

[Under submission to Slovo a slovesnost, March 2009]

Translating Havel: Three key words (*domov*, *svědomí*, and *klid*)

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Abstract

This study sketches a semantic analysis of three Czech words—*domov* (home), *svědomí* (conscience), and *klid* (rest, quiet, calm)—in comparison with their English translation equivalents. It is argued that they are key words in Havel’s thought in that they represent recurring concepts in his writing that cut across both time periods (the pre- and post-1989 Havel) as well as genres. The import of these concepts also cuts across socio-historical -isms: these words not only tell us something about human identity within a totalitarian context, but ought to tell us, who live outside of that context, something about ourselves. While each of these words refers to a more or less distinct realm of human experience, their collective resonance in Czech evokes a similar feel: all have an air of the philosophical or transcendent about them. It is this element of their conventional meanings in Czech that provides fertile ground—a ground that does not exist in quite the same way in English—for Havel’s cultivation of them into key components in his understanding of human identity in the modern world.

Language frequently plays an important role in the formation and functioning of such a distinct [cultural] ‘semiosphere’. As the fundamental means of communication, it is concerned with the saturation of meaning and value classification even in non-verbal cultural realms. It is a means of exchange and of preserving information in the cultural realm as a whole, and it is largely language that also makes possible the direct delimitation and splitting-off of one national culture in relation to other cultures.¹

— V. Macura (1993: 5)

Reflecting on the difficulties involved in translating Havel’s *Power of the powerless*, Paul Wilson, Havel’s main translator, noted that “many of his words carried a different burden of meaning than their dictionary equivalents in English” (2006: 12). One example he cites—Havel’s coinage of the term *samopohyb* to describe the juggernaut nature of the post-totalitarian system—certainly poses a challenge to the translator: while *self-propelled* or *self-generating* capture the particular semantic combination of *samo* (self) and *pohyb* (movement), neither is, like the Czech original, a noun. Wilson ended up using another favorite Havelian word with a not unrelated meaning, *automatism*, as his principal recourse.

Samopohyb is a good example because it represents an extreme case, but other words present similar challenges for reasons that are less immediately apparent: their “burdens of meaning” relate to their grounding in the Czech cultural semiosphere and the unique semantic resonance that results from this grounding. Three words, which are key words in Havel’s

writing and thinkingⁱⁱ, come immediately to mind: *domov* (home), *svědomí* (conscience), and *klid* (rest, quiet, calm). They represent recurring concepts that resonate throughout Havel's oeuvre and cut across both time periods (the pre-1989 "dissident" Havel and the post-1989 presidential Havel) as well as genres. Their import also cuts across socio-historical -isms: these words not only tell us something about human identity within a post-totalitarian context, they ought to tell us, who live outside of that context, something about ourselves.

These three words are distinct yet similar. The first two have stable translation equivalents in English while the last one does not. Each refers to a more or less distinct realm of human experience, but their collective resonance in Czech evokes a similar feel: all three have an air of the philosophical about them that is reminiscent of Havel's description of the "transcendental breeze" (*závan transcendence*) that ruffles the surface of our souls and that we cannot, even if we wanted to, ignore (1991: 122; 1999, 4: 212)ⁱⁱⁱ.

I will sketch a semantic analysis of each of these words in order to make clear that their conventional meanings in Czech provide fertile ground—a ground that does not exist in quite the same way in English—for Havel's cultivation of them into key components in his understanding of human identity and the role of the transcendent within it. My treatment is not intended to be exhaustive; rather, it will be focused on those aspects of the meaning of the Czech terms that prove especially relevant to reading Havel in translation.^{iv}

Domov (Home)

Czech *domov* has a more or less stable English translation equivalent in the word *home*. Wilson has written, however, that *domov* "suggests something more fundamental than *home* in English" (1999:29), and we might ask ourselves in what way this is so—and how it bears on our reading of Havel in translation.

Perhaps Havel's clearest treatment of the word occurs in *Summer Meditations* in a discussion of the "circles of home" or *kruhy domova* that comprise the basic existential background of modern experience and identity (1993: 30ff; 1999, 6: 409ff). The circles of home are understood as a set of concentric circles (*soustředné kruhy*) with the individual at the center: our *domov* is therefore the room and house we live in, the village or town where we were born and where we spend most of our lives; it is our family and friends, our workplace, and the country we live in along with its culture; it is the native language that we speak, our

gender, our political affiliation (if we have one); it is also our education, upbringing, and social milieu; and the list of our circles could be extended as needed. Havel argues that these circles of home shape our identity and that in a healthy society, every circle should be given its due: “All the circles of our home [všechny vrstvy našeho domova], indeed our whole natural world, are an inalienable part of us, and an inseparable element of our human identity. Deprived of all the aspects of his home, man would be deprived of himself, of his humanity” (1993: 31; 1999: 411).^v

Of note here is that the translation tends to use *circles* of home while the Czech original more often has *vrstvy* (layers) of home.^{vi} Havel’s original wording places more emphasis on the concentric nature of the circles and, in doing so, implies that a spiritually healthy individual inhabits various homes that are harmoniously arranged and in which one’s sense of self is not disjointed and fragmented—or dispersed across circles of home that do not overlap.

While Havel, it is true, borrows the notion of circles of home from the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, wrestling philosophically with it in his letters from prison^{vii} before applying it pragmatically to his exposition of a civil society in *Summer Meditations*, recognizing this influence does not address the issue raised in Wilson’s observation: that there is something conventionally more fundamental—more intensely felt—by Czechs when they use the word *domov* than by English speakers using the word *home*.^{viii} We may trace an answer to this by considering not only the range of usage of the word *domov* but also by noting its stylistic versatility and, finally, its grounding in the larger Czech cultural context.

Fronek 2000 lists five primary translation equivalents for *domov*—*home*, *home town* and *native country*, (an institutional) *home* for children or the retired (as in English *retirement home*), and (an animal) *habitat*. This list already suggests that the Czech term has a broader semantic and pragmatic range than English *home*: in conventional application, the word’s meaning extends from narrow realms (*home* or *home town*) outward to encompass larger experiential circles (a whole nation as *domov*), and it also crosses from human to animal domains. We might be tempted to say that the very notion promoted by Patočka and Havel of circles of home that form a nested hierarchy from our innermost and personal homes (self, family, and friends) to our outermost ones (city, state, country, the world) is already contained, in seminal form, in the basic hierarchical meanings of *domov* itself. In fact, Czechs have another way of expressing the same range of contextualized meanings in a common phrase, *u*

nás, that is close in meaning to *domov*; as with *domov*, the phrase *u nás* in its full range of usage is not translatable into English by one word or phrase. Sayer (1998: 193) notes that *u nás* (not to mention *domov*) has strong associations with the National Revival and therefore with Czech nationhood and that it is a “phrase full of homely potency: it can mean ‘at our home’, ‘in our country’, ‘among us’, or simply ‘here’”. He adds: “Not all languages provide so economical a means of expressing the identities whose assertions is so fundamental to modern national statehood” (1998: 193).

Stylistically, *domov* also exhibits a range of usage from its role in everyday expressions like *odejít z domova* (*to leave home*) to its use in newspaper headings to indicate what Americans would think of as the section for national news (*Zprávy z domova*); a lyrical or poetic extension to a meaning of “found homeland” is also conventionally associated with *domov* (but not English *home*), as in *Kde domov můj?* (*Where is my home(land)?*), the title of the Czech national anthem. In connection with the last point, Macura has noted that the Czech anthem begins with a question and “betrays uncertainty and a feeling that the homeland is inaccessible and not self-evident” (1993: 29); it is, somewhat paradoxically, a national anthem that problematizes the very existence of a concrete, national *domov*.

Pointing out the different cultural grounding of the word *domov* in opposition to *home* is not at all the same thing as asserting that English speakers are incapable of grasping the Czech perspective. Indeed, a vivid way of capturing the meaning of *home* in its extended (Bohemized) sense is a sculptural installation called *Home* created in 1984 by the British artist Antony Gormley.^{ix} The sculpture presents a male figure lying on the ground with his head contained inside a model of a house; it might be said that the house resembles a human face with the windows as eyes and the front door as a mouth. Havel’s treatment of *domov* as existential ground for identity broadly conceived is at least suggested in Gormley’s representation of *home*.

As Gormley’s sculpture proves, the concept of *home* is questioned and problematized not only by Czechs. Central Europeans are, however, specialists in the search for *home*, and the meaning of *domov*—its conventional semantics along with its grounding in the Czech cultural semiosphere—already questions and problematizes the concept in a way that the English translation equivalent *home* does not. *Domov* is more fundamental and more intensely felt than *home* because it carries with it a hint of Havel’s transcendental breeze.

Svědomy (Conscience)

Conscience, especially in its relationship to a kind of responsibility (*odpovědnost*) that lies at the core of human identity, is a key concept throughout Havel's thought. In his 1984 essay *Politics and conscience*, Havel problematizes the contemporary meaning of the term, arguing that modern man privatizes conscience (we lock it up in the bathroom) and cuts it off from engagement with the world, thereby turning both conscience and the responsibility that ought to come naturally with it into intimate, personal matters or “phantoms of subjectivity” (1991: 255; 1999, 4: 425). The last sentence of the essay, phrased as a question with *svědomí* as the essay's final word, drives home the relationship between conscience and a future kind of politics that might lead us out of the existential crisis that we find ourselves in: does not hope for a better future, Havel asks, lie in making “a real political force out of a phenomenon so ridiculed by the technicians of power—the phenomenon of human conscience [*lidské svědomí*]?” (1991: 271; 1999, 4: 445). As with the analysis of *domov*, I will leave aside the question of philosophical influences on the development of Havel's understanding of *svědomí* and focus instead on the conventional semantics of the Czech term as opposed to the English translation equivalent.

We should first note an important similarity between Czech *svědomí* and English *conscience*.^x Both are etymologically the same: a prefix meaning *with* (*s-* and *con-* respectively) attached to a suffixed root with the original meaning of *knowledge* (*-vědomí* and *-science*).^{xi} The origin of both words implies a form of mental deliberation that comes “with knowledge” of the world, and this brings them close to the interpretation advocated by Havel: conscience establishes a relationship between ourselves and events in the world at large that we have knowledge of. Put another way, conscience ought to respond to questions that life raises through our experience in and knowledge of the world—what we know should be closely related to what we do and how we act (Ralston Saul 1997: 181).

But this etymological similarity already exposes a crucial difference in how the words resonate in each language: the Czech root for “knowing” (*věd-*) is more etymologically and semantically transparent in a host of other common words related to knowledge, consciousness, and awareness than the comparable English root. A partial list of Czech words where *věd-* is immediately perceivable and where a connection between *svědomí* and knowing

or awareness is therefore strongly felt include: *vědět* (to know), *věda* (scholarship or science), *vědomí* (consciousness), *povědomí* (awareness), and *uvědomit si* (to realize, become aware of).^{xii} By comparison, the *science* in *conscience* is opaque: even the connection between *conscience* and *consciousness* is, at best, only tenuously felt. In Jungmann's entry on *svědomí*, the second meaning is listed as *svědectví*, glossed as *testimonium*, and it is this witnessing element that may be more activated in the resonance of *svědomí* as opposed to *conscience*.^{xiii}

Nejedlá's 2001 study of the semantics of *vědomí* and *svědomí* in Czech in comparison with English lends support to this interpretation. According to Nejedlá, English *conscience* is tied to a sense of duty or moral obligation, but this feature is not as strongly felt in the meaning of Czech *svědomí* (29). In *conscience*, there is more of an element of will when it comes to the uncertainty associated with how conscience as a mechanism functions: that is, the English *conscience* is potentially controllable by an exertion of the subject's will (29). In contrast, the qualms or pricking of Czech *svědomí* "are considered to be phenomena independent of the will of the subject who is undergoing them" (30). Perhaps another way of making the same point would be to say that English *conscience* is primarily conceptualized as an *ability* while Czech *svědomí* is not.^{xiv}

At first blush, this may seem a far-fetched claim, but confirmation of Nejedlá's insight can be found in Wierzbicka (2006), who treats the semantics of English *conscience* in the context of a much more ambitious analysis of the relationship between linguistic and cultural meaning. Wierzbicka traces the development of the English concepts *right* and *wrong* and the extension of these originally conversational words into the ethical realm—a realm that includes *conscience*. She argues that the rise of *right* and *wrong* is a language- and culture-specific phenomenon, and it sets English apart from other European languages in which *good* and *bad*, which are more general in meaning and less subject to an individual's will, still hold sway. She writes: "[T]he ascendancy of 'right' and 'wrong' over 'good' and 'bad' seems to reflect a more rational, more procedural, more reason-based approach to human life and a retreat from a pure distinction between GOOD and BAD unsupported by any appeal to reason, procedures, methods, or intersubjectively available evidence" (2006: 72). Ethical decision-making becomes a matter of good thinking (like science) and interpersonal validation: "It is a rational ethics, an ethics that doesn't need to be grounded in metaphysics (in particular, in God) but can be grounded in reason" (2006: 72).

If Nejedlá and Wierzbicka are correct, then we could conclude that *conscience* already conventionally implies what Havel cautions against in *Politics and conscience*: it has been privatized and rationalized, banished to our most intimate circle of home. The conventional meaning of Czech *svědomí*, however, seems to resist this process whether it be because the concepts of *good* and *bad* still predominate over *right* and *wrong* and individual will is less emphasized or, and this might be stating the same idea in different terms, the relationship between an individual and her or his awareness (*vědomí*) of the world—a relationship mediated by *svědomí*—is foregrounded.

While the meanings of *svědomí* and *domov* make reference to distinct domains of human experience, there is nonetheless a conceptual connection between them, and this is evident not only in Havel's thinking but also in conventional Czech understandings of the terms. *Svědomí*, like *domov*, also has an air of the transcendent about it, and this might be best communicated in terms of the circles of home: unlike English *conscience*, which seems to be more self-contained if not locked entirely away in our bathroom, *svědomí* highlights the concentricity, interpenetrability, and permeability of the circles—the circles not as circles *per se* but rather as Havel's *vrstvy* or layers of a coherent and continuous identity.

Klid (Rest, Quiet, Calm)

Unlike *domov* and *svědomí*, Czech *klid* does not have a stable translation equivalent. Depending on context, it can be rendered as *rest*, *quiet*, *calm*, *calmness*, *peace*, *standstill*, *silence*, *composure*, *tranquility*, *serenity*, and even *leisure*. Partly for this reason, it is a key word in Havel's thinking that does not come across as such for those reading Havel in translation. Indeed, one of the central motifs in Havel's 1975 *Dear Dr. Husák* (1991; 1999, 4) revolves around the concept of *klid* juxtaposed with its opposite, *neklid*.^{xv} In the translation of Havel's letter, *klid* in its separate appearances is rendered variously as *quiet life*, *rest*, *calm*, *peace and quiet* while *neklid* is translated as *restlessness*; a verb with *klid* as its root (*uklidňovat*) is given in English as *reassure* while its nominalized form (*uklidnění*) becomes *assuaging*.^{xvi} Given this range of renderings, it is impossible for a reader of Havel in translation to follow the *klid* thread.

The instability in translation reflects the fact that Czech *klid* has an astoundingly broad range in terms of the domains that it can reference. A partial listing of the domains in which

klid is conventionally used, with brief illustrations of each, would include: human emotions (*vnitřní klid*, inner peace), interpersonal relations (*do rodiny se vrátil klid*, a sense of tranquility returned to the family), work (*mít k práci potřebný klid*, to have the necessary peace and quiet for work), health and sickness (*hemorroidy jsou v klidu*, my hemorrhoids are quiet), death and sleep (*klid zesnulých*, the peace of the dead), diplomacy (*klid zbraní*; *silencing of weapons* or *cease-fire*), history (*neklidná doba*; *a troubled time*), ethics (*klidné svědomí*, an untroubled conscience), and natural phenomena (*moře bylo klidné / sopka se uklidnila*, the sea was calm / the volcano quieted down). An example that illustrates *klid*'s semantic as well as stylistic range is an advertising slogan for a Czech country music station: *Klidné rádio do neklidné doby* (one possible translation would be *Soothing radio for a troubled time*).

It is certainly true that *klid*, like *domov*, is a word that suggests something more fundamental in Czech than can be captured by one word (or root) in English. This is not to say that English cannot convey the meanings that *klid* and words derived from it do, but just that English does not do so in the same lexically systematic way—and that Czech *klid* therefore represents a ready-made conceptual slot that English lacks. In its application to a range of domains, *klid* spans both human experience and non-human phenomena. Internal and external states of being are all collectively implicated in the *klid* spectrum: the same root covers (and implicitly associates?) both internal—and potentially moral—calmness, external peace and quiet that still falls within the realm of human activity, and the tranquility of natural phenomena.

Havel takes advantage of the unique range and resonance of *klid* to develop his argument against the Czechoslovak “normalized” system in *Dear Dr. Husák*. On one level, the *klid* motif is Havel’s response to the Husák regime’s call for a post-1968 “return” to *klid*—the regime here was itself playing on the range of meanings that the word can evoke. As Havel moves from describing the true nature of a “normalized” society to prophesizing its inevitable dissolution, metaphoricity in the essay increases. Whereas *klid* was used in the earlier part of the letter to stand for a “quiet life” that could be secured by cooperation with the regime (1991: 58; 1999, 4: 76-77) or the “rest” that people find by turning away from the public sphere through a focus on their own private lives (1991: 58; 1999, 4: 77), in the later sections *klid* is metaphorized both directly and indirectly.

The turning point is Havel's characterization of the consequence of living a life directed toward consumer gratification and limited to one's innermost circle of home: the regime promotes this because it wants to "not excite people with the truth, but to reassure [*uklidňovat*] them with lies" (1991: 66; 1993, 4: 87). Shortly after this assertion is the key passage (1991: 71; 1993, 4: 93-94):

Just as the constant increase of entropy is the basic law of the universe, so it is the basic law of life to be ever more highly structured and to struggle against entropy. Life rebels against all uniformity and leveling; its aim is not sameness, but variety, the restlessness of transcendence [*neklid transcendence*], the adventure of novelty and rebellion against the status quo.

It is life itself with its *neklid transcendence* that will ultimately undermine and erode the totalitarian system because the system is representative of a false *klid*—the *klid* of the morgue or the grave (1991: 72; 1999, 4: 95). Havel then indirectly invokes the concept of *klid* in metaphorical images that model the disintegration of the regime: the images he uses are grounded in the domains of human health and sickness or sexual physiology, natural phenomena (a tornado, an earthquake, an erupting volcano), and sleep and death (a death-like slumber from which society will eventually awake).^{xvii} The fall of the regime is inevitable because it is *naturally* unavoidable: the regime forces people to maintain *vnějšší* (external) *klid* (1991: 103; 1999, 4: 103) but life as internal *neklid transcendence* will ultimately burst forth and prevail.

If we were to push the analysis, we might say that Czech *klid* implies a folk model of the relationship between human states of mind, the human social order, and the non-human natural order. It suggests a harmony between the internal (*klid* of the soul) and the external in a way that is linguistically systematic. The word *klid* conceptually spans our circles—our layers—of home.

Language is not a prison house. Nonetheless, different languages do conventionalize different construals of reality, and we can sense these differences even as it proves difficult to capture in words exactly how to express them. I would suggest, perhaps *contra* Wierzbicka, that ethnosemantic analysis is more a matter of understanding (*chápání*) than explaining

(*vysvětlení*), and that this very distinction is not unrelated to the ways in which *domov*, *svědomí*, and *klid* differ from their English counterparts.

While a contrast between an *explaining* and an *understanding* mode is not unique to Havel, it has great importance in Havelian thought. Explaining is a mode of relating to the world that depersonalizes, fragments, and destroys the integrity of being; it is rational and maximally objective. Understanding is grounded in our unique, human-level experience of the world; it is essentially a form of aesthetic perception underlying ethical evaluation. The explaining mode *explains away* the mystery of Being for the sake of an exact mechanical accounting: it implies that we are the creators of meaning. Understanding, in contrast, recognizes that meaning is not inside of us, but that is we who are inside of meaning.^{xviii}

In contrasting the conventional meanings of Czech *domov*, *svědomí*, and *klid* with their English equivalents, I am suggesting that the Czech words highlight more vividly the relationship between an individual's existence and the totality of Being—they reflect more of an understanding mode than an explaining one. I make this suggestion at the risk of overstating the case, and a more cautious way of saying it might be that this conceptual contour or overtone is felt more in the Czech words than in English, and it is part of the elusive nature of the difference in construal and resonance.

It would be appropriate to conclude by noting that the privileging of the understanding mode in these Czech words finds affinity in Havel's early poetics that he, according to Kosatík (2006: 150), developed under the influence of—and in contrast to—the poetics of his literary mentor, Jiří Kolář. Kolář purposefully left out of his poetry references to subjective, inner states and left in only what he considered to be objective, external observations. Havel, however, countered this with a synthesis:

According to Havel, it would be more accurate to acknowledge the duplex nature of reality [*dvojjedinost skutečnosti*]: we know that it exists outside of us and without us, but at the same time we are incapable of apprehending it except subjectively. A poet should therefore convey, and not evade, reality's two faces. The meanings of *domov*, *svědomí*, and *klid*, in contrast to the meanings of their English counterparts, hint more strongly at reality's *dvojjedinost*. Their meaning is carried along by the current of Havel's transcendent breeze.^{xix}

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ⁱ Translations are mine unless otherwise referenced.

ⁱⁱ I am using the term "key word" in the sense of Wierzbicka 1997, but with an application to the thought system of one author rather than to a language or culture.

ⁱⁱⁱ Havel is referring here to the souls of those imprisoned under Article 203, but the point could be generalized. Citations of Havel will be given first to the standard English translation and then to Havel's *Spisy*, for which a volume number will also be given.

^{iv} The analysis offered here is inspired by Wierzbicka's ethnosemantic approach to language and culture as well as by cognitive semantic analysis. For seminal contributions to the latter in the Czech realm, see Vaňková et al 2005 and Vaňková 2007. Also crucial is the application of linguistic analysis to literature: see Danaher 2007a and 2007b as well as Vaňková 2005.

^v For a discussion of circles of home as frames for identity, see Danaher 2007a.

^{vi} Wilson sometimes translates *vrstvy* as "aspects" of home.

^{vii} See, for example, letters 52 and 53 (Havel 1983a and b) where he writes about *domov* in terms of concrete and absolute horizons of being.

^{viii} Danaher 2008 argues that Havel is best read as a thinker who brings philosophical concepts back to their existential essence: their primary value is not as intellectualized abstractions, but rather as tools for helping us make pragmatic sense of our lives.

^{ix} I first saw Gormley's sculpture at the Veletržní palác, Prague's contemporary art museum, where it was given the title *Domov*. For a picture, see <http://www.antonygormley.com/viewwork.php?workid=436&page=1>.

^x Another similarity includes the metaphorization of both as an inner voice. See Uličný 1999 for a discussion of *svědomí* and speech acts.

^{xi} Etymological and lexical information on *svědomí* is taken from Machek 1968, Jungmann 1989 [1835], and Gebauer 1970.

^{xii} Note also the fixed and formulaic phrase *podle nejlepšího vědomí a svědomí* (literally: according to the best of one's awareness and conscience), in which knowledge and conscience are invoked side-by-side. English does not have an equivalent.

^{xiii} In the words of a poet: "We watch as if watching could save us, but we ought to fear being a witness. We ought to know what a witness must do" (Pardi 2008: 79).

^{xiv} In this regard, it is anecdotally interesting to compare the first few sentences of the respective Wikipedia pages on *conscience* and *svědomí*. The English page succinctly defines *conscience* as "an ability or faculty that distinguishes whether one's actions as right or wrong". The Czech page initially emphasizes *svědomí*'s metaphorization as an "inner voice" or "inner judge"—that is, the dialogic aspects of *svědomí*—and then goes on to highlight how *svědomí*, as an ability (*schopnost*), is used to establish a relationship between oneself (our personal *domov*) and the experience of others (our knowledge or awareness of the world beyond that *domov*).

^{xv} For more on *klid* and *neklid* as key concepts for reading Havel, see Danaher In preparation and 2007a.

^{xvi} *Klid* as a root is productive: adjectives, adverbs, and a large array of verbs are derived from it. The most common derived words include the adjective *klidný* (calm, peaceful, still), the adverb (and sometimes conversational particle) *klidně*, and the verbs *uklidňovat* (to calm down) and *zneklidňovat* (to alarm or disturb).

^{xvii} These suggestive and mutually-reinforcing metaphors begin in earnest from page 72 in Havel 1991 and from page 95 in Havel 1999, 4.

^{xviii} For a suggestive discussion of these modes in relation to the question of human identity and responsibility, see Havel's letter 62 in 1983a and b. For an application of these modes to the question of literariness, see Danaher 2007b.

^{xix} For their contributions to my thinking on Havel, I am grateful to the students in my literature-in-translation course on Havel at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (<http://web.mac.com/pes/havel/syllabus.html>), Chris Ott, Jim Pontuso, Irena Vaňková, and Daniel Vojtěch.