

Teaching Havel

Shortly after finishing my PhD in Slavic Languages with a dissertation on Czech, I found myself teaching Russian at a university in the west. At the end of my first year there, a professor of Political Science who had heard of my background in Czech invited me to be the final reader of an undergraduate thesis about Václav Havel. I eagerly agreed to join the committee, read the already completed thesis, and went to the thesis defense. When it was my turn to question the author of the thesis, I asked about something that, to my surprise, had not been addressed at all in the thesis itself, which was entirely devoted to deciding whether Havel fit Max Weber's model of a charismatic leader (the conclusion was that he did). My question struck a somewhat different note: "In studying Havel as a leader, do you feel that he has something to say to us about our society and our democracy? In researching and writing this thesis, did Havel teach you something about yourself?" To my embarrassment, the question was met with nervous silence on the part of the author of the thesis, who had evidently not been thinking about Havel in this way.

What is the value of great literature and how should we teach it? Which lines of thought do we encourage our students to pursue (and which, perhaps without our intending, to neglect) when we teach the major works of Czech literature, including Havel's writings? In a recent book on the reading and teaching of literature, Mark Edmundson (2004: 5) lists what he considers to be 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?." He notes (2004: 5): "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." Edmundson argues that reading great literature is

a life-transforming experience (after all, why did most of us become teachers of language and literature in the first place?), but, paradoxically, we do not always teach it as such.

What then are the traditional ways that great literature is taught? Edmundson (2004: 15) suggests that we tend to historicize the literature that we teach, contextualizing the writer and/or the work culturally and intellectually. The work's potential application to real life may be touched upon here and there, but the primary message that we convey to our students is that the work “really has nothing to do with the present except as an artful curiosity” (2004: 15).

Havel is one of the most influential intellectuals of our times whose writings are readily amenable to historicizing and situating in their specific intellectual context. In the case of Havel, we might add to Edmundson's list by noting the strong tendency to **biographize**: not simply to comment on his writings as part of a broader cultural setting, but to situate them in the context of his remarkable life and to praise that life as an inspiration without ever stating exactly why we, living in an entirely different historical context, should find it inspiring and what we should do with our admiration and appreciation. In this approach, Havel is quite unintentionally reduced to a kind of celebrity (the hero of a fairy-tale, a characterization that Havel himself has repeatedly warned against and indirectly debunks in *To the castle and back*), and his writings, linked so closely to his own inimitable life story, are unintentionally robbed of their potential resonance.¹

¹ Most of the major book-length studies of Havel—Keane 2000, Tucker 2000, Rocamora 2005—can be accurately described as historicizing or intellectualizing or biographizing (or a combination thereof); Pontuso 2004 is an exception to this general rule in a number of respects. I would like to make clear that I am not attempting to criticize these studies as works of scholarship; I am, however, arguing that they generally fail to communicate something essential about Havel's continued relevance and that this is a void that calls out

My experience in teaching a monograph course on Havel since 2002 has led me to conclude that Havel's texts resonate even with students who know little about his cultural and historical context and little to nothing about his intellectual and philosophical inspirations.² For those who attended the recent festival of Havel's plays in New York (<www.untitledtheater.com/havel/plays.html>), the same point was also emphatically made by most of the productions. It is valid to ask why this is the case and how we, as teachers of Havel, can introduce students to his historical, cultural, and intellectual context while, at the same time, not failing to adequately address his resonance and contemporary relevance.

We might also ask a related question: how did and does Havel view his own writing? The answer is clear: Havel has never considered his writings, not his dissident essays nor his plays, to be specific to the post-totalitarian context in which they were written. Grossman's well-known discussion of Havel as playwright in the pure sense of the term because of his *apelativnost* (his focus on the “appeal” to the audience) is useful here: “The greater and more thoroughly Havel avoids superficial everydayness [*povrchní aktualita*], the deeper and more universal is the appeal [*výzva*] of any of his works” (Grossman 1966/1999: 148).³ It goes without saying that Havel as author of the “appeal” applies not only to Havel as playwright but also Havel as literary critic, graphic poet of the *Anticodes*, essayist, and both politician

to be filled. As a counter-example, although one not focused solely on Havel, Purdy 1999 at times takes Havel as an inspiration in precisely the way that I am advocating here.

² A cursory search of Havel-related sites on the internet leads to a similar conclusion: Havel's resonance transcends the limits of his own specific historical and intellectual context. Danaher (forthcoming 2008) argues that the essence of Havel's thinking involves questions of conceptual framing (and reframing) and that his extraordinary resonance even among uninitiated readers derives, at least in large part, from this focus. My course description and other information on the course, including a sampling of students' personal “translations” of Havel's ideas to their own contexts, is available online at <web.mac.com/pes/iWeb/havel/syllabus.html>.

³ All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

and political speechgiver (see Wilson 2000). If an appeal component is essential to Havel's technique and message, then should it not also be central to researching and teaching Havel?

Beyond a focus on the “appeal”, Havel himself has explicitly argued that post-totalitarian East and democratic West were two sides of the same modern coin. *Power of the powerless* is arguably the most taught of all Havel's works since it is often excerpted or assigned in full in a range of courses in Political Science and History where it is read as a period piece: i.e., the most influential “dissident” essay of its time. But is this reading consistent with the text itself? If we compare *Power* with the earlier *Open letter to Dr. Husák*, we see the same broad theme, a phenomenological analysis of post-totalitarian society, with different specific emphases; the main difference between the two essays is that the existential level of analysis, post-totalitarian society as grotesque extreme of modern human society, is much more fully developed in *Power*. The earlier essay provides a domestic analysis of the existential crisis of humanity under the more or less specific conditions of the period known as normalization while the latter places post-totalitarianism squarely in the context of the modern age as a whole.

Havel argues that both post-totalitarian East and democratic West share fundamentally the same value system but that they represent different realizations of modern consumer-industrial society (1999: 229). Post-totalitarianism is a face of the global crisis of civilization that represents a “special and extreme version” of it (1999: 321) or a caricature of it (1999: 246) that should serve as a warning to the West of its own “latent tendencies” (1999: 246). Moreover, despite the clear political differences between the systems, Western democracy itself does not provide a solution to the crisis; on the contrary, because ideological manipulation in the West is “infinitely more gentle and refined” than its

counterpart in the East, the crisis is more hidden, more elusive, and therefore more difficult to confront (1999: 322).

Havel has made this same argument throughout his life. Most of his early literary-critical writings deal with the crisis of identity in the modern age (e.g., *Anatomy of the gag*), the message of the *Anticodes* cannot be said to be limited to a post-totalitarian society, and the “appeal” of his plays transcends a post-totalitarian world. In other essays, Havel returns to the same point through different language: in *Politics and conscience*, the post-totalitarian system is a convex mirror of modern society in general (1999: 431), and the West intending to rid the world of communism is like an ugly woman wanting to rid herself of her ugliness by smashing the mirror that reflects it (1999: 432); in *Disturbing the peace*, he notes that the problems of the world “are lodged in something deeper than a particular way of organizing the economy or a particular system. The West and the East, though different in so many crucial ways that we should not underestimate or ignore, are nonetheless going through a single, common crisis” (Havel 1990: 10) and reflection on this common crisis “should be the starting point for every attempt to think through a better alternative” (1990: 10).⁴

In his speeches as president, Havel also at times refers explicitly to the East/West relationship. Some of the better-known examples of this include: communism as a “perverse extreme of the modern age” (*World Economic Forum* 1992), the post-communist challenge as a human challenge or the search for a “new type of self-comprehension for man” (*George Washington University* 1993), the structure of thought under communism as fundamentally the same as under capitalism: all of life can be explained by “banal schemas,” people in power want to create the impressions that they are “the only owners of the truth,” and

⁴ This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of instances where Havel develops this line of thought.

economic being is primary (*Státní svátek* 2001).⁵ However, in most of his speeches as president, Havel drops the contrastive East/West frame while continuing to develop his thesis of a world in existential crisis.

It can be argued that “dissidentism” in Central/Eastern Europe consciously transcended its specific totalitarian context from its very inception as a movement. While Charter 77 represented a response to one specific cultural-historical context, the reasoning behind it was grounded in universal notions of human and civil rights. Havel, in a 1978 interview with a Viennese newspaper about the Charter noted: “We believe that modern society—not only our society but also Western society—finds itself in deep crisis” and “I understand it first and foremost as a spiritual [*duchovní*], moral, and existential crisis” (Havel 1984: 260). Consider also Barbara Falk on the meaning of dissidentism in Central/Eastern Europe (2003: 8-9): “Herein lies the deeper and philosophical contribution of the dissident *oeuvre*—not as a recipe for political change but as a moral imperative for political responsibility, regardless of the particular regime or economic order.” As far as Havel's thesis goes, we should perhaps change the qualification “political” before “responsibility” to “existential.”

To sum up, a conventional, and the primary, reading of Havel wants to situate him in a context completely unlike our own (post-totalitarian East versus democratic West), but this is a false dichotomy that has never been advanced, and has actually been consistently denied, by Havel himself. To believe it even implicitly makes it difficult, if not impossible, to see the coherent development of Havel's thought from his early literary-critical essays through the *Anticodes*, plays, and “dissident” essays, to his post-1989 presidential speeches. Can we

⁵ Havel's speeches are most easily accessible by the year given, in Czech and English, online at <old.hrad.cz/president/Havel/speeches/> or <www.vaclavhavel.cz>.

teach Havel without taking seriously this overarching idea that spans all of the genres that he has written in (as well as the divide between Havel as writer and Havel as politician) and that is also necessary for us to make sense of the continuity of Havel's thought from his youth to the present day?

What then would be entailed in teaching Havel in a way that is consistent with Havel's own thinking? In all of his writings, Havel provides us with a framework for understanding who we are in the modern world, regardless of the specific socio-historical context in which we live. As one of my students has written, Havel “offers a kind of manifesto of truth and responsibility to his readers: I now own a new set of tools for understanding my own world.” He presents, throughout all of his diverse writings, a framework for making sense of the crisis of human identity in the modern age. Reading Havel requires students to struggle with how this framework applies to them: in teaching Havel, we should emphasize “translating” Havel's ideas into our own terms and our goal should not only be familiarizing students with Havel's context, but also applying Havel's critique of modern identity to our own selves.⁶

Questions that students might ask include: How does Havel's account of identity in the modern world resonate with their own personal experiences? Does existential dissidence, as Havel defines it, have a modern American form? How do we understand ideology, responsibility, and politics, and what does Havel's treatment of these concepts teach us about our own definitions? How is the relationship between form and meaning manifested in our own everyday lives or, in other words, is there a relationship between **how** we live and **who**

⁶ This is especially true in the context of teaching American undergraduates, the great majority of whom are not and will never be specialists in literature, much less in Central European literature.

we are? What are our immediate and absolute horizons and do we, given our own set of circumstances, live lives in truth? A provocative question that never fails to “appeal” to the students is the following: Had you lived in Havel's post-totalitarian context, would you have been a dissident, an active party member, or would you have adapted to circumstances and lived in the proverbial gray zone like the green-grocer in *Power of the powerless*?⁷ In a recent interview with the Czech weekly *Respekt*, Havel himself has, not surprisingly, suggested that Americans in similar circumstances would have behaved in much the same way as the majority of Czechs and Slovaks did (Havel 2005: 16).

There are also any number of concepts in Havel's writings that lend themselves to historicizing and theorizing, but that could equally be taken at face. The very idea that Havel is a phenomenologically-oriented thinker whose main philosophical influences are Patočka and Heidegger calls out for just this kind of existential reduction.⁸ Phenomenology could be explained as the belief that meaning derives from our experiences, both real and imagined, in the world around us: we make experimental or pragmatic judgements about the world, and from these judgements we develop, usually unconsciously, a framework that organizes the diversity of our experiences. Meaning is subjective but grounded. It could be said that we are all covert phenomenologists in that each of us does have a framework for understanding how the world works whether we are aware of the detailed structure of our own framework or not.

⁷ A more controversial extension of the same question: And what positions would current American political leaders have occupied in the post-totalitarian reality?

⁸ Havel's debt to Patočka and Heidegger has been extensively explored (see especially Tucker 2000 and Pontuso 2004), but it does not seem to me that the value of this debt for reading Havel has been appreciated, although Pontuso takes important steps in this direction. Tucker, however, more or less dismisses the validity of Havel's East/West hypothesis.

Students of Havel then understand that they should read to identify Havel's framework and use it to help them become more fully aware of their own.

While I am not suggesting that intellectualizing concepts like phenomenology is entirely beside the point (it is not), I would argue that Havel himself is always heading in the other direction, i.e., trying to bring these concepts back to their existential essence. In other words, they are not abstract phenomena whose primary value is historical or intellectual, but rather they are tools for helping us make pragmatic sense of our lives. This is arguably Havel's greatest contribution to philosophy: not as a systematic philosopher (he has always denied being one or, more importantly, even wanting to be one), but as a thinker who can bridge the gap between intellectualizing and everyday life. Other concepts like phenomenology include: ideology, dissidence, a life in truth (or in lies), home as *domov* and the circles of home, and the absolute horizon.

If we examine only ideology and limit our consideration to how Havel frames it in just one essay (*Power*), we might notice how he defamiliarizes (redefines) the meaning of the term by removing it from its conventional political associations (ideology as a set of programmatic political beliefs), emphasizing instead its existential contours (modern identity as a thoroughly ideologized way of being). When Havel refers to manifestations of ideology in the post-totalitarian society as something like a “panorama of everyday life [*panoráma každodennosti*]” (1999: 242), something that exists as “natural” background to our daily lives and that suffuses them without our being consciously aware of it, we should take this description seriously at an existential level and ask our students as well as ourselves what phenomena function as panorama for us in our everyday lives. Some answers that students have given to this question over the years have included: highways, roads, and parking lots;

telephone or electrical wires; advertizing in all of its various forms; and everything in the modern West (and now East) that reinforces a consumerist identity (shopping malls). These answers are then useful as starting points for thinking about what may constitute ideology in our lives. We could also pay careful attention to the ways in which Havel metaphorizes ideology in *Power* and try to see instances of the same phenomena in our own lives: ideology as secularized religion (1999: 227), a ready-made answer to any question (227) or a phenomenon that transforms us from “beings in question” to “beings in answer”, a veil that masks authentic being (232), an alibi or excuse that creates the impression that we are behaving in harmony with a natural or higher order (232), a “low-rent” home (228), a bridge between the system and life (235-236), gloved hands that touch us at every encounter (235), the rules of the game (236), a set of traffic signals or road signs (237), a gigantic machine in which individuals are interchangeable cogs (295), perfunctory ritualization (236). We could read Havel as developing a check-list for symptoms of ideologization in the modern world and urging us to become sensitive diagnosticians of this disease as well as expert practitioners of preventive care.

Following Havel's lead, we could subject the other terms to a similar analysis. Even the absolute horizon, arguably the most abstract and difficult concept in Havel, readily lends itself to existential characterization, especially in contrast with a concrete “immediate” horizon. In fact, Havel makes extensive use of this contrast, without explicitly mentioning the “horizon” terminology, in many of his speeches.

There is much more that could be said about Havel's “appeal” to us and about the framework he develops for exploring identity in the modern world. At the very least we could mention the distinction between explaining (*vysvětlení*) and understanding (*chápání*)

that exists as a running theme in many of his writings (see his discussion of “cow-ness” in letter 118 of *Letters to Olga* [Havel 1989]), his exploration of the relationship between form (the medium) and meaning (the message) that is most vividly portrayed in his plays but present analytically throughout all of his writings, or his understanding of meaning as a pragmatic “would-be” in that the meaning of a concept necessarily contains all logical consequences that follow from it (see Pontuso 2004 for an analysis of Havel's plays as “Heideggerian thought experiments” in this vein).

The crux of the matter, however, is easy to state: where should our responsibility lie in teaching Havel? What should be foregrounded and what backgrounded? What is figure and what is ground? The pedagogical ground is, without a doubt, Havel’s socio-historical and intellectual context, and this ground should be used as a starting point to tackle, in a more systematic and informed way, the pedagogical figure, that is, the personal “translation” or critical application of Havel's ideas to our own lives. Any approach to Havel that focuses entirely on the ground, or privileges the ground and merely assumes the figure, is a misreading.⁹

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