



READING

VÁCLAV
HAVEL

David S. Danaher

Reading Václav Havel

DAVID S. DANAHER

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS
Toronto Buffalo London

© University of Toronto Press 2015
Toronto Buffalo London
www.utppublishing.com

ISBN 978-1-4426-4992-7 (cloth)

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Danaher, David S., author
Reading Václav Havel / David S. Danaher.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4426-4992-7 (bound)

1. Havel, Václav – Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.

PG5039.18.A9Z75 2015 891.8'655 C2014-907981-8

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial assistance to its publishing program of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council, an agency of the Government of Ontario.



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund for its publishing activities.

READING VÁCLAV HAVEL

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to a great many people, institutions, and places for their support in the process of researching and writing this book. My greatest debt is to the students in my monograph course on Havel's writings that I have offered regularly at UW-Madison since 2002. They have collectively taught me more about Havel than any scholarly book possibly could, and it is to them that I dedicate this book. In particular, I am grateful to Paul and Tommy Atwell, Jerrie Ceplina, Katie Peplinski Coffin, Soren Larsen-Ravenfeather, Abby Panozzo, Rachel Parker, and Wyl Schuth. Two former students, Megan Munroe and Ruth Ann Stodola, have done heroic work in reading, editing, and commenting on drafts of the book, and I am deeply grateful to them for their generosity of time and spirit. Graduate students in the Slavic Department at UW-Madison – especially Colleen Lucy, Naomi Olson, and Joey Vergara – also deserve my thanks.

I am fortunate to have had input from careful readers of a draft of the full manuscript – Greg Bettwy, Judith Kornblatt, Hana Pichova, and Tom McCarthy – whose kindness in agreeing to take on an additional project in the midst of their already busy professional and personal lives overwhelms me.

Special thanks go out to my colleagues in Prague for their unwavering support of my work on Havel, and in particular to Jasná Pacovská and Daniel Vojtěch. I am forever in the debt of Irena Vaňková (and the members of her informal discussion *kroužek*) for her (their) unwavering and enthusiastic support of my research over the years. I am also grateful to Kim Strozewski, whose help at various stages of my Prague-based research has been much appreciated.

Jonathan Bolton, Craig Cravens, and Kieran Williams are US-based colleagues who have been generous with their time in critiquing parts

of the manuscript and in sharing with me their ideas about Havel and his larger context. James Pontuso has been extremely generous over the years in this regard, and to him I owe a particular debt of gratitude.

Personal discussions with Christopher Ott (and not only or even especially about Havel) have made this a much better book than it otherwise would have been.

Institutions and organizations to which I am grateful for support include: the UW Foundation for support in the form of a Vilas Fellowship; the Davis Center at Harvard University for an affiliation that, among other benefits, allowed me access to the stacks at Widener Library; and the Kruh přátel českého jazyka, the Filozofická fakulta of Charles University, and the Prague-based Václav Havel Library for generously inviting me to present on my research. For providing internet infrastructure and a quiet place to write, I am grateful to the Cambridge Public Library, the former Lyndell's Bakery in Cambridge's Central Square, Top Pot in Seattle's Capitol Hill, and Fair Trade on Madison's State Street.

I gratefully acknowledge the following journals and edited volumes in which some of the material in this book has previously appeared: *The Linguistic Worldview: Ethnolinguistics, Cognition, and Culture* (Versita 2013), *Česká literatura, Ročenka textů zahraničních profesorů 4* (Charles University 2010), *Slovo a slovesnost, Between Texts, Languages, and Cultures: A Festschrift for Michael Henry Heim* (Slavica 2008), *Slovo a smysl / Word and sense*, and *Czech Language News*. For full citations of the articles and chapters in question, see the bibliography.

Two anonymous reviewers of the book manuscript also made valuable suggestions for improving the book's arguments as well as its readability, and I thank them for their input. Any errors that remain in the book are naturally my own responsibility.

Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction: Approaches to Reading Havel 3

1 The “restlessness of transcendence”: Havel’s Genres 17

2 *Explaining and Understanding*: The “Weirdness”
of Havel’s Plays 74

3 Understanding East and West: The World in Existential Crisis 138

4 “Metaphysical reconstruction”: Translating Havel’s Keywords 174

Conclusion: Havel’s Legacy as Appeal 216

Notes 223

Bibliography 253

Index 263

READING VÁCLAV HAVEL

Introduction: Approaches to Reading Havel

"You must change your life," says Rilke's sculpture of Apollo to the beholder. So says every major work of intellect and imagination, but in the university now – as in the culture at large – almost no one hears.

– Mark Edmundson, *Why Read?*¹

Who was Václav Havel? In what way or ways do we – his twenty-first century readers from all over the world who may already know something, or perhaps very little, about Havel's life and context – typically think about him? How do we read Havel, both in the literal sense of reading his remarkably diverse set of writings in translation, or perhaps even in the original Czech, as well as in the figurative sense of interpreting his writings and his life? How do we make sense of Havel as one of the most prominent and arguably most influential intellectual figures (if not also political figures) in world history from the second half of the twentieth century through the end of the first decade of the twenty-first? With Havel's death in December 2011 comes another question, one tightly bound up with the preceding ones: what shape will Havel's legacy take?

Václav Havel was born in 1936 to an affluent, educated, and well-connected family. His childhood took place against the backdrop of geopolitical turbulence. Within several years of his birth, the democratic First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–38) would come to an end with the signing of the Munich Agreement by the great European powers. An attempt to appease Germany, the agreement allowed Hitler to annex the ethnically German borderlands of Czechoslovakia, which would result

in German occupation of the country beginning in March 1939. When the war ended in 1945, the Czechoslovak government-in-exile returned from London and founded the Third Republic, but this political entity lasted for only three years. Most of the country had been liberated by Stalin's army and, before Havel was twelve years old, Czechoslovakia had been taken over by the Communist Party. The country remained in the Soviet sphere of influence from 1948 to 1989, that is, for what would prove to be the majority of Havel's life.

Although Havel, as a child of "bourgeois" parents under a communist regime, was denied access to educational opportunities that befitted his interests and talents, he nonetheless managed to establish himself as a promising writer and engaged intellectual before the age of thirty. By the mid-1960s, he had begun what would develop into a brilliant career as a playwright, and in the process had brought the techniques of French theatre of the absurd, in conjunction with the Czech theatre of the appeal, to his country.² Throughout the 1960s, he was also a leading figure in the cultural and political movement that eventually culminated in the 1968 Prague Spring and the national tragedy of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August of the same year. The post-invasion regime, under the leadership of Gustáv Husák, banned Havel (along with other reformist writers and cultural figures) from publication and public life as part of a campaign of repression that came to be known as "normalization." Despite his "normalized" status, Havel continued to write, and gradually became a key figure in the so-called dissident movement that led to the founding of Charter 77.³

Founded in 1977 and extant as an organization until several years after the fall of communism in Central Europe, Charter 77 was a civic initiative composed largely of dissidents or "intellectual oppositionists" (Goldfarb 1998: 85). Technically speaking, the Charter focused on questions of human rights under Husák's regime, but it also served, more broadly speaking, as a cultural space for a community of people who wanted to think and live outside the "normalized" box. Havel was one of the leading theorists of the oppositionist intellectuals not only in Czechoslovakia's Charter movement – he was one of the Charter's founders and among its original spokespeople – but also in the Soviet bloc as a whole. Because of these activities, the regime tried Havel (and others) on trumped-up criminal charges, and Havel spent almost four years in prison from 1979 to 1983.

As the communist regimes began to crumble across Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, and in the aftermath of dramatic events in

Czechoslovakia in November 1989, a Prague-based organization called the Civic Forum was established to unite opposition to the regime and push for its end. Havel was a founder, and the nominal leader, of the Civic Forum, and most of the Forum's leading representatives came from Charter circles. The Forum was successful in negotiating a non-violent end to the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, and the Velvet Revolution, as it came to be known, transformed Havel nearly overnight from a publicly vilified "dissident" to the unanimously elected president of his country on 29 December 1989.⁴

Havel served as president of Czechoslovakia from 1989 to 1992, and then of the newly independent Czech Republic from 1993 to 2003. During his presidential years, Havel also travelled the world to receive awards and honorary degrees; he gained global renown as an intellectually oriented politician and leading thinker. He cemented this reputation during his presidency and beyond both by concerning himself with questions of human rights across the world and by organizing global initiatives to confront the challenges faced by humanity in the twenty-first century.⁵ After a long illness, Havel died on 18 December 2011 at his country home in northern Bohemia.

A commentator writing on Havel's philosophical or "dissident" essays once described him as a "relentless thinker," observing that "there's something exhilarating about the dogged way Havel sniffs and digs at his ideas until every bony chip has been unearthed" (Schiff 1999: 87). This is a feature of his writing that any serious reader of Havel, or at least someone who has tried to take notes on his essays, will immediately recognize; the notes often end up reproducing nearly every detail of the original text. In a not-unrelated characterization, Paul Wilson, Havel's English-language translator, called him a "visionary tinkerer" who had "a mind as much at home with the minutiae of a state banquet or designing improvements to Prague Castle as with NATO expansion or the New World Order" (Wilson 2006: 15). What some may be quick to consider a quirk of Havel's personality seems, in a different light, more integral to his persona. The big picture can never be divorced from the procedural details – those "bony chips" – that comprise it, and small details are not incidental to the outcome of great events.

Although it is useful to trace the outlines of Havel's life, this book is not intended as a biography. My ambition is instead to develop an approach to reading Havel that reassembles the "bony chips" and tinkered pieces of his visionary project into a coherent whole. Over the course of his life, Havel engaged in a remarkably diverse range of

genres, both literary and non-literary; he presented a variety of “faces” to the public at different stages of his life. He was, for example, a productive and accomplished writer of essays devoted to literary and film criticism, visual poetry, plays, philosophical (and political) essays, short philosophical reflections written and sent as letters from prison, and political speeches (as well as other texts); he was a writer and also simultaneously a political figure both as a pre-1989 so-called dissident and the post-1989 president of his country.⁶ Across all of these various genres or faces, Havel was nothing if not a consistent thinker. His ideas and themes – and, as we will see, the conceptual strategies he exploits in engaging with them – remain constant across these faces, genres, and time periods. It should be possible, then, to read Havel in a way that does not fragment but rather integrates the diversity of his writings and political contributions. In other words, Havel’s artistic and literary versatility as well as his role as a leading actor in the culture and society of his time ought to have a direct bearing on how we read him. In order to make sense of Havel as a writer, a thinker, and a politician, and also to initiate a discussion of his legacy, we are in need of a holistic evaluation of Havel’s contributions.

One path to realizing an integrative approach to reading Havel consists in identifying and describing key conceptual threads running through his thought. These threads cut across the various genres and time periods that characterize his career, and are therefore crucial to understanding Havel as a coherent thinker. Moreover, and as will become evident, these threads represent forms that Havel himself uses as an engaged writer while simultaneously functioning as crucial elements of Havel’s message; in reading Havel, the *how* cannot be easily separated from the *what*. The crux of Havel’s project is to map the topography of human identity in the modern world, and the strategies that he exploits in realizing the mapping turn out to be crucial features of the topography itself. In other words, the strategies that Havel uses to analyse the crisis of modern human identity – the very ones that we encounter again and again while reading his works – also prove useful as conceptual tools for analysing ourselves. Reading Havel thus becomes a way in which to “read” ourselves also.

I explore four of these strategies/tools over the course of this book. The first of these is suggested by a recurring image in Havel’s oeuvre, the image of the mosaic (or the related image of the collage), which symbolizes for Havel the structural complexity of modern human identity at both personal and societal levels.⁷ The second is a recurrent opposition

found in Havel's thinking between, on one hand, *explaining*, and, on the other, *understanding*; the former is, in Havel's treatment, a way of relating to the world that privileges rationality at the cost of depersonalizing and fragmenting human experience, while the latter represents an integrative way of being in the world that is grounded in everyday human experience. The third thread that I will consider, and which has been underappreciated in the scholarly literature on Havel to date, is his radical reconceptualization of the East/West dynamic during the Cold War. Havel's reframing of East and West is subsumed under the broader conviction that modern humanity is in the throes of a spiritual crisis, and to appreciate Havel's characterization of this crisis – both the causes of it and the ways to resolve it – will require us to reconsider who we were prior to 1989 and who we therefore are in the post-1989 world. The final thread that binds together Havel's various incarnations is a constant focus on restoring an experience of the transcendent in the modern world. How this plays out across Havel's oeuvre, and particularly with regard to the very language that Havel used in creating that oeuvre, will be a major concern of this book.

Figuring prominently in all four of these discussions (and binding them together) will be an emphasis on Havel's literary and political engagement as forms of appeal. I use the word "appeal" here in the special sense of Czech theatre of the appeal (*divadlo apelu*), which is a term associated with Havel's dramatic style. The renowned Czech writer, playwright, actor, director, and teacher Ivan Vyskočil, who was Havel's early theatrical mentor, defined *divadlo apelu* as a kind of theatre that aims "to engage the intellect and the imagination of the spectator in order to force him to agree, disagree, compare, and view a subject matter from various angles" (cited in Trensky 1978: 105). *Divadlo apelu* is absurdist theatre of a special type, in which the techniques associated with absurdism are deployed to provoke – and thereby "activate" (Grossman 1999: 71) – the audience by creating within the play an empty space for audience self-reflection; spectators (or "spect-actors") in the theatre co-create the meaning of the work as they fill in its empty space. In making an effort to internalize and personalize the message of the play, "the viewer's being [becomes] more fully embedded in [its] meaning" (Pontuso 2004: 75). The meaning of an appeal-oriented play is therefore less a function of the playwright's intentions than a matter of each audience member's existential "encounter" with the play, and this struggle to render the play meaningful can often prove uncomfortable or disturbing.

I will argue that the appeal component of Havel's thought is not limited to its dramatic incarnation. My goal is, in other words, to extend the concept of the appeal from a narrow application to Havel's absurdist plays to application to his oeuvre as a whole. The chapters in this book describe, each in its own particular way, various forms of Havelian appeal, and it will gradually become clear that the meaningfulness of Havel's engagement, both literary and political, arises from its anchoring in the appeal form. The principal way in which Havel structures his engagement thus becomes a crucial component of the intended message of his intellectual project.

In pursuing an integrative approach to reading Havel that highlights the importance of form for meaning and that raises the appeal to the level of a dominant principle in Havel's thinking, I will also present specific readings of themes and texts throughout Havel's works. Specific readings will be devoted to: Havel's typographic poetry (the *Anticodes*) from the 1960s; his 1966 essay "Anatomy of the Gag"; the trilogy of so-called Vaněk plays from the 1970s, as well as the 1975 play *The Beggar's Opera*; the essays "Dear Dr. Husák" (1975), "Power of the Powerless" (1978), "Politics and Conscience" (1984), and "Thriller" (1984); selected prison letters from *Letters to Olga* (1979–83); aspects of the late-1980s book *Disturbing the Peace*; key passages from the 1993 book *Summer Meditations*; and a variety of selected texts from Havel's post-1989 presidential period. In addition to their usefulness as readings of specific themes and texts in Havel's oeuvre, these analyses are also intended to enact the holistic and integrative approach to reading Havel that I propose in the book.

The holistic framework proposed here represents a radically different approach to reading Havel than exists in current scholarship. Existing approaches to reading Havel fall, broadly speaking, into three types: *biographizing* criticism, or reading him through the events of his own fairy-tale, dissident-to-president life; *historicizing* scholarship, or reading his works in relation to the historical context in which they were written; and *intellectualizing* criticism, or scholarship that situates Havel's thinking in its intellectual and cultural context. These three modes of reading Havel share a common feature. They all focus, each in its own way, on contextualizing Havel. In doing so, each also suggests a frame for reading him, and the reading that results is strongly influenced by the frame in question. More often than not, commentary within each of these frames tends to fragment Havel's incarnations. There is little sense that the various genres that Havel engaged in represent coherent parts of a larger intellectual project or related pieces in his life's mosaic.⁸

Biographizing, historicizing, and intellectualizing are ways of relating to Havel that have, moreover, a tendency to totalize or fix our reading of him. We appreciate (or we criticize) his writings and his political engagement, but we do so from an admiring and safe distance. Contextualizing commentary promotes the notion that Havel's life and work speak to a place and a time – to one particular sociopolitical and historical -ism – that has little to do with our twenty-first century world. It is as if the full meaning of Havel's works, both literary and political, can be reduced to the historical and cultural context in which they emerged; in these approaches, then, the appeal component of Havel's project is radically circumscribed, if not entirely absent. In reading Havel only or even primarily through a contextualizing filter, something essential about his message and his legacy is lost.

Discovering or recovering what has been lost in traditional approaches to reading Havel will also be a main theme of this book. This concern takes shape in two related questions: (1) If we adopt a biographizing or historicizing framework for reading Havel, do we contextualize him in a way that closes off interpretive possibilities as well as precludes readings that could, perhaps, lead to various forms of personal catharsis? (2) Does a safely contextualized Havel belong under glass in a museum display-case of some kind, or should we understand his legacy to be a living one?

It is for the most part true that historians – of a certain figure, of a particular era, or of an idea – necessarily think and write historically. If human history is imagined as a mosaic of past, present, and future eras or moments in time (or a mosaic of events, figures, and ideas), then historical writing tends to orient itself towards describing the individual pieces or the historical tesserae that comprise the mosaic as a whole. More often than not, the focus narrows onto the historical uniqueness of the individual tessera. Historical writing privileges contextualization. This, however, is not the only way to "read" the human mosaic. We could, for instance, ask how the pieces of the mosaic relate to one another. In this regard, we might specifically ask ourselves how past eras, moments, figures, events, and ideas relate to our own age, if not also to future ages. What is the message or meaning of these historical tesserae for us living in the here and now, and what is the value of the moral lessons that we may divine from them for future generations? In this approach, we transcend the historical moment and its context. We "read" history so that it speaks indirectly to us and about us, and the experience of doing so may even change how we understand ourselves.

When we read history in this way, it becomes a kind of present-day existential encounter with the past. To read ourselves through history, we need to break the glass in the museum display-case.⁹

Let me be perfectly clear that I am not dismissing the value of an approach to Havel (or an approach to human history) that focuses on contextualization in one form or another. It is indeed valuable to research and write the biography of a major historical and intellectual figure, and an English-language biography of Havel worthy of its subject still remains to be written. It is equally valuable to situate Havel and his works in his and their historical and intellectual context. These are necessary frames for reading Havel, but they are not in and of themselves sufficient. Each of these modes seeks, in its own way, to *explain* Havel, but this does not exhaust our possibilities for *understanding* him, and it is in our privileging of the former at the expense of the latter that we lose a connection to Havel's legacy as a living one.

We lose, in other words, an active connection to the appeal component of Havel's writing, because Havel's appeal cannot be adequately addressed in scholarship that privileges *explaining* over *understanding*. What is lost or dramatically underplayed in historicizing, biographizing, and intellectualizing are the ways in which Havel speaks directly to us and asks us, in the spirit of this introduction's epigraph, to rethink who we are. The argument that I will be making in this book is that this element of Havel's story is not an incidental part of his oeuvre, but rather the central thrust of his larger project. It is in this sense, then, that the approach to reading Havel proposed here proves complementary to existing scholarship.

A distinction between *explaining* and *understanding* is a key conceptual thread in Havel's thinking that I will explore in detail in the second chapter of this book. For the moment, however, we can capture the essence of the distinction through an analogy to music. Although it is certainly possible to historicize and intellectualize a musical composition – to write about the life of a composer and/or performer, to situate the music in its own rich historical context, to provide a critique of its style in relation to musical trends, influences, and theories – none of this sufficiently accounts for how and why the music may move us so deeply. Our “encounter” with music does not consist only, and perhaps not even primarily, in how we contextualize it and rationally investigate it. In other words, the meaning of music for us transcends our ability to *explain* it. It is even possible that too strong a focus on these aspects might undermine our personal encounter with the music in much the