science and Rationality: it analyzes (“breaks apart”), technicalizes, taxonomizes, and concretizes. The explaining mode of thinking and being lacks a conscience or spirit. On the other hand, *understanding* privileges the experiential and human dimension: it is essentially a form of aesthetic perception that is often accompanied by ethical evaluation. We might consider the etymology of the English words “explain” in opposition to the etymology of the Czech word *chápat*, which means “to understand”: the roots of the former mean “to render flat, to flatten out” and the root

of the latter “to grasp or seize”. *Explaining* kills phenomena for the sake of objective, scientific analysis; *understanding* represents a dynamic and human-level approach to a given phenomenon in which meaning becomes a function of experiential relation.

There are many ways to illustrate this dichotomy and its relevance for everyday life. Havel himself illustrated the opposition in a variety of ways, and it is possible to take his examples as a starting point to introduce others. Consider just two illustrations: the nature of a joke and the meaning of pain. For a joke to fulfill its mission, it needs to be *understood* because there is nothing less funny than a joke that has to be *explained*. In regard to pain, medical science can certainly *explain* what pain is by measuring and charting the effects on the body of a traumatic injury, but science cannot hope to adequately *understand* the dilemma of a human being in pain – that is, the dramatic disruption of identity associated with sudden physical trauma.

In terms of Havel, *explaining* is the mode of thinking – and, more crucially, way of being – associated with the Age of Science and Rationality. The totalitarian East represents this mode of being in a grotesquely exaggerated form. To understand the import of the totalitarian East, we must evaluate it against the larger frame of a world in existential or civilizational crisis, that is, in transition from one great age of humanity to another.

As is typically the case, structural patterns in Havel’s thinking tend to be reflected, fractal-like, at various levels. The *explaining* versus *understanding* opposition manifests itself also at the level of genre: as a rational discourse grounded largely on the level of verbal proposition, the essayistic form is grounded in *explaining* while the dramatic form – Havel’s primary genre – has the *understanding* mode built into its very structure. This opposition proves to be key for reading Havel as well as for reading, in a much larger sense, modern human identity.

CHAPTER 4: Key Words in Havel’s Thinking [50pp]

What concepts are key to Havel’s thinking and do these concepts have the same semantic/cultural resonance in the original Czech as they do in their English translations? Few of Havel’s English-language commentators have been proficient in Czech, and this has resulted in the strange paradox that Havel is primarily read and understood through

translations of his work into English. Ethnosemantic analyses of key words in Havel's thinking – *domov* ("home"), *svědomí* ("conscience"), *duchovnost* ("spirituality"), *neklid* ("restlessness"), *lidský* ("human/e"), *výzva* ("appeal, challenge") – indicate what may be lost in reading Havel in translation and also elucidate Havel as a thinker.

In this chapter, I argue that Havel uses the resonance of these concepts to bring together several different levels of their meaning: the historical level (how they may 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). In comparison with the meanings of the English translation "equivalents", the meanings of the Czech words have a typically broader semantic range and carry with them, in Havel's words, a certain "transcendent breeze [*závan transcendence*]".

These key terms serve as touchstones in Havel's thought across the genres: he returns to them again and again because they have the semantic potential to encapsulate his argument. The meanings of these words represent compressions of Havel's thinking across a range of issues, and analysis of them provides an entrée into his oeuvre. As with the explaining/understanding opposition, however, they can also be read as a special set of tools in Havel's conceptual toolbox for comprehending modern human identity. In other words, they are not touchstone-words for Havel alone, but also for us.

CHAPTER 5: *Ideology and Identity: Rereading "Power of the Powerless"* [30pp]

The final chapter is devoted to a critical rereading of *The Power of the Powerless* (1978), perhaps Havel's most widely known and read work. *Power* is usually read for its historical value as one of the most influential "dissident" essays of the post-totalitarian period, as an intellectual formulation of the mission of Charter 77, and in terms of Havel's personal biography.

While not denying its value in these terms, I argue that, in light of the overall argument presented in the book, historicizing, intellectualizing, and biographizing *Power* results in a misreading of its original intent and its potential significance. Through only these traditional readings, we cannot understand the essay's relationship to other essays written before and after it, to the letters from prison that were begun not more than a year after *Power*, and to the post-1989 presidential speeches. In particular, *Power* must be read

as a more or less rationalized *explication du texte* for the so-called Vaněk plays of the 1970s: *Audience* and *Unveiling* were written in 1975 and preview the themes in *Power* and *Protest* was completed in 1978, which means that it was written at the same time as the essay. To make sense of *Power*, we must adopt an explicitly cross-genre or integrative reading, one that respects the mosaic principle.

In carrying out this reading, I demonstrate that *Power* is grounded in Havel's East-West hypothesis and is informed by his overarching hypothesis of a world in spiritual crisis. It is only, moreover, by invoking the *explaining/understanding* opposition that *Power* can be adequately read as a text that transcends its particular time and place – its own sociopolitical and historical -ism – to speak to readers living in the twenty-first century. Havel's touchstone-words also prove crucial to a reading of *Power*, especially in regard to the solutions that Havel proposes to confront the challenges of politics and power in the modern world.

While, on the one hand, this represents a radical rereading of *Power*, it also represents, on the other, a welcome return to the way in which Havel clearly asks that the essay be read.

CONCLUSION [10pp]

The essence of Havel's engagement across all of his eight genres – as well as the essence of his legacy – is a *výzva*: a summons, call, plea, prompt, challenge, appeal. This is not the way that Havel has been traditionally read, neither as writer nor politician.

The mosaic principle represents both a strategy for reading Havel and, as Havel himself intended, a strategy for reading ourselves. Reading Havel models or enacts a quest for human meaning and meaningfulness amidst the spiritual turbulence of the modern age.

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