

# 11a

## Václav Havel

*Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz*

What power—what group—finds it eternally necessary to make people as characterless and submissive as possible? ... Why must peoples' support be won only at the price of their moral devastation?

LUDVÍK VACULÍK

When Tom Stoppard, the well-known British playwright of Czech birth, had completed *Jumpers*<sup>1</sup> which opened in London in February 1972 and became an immediate international success, nine years had passed since Václav Havel had written *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* which anticipated Stoppard's play in several ways. The heroes of both plays are scholars (Stoppard's is a moral philosopher, Havel's a social scientist) who are trying to define – in hilarious, utterly confused lectures and dictations which provide much amusement for the audience – the existence of moral absolutes and the essence of man. In both cases, however, these valiant, if grotesque, attempts are thwarted because the thinkers are constantly interrupted by the mad ways of the surrounding world. When the plays end, their heroes are not one iota closer to either the nature of morality or the nature of man.

Although their characters have similar problems on stage, the authors themselves have been leading – particularly during recent years – drastically different lives. Since early 1977, when he was arrested and imprisoned as one of the three spokesmen for Charter 77,<sup>2</sup> Václav Havel's name has been appearing in the Western press with increasing frequency. In 1978, when Tom Stoppard dedicated his television play *Professional Foul* to Václav Havel, the latter moved as it were officially into the consciousness of Western writers. 'I had ill-formed and unformed thoughts of writing about Czechoslovakia for a year or two,' Stoppard writes in the spring of 1977 in his introduction to *Professional Foul*. 'Moreover, I had been strongly drawn to the work and personality of the arrested playwright Václav Havel. Thus it would be natural to expect that the setting and subject matter of *Professional Foul* declared themselves as soon as the Charter story broke ...'<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Tom Stoppard *Jumpers* (London 1972)

<sup>2</sup> Charter 77, signed by over 300 Czech and Slovak writers and intellectuals, has become a symbol of the struggle for human rights and freedom of expression; the Charter urged the Czechoslovak government to carry out the promises it made at Helsinki in 1975, and pointed out that anyone who tried to claim these rights was persecuted.

<sup>3</sup> Stoppard, Introduction to *very Good Boy Deserves Favour & Professional Foul* (London 1978) 8. More recently Stoppard has written *Dogg's Hamlet, Caboot's Macbeth*, the second part about the

The play is a very witty work about a British academic, Professor Anderson, who is flying to Prague to attend the 'Colloquium Philosophicum Prague 77,' an international conference of scholars. He is scheduled to give a lecture on the topic 'Ethical Fact in Ethical Fiction' and also attend a football match – both, obviously, completely unpolitical activities. However, during his visit in Prague, Anderson is inevitably drawn into a political situation. A former student of his, Pavel Hollar, who is now reduced to cleaning lavatories at a bus station, appears in his hotel room and asks him to smuggle out a thesis arguing that the ethics of the state must be based on the fundamental ethics of the individual. Anderson, well-versed in ethical problems in fiction, finds himself in a very real ethical dilemma: after all, as a guest of the government he felt he could not, with a clean conscience, smuggle out what that state considered to be subversive literature. However, in the end Anderson performs an action which could or could not be considered ethical, depending on the circumstances: he puts Hollar's thesis into the briefcase of an unsuspecting colleague who unwittingly carries it out of the country. 'Ethics,' Anderson concludes when informing his stunned colleague of the latter's unconscious act of political smuggling, when their plane has left Czechoslovakia far below and behind, 'is a very complicated business.'<sup>4</sup>

When Tom Stoppard created the figure of Pavel Hollar, he obviously thought of Václav Havel, although he was aware that Havel 'would be the first to object that in mentioning his name only, I am putting undue emphasis on his part in the Czechoslovakian human rights movement. Others have gone to gaol and many more have been victimized. This is true. But I have in mind not just the Chartist but the author of *The Garden Party*, *The Memorandum*, *The Audience* and other plays. It is to a fellow writer that I dedicate *Professional Foul* in admiration.'<sup>5</sup>

A short time after writing these words Stoppard went to Czechoslovakia in June 1977 (for the first time since he had left it as a small child thirty eight years ago) in order to meet Václav Havel.<sup>6</sup> They met in Havel's converted farmhouse for a few intense hours – two outstanding writers, born within a few months of each other in the same small country, whom life had led such drastically different ways. The two men knew they were kindred spirits and knew they were trying to do basically the same thing: to show in their creative medium what they conceived to be the truth about our age and its people lost in the network of vast societies. But only one of them is allowed to speak, to have his plays produced, to see international audiences respond to his humour, his thought, his brilliant histrionics. The other one is isolated from any stage, any audience; he has to let his plays, like bottles on the ocean, be

---

production of *Macbeth* put on in a Prague apartment by Pavel Kohout and his friends, some of them banned from the Czech stage (see illustration).

<sup>4</sup> *Every Good Boy & Professional Foul* 93

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, Introduction 9

<sup>6</sup> For a lively discussion of the surprising parallel between the two playwrights see Kenneth Tynan 'Profiles' *The New Yorker* (19 Dec. 1977) 41ff.

carried to foreign shores. This is an incredible contrast in fates between writers who have such similar views of the world.

In an essay contributed to the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1967 Václav Havel makes the comment that theatre 'attains immortality only through its topicality. It can only achieve lasting value by the profundity of its topical value.'<sup>7</sup> Nine years later, in an author's comment published in the first edition of his suppressed plays, Havel makes the same point but modifies it this time with a sad undertone because it is no longer possible to attain that concrete realization of his plays on a Czech stage. He tells us that 'I must lean on something I know, on the concrete background of my life, and only by means of that authenticity can I – perhaps – give account of the times ... I must open myself much more fully to what was missing in the poetic structure of my older plays, to what I would call the *existential dimension of the world*.'<sup>8</sup>

In approaching Havel's brilliant and startling plays it might be useful to become aware of how the main theme of his work, which had been formulated as 'the relationship between man and the system'<sup>9</sup> in 1968, expanded and deepened to what the author himself calls the 'existential dimension of the world.' Perhaps the development Havel has undergone in his relatively brief career as a dramatist can be followed best by starting with a simple proposition: that social systems make their – more or less pronounced – demands to organize individual man into a system, in order to achieve certain – more or less laudable – aims which in turn are to serve the interests of man. Already we see a suggestion of a vicious circle in the argument: man is an organism, the system functions as a mechanism; one must subdue the other or be subdued. Around these tensions Václav Havel builds his unique, grimly comic theatre.

Since the mid-sixties, when his first two plays were translated into English and German, Havel – together with the Polish writer Slawomir Mrozek – has become known in the West as the prime example of the Theatre of the Absurd in Eastern Europe. Havel's actual connection with the playwrights of the Absurd is that he read them, loved them, and most likely derived some ideas from them. Nevertheless, the absurdity of his own plays is highly original and of a different brand than that of Ionesco, Genet or Adamov. Havel's theatre explores language as the primary agent in man's absurd situation.<sup>10</sup> The real hero of his plays is the mechanistic phrase, uttered from habit, repeated with parrot-like readiness, which decides people's actions, composes events, and creates its own absurd reality. At the outset of our first chapter,

---

<sup>7</sup> Václav Havel 'Politics and the Theatre'

<sup>8</sup> Havel 'Dovětek autora' *Hry 1970-1976* (Toronto 1977) 306. This is the first publication in Czech of five of Havel's plays which were not allowed to be published in Czechoslovakia.

<sup>9</sup> This idea is formulated in Hořínek 'Člověk systematizovaný' *Divadlo* (Oct./Nov. 1968) 4-10.

<sup>10</sup> Another way of revealing the absurdity of language on stage is reflected in the experiments in silence of Samuel Beckett and the Austrian writer Peter Handke.

while reflecting on the highly problematic nature of the very term 'Theatre of the Absurd,' we considered the way a mere working definition, conceived for the sake of clarity, can create an absolute order which proliferates itself with surprising reproductive powers. It is precisely this type of situation that makes up the core of Havel's theatre: an exploration of the tremendous power of the word or phrase which becomes the unquestioned property of all, prevents anyone from thinking, and is the prime enemy of common sense and reason.

Critics and commentators never fail to mention the inherent 'logic' of Havel's writings. Jan Grossman was the first to apply the word<sup>11</sup> to Havel's works and it has been mentioned in variations ever since. One has indeed the feeling that events in Havel's plays follow each other with inevitable logical causality. Its particular quality, however, needs some consideration. Havel's plays work with the causality of mechanism. His is a unique combination of logical thinking and the inevitability of a mechanism set in motion. Take an electric carrot-slicer. It will go on cutting as long as it receives an object of a certain shape – that of a carrot. It will go on slicing, irrespective of any other considerations. We are reminded of one of Charlie Chaplin's most brilliant scenes when he is working on an assembly line and, by failing to react predictably, upsets the smoothly running mechanism of the whole establishment. Here we have the stuff Havel's plays are made of: the insoluble tension between the individual who knows that a carrot is a carrot for reasons other than its shape alone, and the system which identifies a carrot as a carrot solely by a mechanical reaction, leading, more often than not, to a logical disaster.

Ionesco, too, was concerned with this problem. Take, for example, the male characters in *The Bald Soprano*. When it occurs repeatedly that there is no-one at the door after the doorbell has been ringing, they base their speculations on logical theory: 'When one hears the doorbell ring, that means someone is at the door ringing to have the door opened.' The female characters, however, base their reasoning on the logic of experience: 'That is true in theory. But in reality things happen differently ... Experience teaches us that when one hears the doorbell ring it is because there is never anyone there.'<sup>12</sup> Both lines of reasoning, since made without the 'logic' of common sense, are proved wrong; and Ionesco leaves it at that. Another case in point is the conversation in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in which Vladimir and

---

<sup>11</sup> Grossman 'Předmluva' in Havel *Protokoly* (Prague 1966) 12-13. Jan Grossman, who worked very closely with Havel and directed both *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum* at the Theatre on the Balustrade in Prague, informs us that Havel's world 'consists of real components, existing everywhere, even banal in their daily occurrence'; and that the playwright's method in presenting them is 'exactly as real, we might even say "logical."' The fact that these considerations caused Grossman doubts as to whether Havel could be counted among the 'absurd' playwrights merely shows how vague the term itself has remained even in the minds of people who have given it some thought.

<sup>12</sup> Ionesco *The Bald Soprano* in *Four Plays* tr Donald M. Allen (New York 1969) 23

Estragon are discussing the possibility of hanging themselves. Estragon, having warmed up to the idea, wants quick action:

ESTRAGON Let's hang ourselves immediately!

VLADIMIR From a bough? *they go towards the tree* I wouldn't trust it.

ESTRAGON We can always try.

VLADIMIR Go ahead.

ESTRAGON After you.

VLADIMIR No, no, you first.

ESTRAGON Why me?

VLADIMIR You're lighter than I am.

ESTRAGON . Just so!

VLADIMIR I don't understand.

ESTRAGON Use your intelligence, can't you?

*Vladimir uses his intelligence*

VLADIMIR *finally* I remain in the dark.

ESTRAGON This is how it is, *he reflects* The bough ... the bough ... angrily Use your head, can't you?

VLADIMIR You're my only hope.

ESTRAGON With effort Gogo light – bough not break – Gogo dead. Didi heavy – bough break – Didi alone. Whereas–

VLADIMIR I hadn't thought of that<sup>13</sup>

Vladimir hoped to convince Estragon with a logical argument: Estragon was lighter. Estragon proceeds to reveal the fallaciousness of this reasoning by another type of logic. Each reasons to his own advantage; the situation dictates their reasoning. Vladimir's logic says the lighter man should try first because the bough should undergo the easier test first and, having passed it, could be submitted to the more difficult test. Estragon's logic says if the bough passed the difficult test first, logically it would also bear up under easier tests. Vladimir has based his logic on testing the branch as such, Estragon on its performing the required function. This double display of reasoning, however, is proved irrelevant a moment later when the two realize that actually they have no idea as to who is heavier. 'There is an even chance. Or nearly.' Estragon muses.

As in Ionesco's play, the chain of reasoning is proved useless because the premise is wrong or unknown. This deep mistrust of human reason permeates the absurd theatre of Western countries – it is obvious in the plays, say; of Harold Pinter or Wolfgang Hildesheimer. But Havel's case is different. He takes a seemingly rational subject (the creation of a new way of communication, a man's adaptation to his new job, the difficulties encountered in sociological experimentation, opposition to poor

leadership) and analyses its consequences with minute logic. Regarded on the surface the absurd has no place at all in Havel's work. But then, in the fashion of some Surrealist painters, he injects into this perfectly sane situation one absurd element which inverts the whole meaning and stands it on its head. As in our examples from Ionesco and Beckett, human reasoning is again proved irrational. However, with Havel the point at which the 'reversal into absurdity' takes place is identifiable: it is the moment when the project in a man's mind – an idea, let us say – can create a mechanism which, once it begins to function, adapts everything to its function and makes it part of the mechanism. The theme of mechanization in Havel's plays is the search for that concealed point at which reasoning becomes absurd. The same theme in the Western branch of absurd theatre revolves around the claim that this point can never be found.

Martin Esslin has pointed out that it is a fusion of the worlds of Franz Kafka and Jaroslav Hašek – metaphysical anguish and low-life clowning both peculiarly rooted in Czech tradition, which we find in Havel's plays.<sup>14</sup> This combination is obviously reminiscent of Beckett's plays, yet any comparison is very tenuous. The latter writes in a language that seems to be transparent and makes us realize the superficiality of all dialogue; the conversations of Beckett's characters seem like fences put up to designate some kind of – perhaps arbitrary – order in the vast spaces of the unknowable. Havel sets up his language as a barrier to knowing and realizing anything at all. Where Beckett questions without an answer, Havel answers without a question.

The stage settings in Havel's plays resemble each other. On the one hand they remind us of Kafka's oppressive houses with no way out; on the other hand they bring to mind Beckett's bare stage, where a leafless tree, a chair, handbag or step-ladder each takes on a vast importance beyond its actual usage and becomes a sign indicating the nature of the characters' lives. The most distinguishing mark of Havel's stage is a kind of standardized neutrality: the characters move about in the aridity of functional rooms and offices.

But even the private homes in Havel's plays are deprived of any touch of a homey atmosphere. They are like cells in a beehive where everything (even a gothic madonna in a window-recess) must be 'just the way it was planned,'<sup>15</sup> where certain things are expected to take place at certain times, and events are regulated by frozen habits which seem to have acquired an uncanny inevitability in the characters' minds. Lunch and dinner have become facts of life like birth and death – events which we all share and which provide the only certain ground of communication between the characters. The effect of this rigid patterning on the audience is paralyzing in its inevitability. When we hear Mrs Huml in *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* rummaging backstage in the kitchen and drawing her husband's attention to the pot of beef he is

<sup>13</sup> Beckett *Waiting for Godot* (New York 1954) 12

<sup>14</sup> Esslin, Introduction to *Three East European Plays* (Harmondsworth 1970) 16. For a more detailed discussion of the relation between Hašek and Kafka see Kosík 'Hašek and Kafka' 84-8.

<sup>15</sup> *Vernissage* in *Hry 1970-1976* 276

to heat for his lunch, we have visions of thousands of similar pots of beef, thousands of similar husbands putting them on thousands of similar stoves.

The first production of *The Memorandum* at Prague's Theatre On the Balustrade under the direction of Jan Grossman was designed to bring out the standardized barrenness of Havel's world by reducing the visual aspect of the performance to the same collective cliché which makes up the texture of the whole dialogue. The stage set included an empty can front stage into which water kept dropping constantly and with deadening monotony. In almost unbearable contrast with it were loud, bouncy, optimistic snatches of music – a symphony orchestra blaring out some terrible mixture of Lohengrin and Nabucco<sup>16</sup> – the agitated bursts of laughter from the audience providing a kind of counterpoint, recreated with varying patterns during each performance. The numerous filing cabinets on stage turned out to contain nothing but the clerks' knives, forks, and spoons, wrapped in plastic bags, and taken out and replaced again with metronomic precision, according to the daily ritual of going to lunch. Special fire-extinguishers which go with the office of director, indicating his stature like a coat of arms, were set up and removed according to who occupied the director's desk: fire-extinguishers remain the same, directors are interchangeable. This prominence given to physical details on stage (as well as in the dialogue, as we will see later) maps out the area in which Havel's characters move. It is limited on one side by the sterile, fixed phrases of abstract language (be it of a politico-bureaucratic, proverbio-folksy, or private-emotional nature), and on the other side by physiological needs like eating, dressing, combing one's hair, and going to the bathroom. The stage instructions for the director's secretary Hana in *The Memorandum*, for example, read as follows: 'Hana hangs her coat on a coat-rack, sits down at typist's desk, takes a mirror and comb out of her bag, props mirror against typewriter and begins to comb her hair. Combing her hair will be her chief activity throughout the play. She will interrupt it only when absolutely necessary.'<sup>17</sup> When we have seen the play we realize that these instances of absolute necessity occur only when she runs out to get milk, rolls, or peanuts.

Another example is the Chief Censor Aram in *The Conspirators*. During the first and the last scene of the play when most of the characters are assembled on the stage, Aram consumes sandwiches with the punctual monotony of an egg-timer. Whenever the conversation stalls, he leans over to the hostess and utters a soft 'may I?' pointing to the sandwich plate on the table. Having received her mechanical response, 'of course,' Aram, according to stage instructions repeated six times during these two scenes, 'takes a sandwich and eats it hungrily, then wipes his hands on his handker-

---

<sup>16</sup> Andreas Razumovsky 'Der Mechanismus von Feigheit und Macht' *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 5 August 1965

<sup>17</sup> Havel *The Memorandum* tr Vera Blackwell (London 1967) II; original publication: *Vyrozumění in Protokoly*

chief.'<sup>18</sup> The mechanistic predictability of man counterpoints the action like an electric instrument paying a certain tune at a set time.

Another point to consider is the naturalistic precision with which the playwright in his stage instructions to *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* indicates what is eaten for lunch or dinner in the Humls' house and how it is served: on the tray there are 'two plates with steaming stew, a pot of mustard, a basket with bread, glasses, beer, knives and forks.'<sup>19</sup> Sometimes the tray is brought in by Vlasta, Huml's wife, at other times by Renata, Huml's mistress. The two are interchangeable like the directors in *The Memorandum*, but the lunch, like the fire extinguisher, remains the same. We are reminded of a scene in Dürrenmatt's 'absurd' play *An Angel Comes to Babylon* in which outside the king's palace there is a huge royal statue with an exchangeable head.<sup>20</sup> Every time one king is replaced by another, only the statue's head is changed and the state saves great expense in material and labour. Matter has taken over man's existence. Man himself has become exchangeable like a part of a machine.

A Czech critic said of Havel that when watching his plays one has the impression of listening to conversations between two rather primitive cybernetic machines which have at their disposal only a very limited range of answers to a very limited range of questions. In Havel's first full-length play, *The Garden Party*, we are even made the witnesses of the schooling process of such a machine, a young man named Hugo Pludek. In the course of the action he rises from being a monosyllabic, chess-playing son of an obscure middle-class family to the honourable position of heading a newly established ministerial commission which is to solve the political impasse in society (we never find out which society nor which political system – and it does not matter in the least). On closer inspection it appears that the impasse is a strange one indeed: the difficulty turns out to be a linguistic one; it is language that has created an acute political problem. How does Havel go about putting such intangible and undramatic material on the stage? He builds his play quite logically around one point of language and leads his audience on an extremely comic four-act exploration of the power of language itself. At one moment words seem to provide the only logical element on stage, at the next moment they create complete confusion. The audience, unable to stop laughing, is taken through bounds and leaps of reasoning, across swamps of phraseology, as it watches sense turn into nonsense and nonsense into sense.

*The Garden Party* is about the bureaucratic ordering of life – public and private. The setting is a utopian (though thoroughly Czech) society. Its various organizational organs must have identifiable labels and there must be order in every sphere. Under no circumstances may there occur any confusion between, say, the 'Secretariat of

---

<sup>18</sup> Cf *Spiklenci in Hry 1970-0976* scenes i and XV.

<sup>19</sup> Havel *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* tr Vera Blackwell (London 1972) 16; original publication: *Ztižená možnost soustředění in Divadlo* (May 1968)

<sup>20</sup> Dürrenmatt *Ein Engel kommt nach Babylon in Komödien I* (Zürich 1963) 244

Humour' and the 'Ideological Regulation Commission.'<sup>21</sup> That might result in a confusion between an idea and humour, and that would never do. This is where the social system represented in *The Garden Party* gets into trouble. The government has made the decision to initiate some form of liberalization, the first step of which is to liquidate the Ministry of Liquidation. Expressed in words, the issue seems simply a matter of bad stylistics, and if we substitute the words 'close down' for 'liquidate' we have solved the problem and can proceed. But in Havel's world language is taken seriously and above all, literally. If it says 'liquidate,' it means it! But since liquidation is a measure that can only be performed by the appropriate body, which in this case is the Ministry of Liquidation, the politico-linguistic deadlock is already upon us.

This deadlock turns out to be the springboard for the central character's rising political career. By adapting himself with supreme linguistic agility to the ways of the officials in the bureaucratic structure he attains one prominent position after another. The whole play consists of a biting and very amusing demonstration of how he succeeds on the basis of linguistic talents alone. In the first act Hugo Pludek says very little indeed. Except for one or two monosyllabic comments on his chess game, his conversation is limited to variations of 'just fine, Ma,' and 'pretty bad, Dad.' Only toward the end of the act does he give an indication of his budding talents, by quoting one of his father's twisted proverbs: 'if we don't realize in time the historical role of the middle classes, the Japs, who don't need the middle classes, will come, remove them from history, and send them to Japan.'<sup>22</sup> Grammatically the statement is correct: the conditional if clause is duly followed by the main clause, the relative clause describing the antecedent subject is in place, and the predicate consists of three verbs, one of them intransitive, the other two transitive, following each other properly according to the chronological order of the events. Hugo's statement gets an A plus in grammar, but in logic it gets an F for Failed. Havel has prepared the ground for the rest of the play. The combination of good grammar and suitable vocabulary irrespective of sense turns out to be the key to social success.

In the second act Hugo has gone out into the world to utilize his talents. Under pressure from his parents who are worried about his career, he attends a garden party at the Ministry of Liquidation in order to make useful connections. Beginning cautiously with the meaningless proverbs he had learned from his father (an example: 'lentils are lentils and rats are rats') he becomes increasingly sure of his linguistic powers. By keeping his eyes and ears open and committing to memory the impressive phrases of two secretaries, he soon commands a truly striking repertory of expressions that vary from hazy tautologies like 'lyrico-epical verses,' to false scientific language like 'the chemification of liquidation practice.'<sup>23</sup> Hugo scores his first socio-political victory by defeating a high official in a battle of rhetoric in which the

weapons are phrases – repeated, inverted, declined, distorted, yet unassailable in their ready-to-use compactness. At the end Hugo has landed a new job in the Ministry and we know that he is on the road to a brilliant career.

In the third act, which takes place in one of the offices of the Ministry of Inauguration, the linguistic deadlock between inauguration and liquidation is reduced ad absurdum in a series of official discussions, and the mechanistic logic of the author's dead-pan humour is bound to delight audiences East and West. Eastern European audiences, trained in the simplified logic of popularized synthetic dialectics, roll with laughter because they recognize how close such scenes are to their daily experience. Hugo Pludek has now succeeded in the system. High-handedly he bestows clichés of friendliness on the official whose favours he had courted in the previous act. At the end he is even honoured as having been the only one to prevent the terrible mistake of wanting to liquidate an institution that was in charge of liquidation.

The fourth act takes us back to the Pludeks' household where telegrams are delivered, congratulating Hugo in turn on having been appointed chief official of Liquidation, then of Inauguration, and finally heading the illustrious 'Central Commission for Inauguration and Liquidation.' Now Hugo's bureaucratic personality takes over completely. He is so depersonalized that he refers to himself in the third person singular – he has lost his 'I,' his self. Moulded by the system into a standardized form, he is also the co-creator of this form. The circle is closed: man invents a system that in turn shapes him. Toward the end of the play Havel – following Shaw's advice to tell the audience what you have done after you have done it illustrates his main point once more in concrete terms: Confused by the phrase-spouting official in whom he fails to recognize his son, Hugo's father asks him who he really is. Hugo responds with a long, extremely funny speech, explaining the difficulties, nay the impossibility of answering such a naïve inquiry: 'Me? You mean who am I? Now look here, I don't like this one-sided way of putting questions, I really don't! You think one can ask in this simplifying way? ... Truth is just as complicated and multiform as everything else in the world ... and we all are a little bit what we were yesterday and a little bit what we are today; and also a little bit we are not these things. Anyway, we are all a little bit all the time and all the time we are not a little bit ... some only are, some are only, and some are only not so that none of us entirely is and at the same time each one of us is not entirely.'<sup>24</sup> Although this can be taken as a parody of Engels' explanation of motion in terms of the dialectic law of contradiction, it is primarily an example of statements nullifying themselves, of circular logic run wild. What remains is not meaning but an exercise in grammatical construction. This is Havel's main concern: the power of language as a perpetuator of systems, a tool to influence man's mind and therefore one of the strongest (though secret) weapons of any system that wants to mould him to become a well-functioning

---

<sup>21</sup> Havel *The Garden Party* tr Vera Blackwell (London 1969) 21; original publication: *Vyrozumění in Protokoly*

<sup>22</sup> Ibid 16

<sup>23</sup> Ibid 19, 36

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid 73-4

part of a system rather than a free spirit – unpredictable, ernng, imaginative, mysterious in his tireless search for the truth.

*The Memorandum*,<sup>25</sup> although again highly amusing, is an even more relentless exploration of language as a tool of power. The subject is grimmer than that of *The Garden Party*, not only because the hero's absorption into the system is represented not as a career but as a matter of survival, but also because Havel has by now mastered the art of placing the action against a background of 'real' life in an office hardly distinguishable, as a Czech critic says, 'from the office where we were yesterday.'<sup>26</sup> The setting is deceptively naturalistic and only some time after the opening of the curtain does the audience begin to adjust to the fact that only the surface looks normal, everything else is absurd! Or does this realization itself make it realistic in the deeper sense of the word? It seems that this secret tie – almost complicity – between the absurd and real emerges in the works of many of the best modern writers. Jan Grossman calls it 'trying to render reality more concretely and more intensely.'<sup>27</sup>

In *The Memorandum* Havel has shifted the whole action into one of those huge bureaucratic establishments on the periphery of which part of the action of *The Garden Party* took place. It is a world where complex hierarchies wield power, where coffee-breaks and lunch-hours regulate the office work. The whole play is like an extended parody of Parkinson's Law (in itself an excellent description of an absurd situation): Work expands to fill the time available for its completion. In order to make procedures and official communications allegedly more precise (while actually complicating everything *ad infinitum*), a new synthetic language, called Ptydepe, has been invented. Ptydepe, regarded as a sacred text by those who have not learned it, and used with reverence by those who have, is regarded as the utopian solution to all problems because it 'guarantees ... [the] truly humanistic function'<sup>28</sup> of language. In reality, however, it becomes a symptom of the establishment itself – useless, existing for its own sake, proliferating fake values and hollow communication – a monstrous off spring of bureaucracy for its own sake.

*The Memorandum* consists of twelve scenes. The place of action is, in turn, the Director's Office, the Ptydepe Classroom, and the Secretariat of the Translation Centre. This pattern is repeated four times, thus indicating the mechanical nature of the events. Into this closed four-sided structure which seems like a square link in an endless chain, Havel builds his play. Director Josef Gross, an innocuous official who has been functioning for years in his assigned slot, has one morning a kafkaesque

---

<sup>25</sup> The Play won the 1968 *Village Voice* award for the best foreign play of the Off Broadway season.

<sup>26</sup> Machonin 'Vyrozumění' *Literární noviny* roč. 14 č. 40 2 Oct. 1965 5

<sup>27</sup> Jan Grossman's contribution to a discussion on theatre, 'Polishes Theater in Ost und West' *Theater* 1965 53

<sup>28</sup> *The Memorandum* 45

experience. He does not wake up as a giant beetle, as does one of Kafka's characters, but he suddenly feels himself similarly alienated from his habitual existence. On his desk he finds an official memorandum of the type he has found a thousand times before, but this time it is written in an incomprehensible language!

This is the kind of situation which the playwright himself has defined as absurd. 'The feeling of absurdity,' Havel writes in his essay 'The Anatomy of the Gag,' '*results from estrangement ...* [the person] no longer sees the appearances of the world in their traditional function ...' By means of examples that vary from Tolstoy to Chaplin the author explains that the first phase of a gag merely states the situation. It is the second phase that '*alienates the first phase* and reveals its absurdity, thus being the "subject" of alienation. It is the active force which brings absurdity into the gag; it turns into nonsense that which made sense before, it denies the given situation, reverses and negates it.' This is precisely what happens to the hero of Havel's play. To find a message on your desk is nothing strange, but not to be able to decipher it means that what had made sense before does so no longer. 'How is it,' argues Havel in his essay, 'that prior to the alienation the given reality did not seem absurd to us? For a simple reason: sense is outlived by the illusion of sense; the sense of the past emerges; what is at work here is persistence, automatism.'<sup>29</sup>

Recovering from the shock of finding himself in this absurd situation, Josef Gross is informed by his secretary that the memorandum is composed in the new official synthetic language Ptydepe which was introduced into the official procedures without Gross's knowledge. The absurd incident thus seems to have a rational explanation, but only for a non-thinking bureaucrat whose mechanical reaction to the new way of communication is simply that he shrugs his shoulders and gets down to his copy of *Ptydepe for Beginners*.

On another level, that of an outside observer – in this case the audience – the whole proposition reveals itself as absurd. It soon becomes clear that the new language is infinitely more cumbersome and complex than the old 'natural' language it is replacing. Gross, however, well-trained in the ways of bureaucracy, is on the inside of the situation. Unaware of its absurdity – his moment of alienation, his discovery of the memo, has gone by unused – he immediately gets busy and makes several unsuccessful attempts to have the memorandum translated. Now he finds himself in a truly absurd situation: he has become a stranger in his own office (where clerks break into Ptydepe conversations at the drop of a hat), just as Kafka's Gregor Samsa became a helpless, mute beetle in his own home. Ptydepe has taken over; an expert on Ptydepe usage, a Ptydomet, has been hired; Gross's deputy, Baláš, takes over the director's desk; in the Ptydepe-classes Gross cannot remember a single word while others rattle off vocabulary and get an A plus. Gradually Gross loses all official

---

<sup>29</sup> Havel 'Anatomicu gagu' *Protokoly* pp. 126, 127, 129. (Havel has found a fortuitous way of rendering the Brechtian expression 'Verfremdung,' 'Ozvláštňení' carries the implication of both 'alien, distant' and 'strange.' The English 'estrangement' is no happier a translation than the French 'distantiation'.)

power and Baláš and his followers threaten to reveal some minor instances of his having side-stepped bureaucratic procedures. In this way Gross moves from one demotion to another.

By the half-way mark of the play the hero's fortunes have reached their lowest point. In the second half we are shown his gradual recovery and renewed rise to the position of director. Just as his downfall had been paralleled by the relentless rise of Ptydepe, his ascent now takes place against the background of Ptydepe's dwindling fortunes. As things get more hectic and the opportunists try to switch sides again, Gross finally finds out the content of the fateful memorandum. The person who translates it for him is the secretary Marie, the only person in the establishment who seems to have preserved some non-mechanized human qualities like sympathy and kindness. What Gross finds out sounds like a parody on the Gatekeeper's message in Kafka's *The Trial*<sup>30</sup> – it renders all preceding efforts of the receiver of the message totally futile. The memorandum informs Gross that he has been exonerated from his minor failings and praises his steadfast opposition to the 'confused, unrealistic and antihuman'<sup>31</sup> elements of Ptydepe, recommending at the same time that he be ruthless in purging his office of any further subversive activities of this sort.

Now Gross is given the opportunity he had yearned for when his fortunes were low: to be able to start all over again and do things differently. But in the last moment Havel crushes our hopes. The symmetry of the play suddenly reveals itself not as reflecting the rise of goodness and fall of evil, as it had seemed to, but rather as a constant, rigidly mechanized process. The theme of mechanical adjustment which was treated with bright exuberance in *The Garden Party* is struck here on a more sinister level. Against his better convictions and allegedly humanistic ideals, Gross succumbs in turn to the absurd order of the Ptydepe movement, to the empty slogans, promises, and flattery of the opportunists, and finally to the new but equally absurd order of a new synthetic language, Chorukor, introduced at the end of the play.

Havel has made his point. Gross becomes a tool in the hands of those who keep functioning unperturbed in the name of new slogans. Like Brecht's Mother Courage they do not care under whose flag they do business, so long as the business flourishes. The spark of Gross' insight into the absurd nature of his mechanized existence that might have flared up when he discovered the incomprehensible message has been extinguished for good. His final phrase-ridden speech to Marie, who is fired as a consequence of her act of loyalty in translating the memorandum, shows that he will never be capable of experiencing that revealing moment of alienation which, Havel tells us, makes a man recognize the absurdity of his being tied to a mechanized process. Gross has become part of the process.

In his next play, *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, Havel again manages to amuse us while he unfolds before our eyes one of the grave problems of our century. The cooler critical reception abroad is likely due to Havel's rather misleading 'image' as critic of social circumstances in Czechoslovakia. Faced with this new play in which the playwright takes on contemporary society in general, Western criticism until quite recently has tiptoed cautiously around the play, without a sign of having recognized its genius.<sup>32</sup> In *Increased Difficulty of Concentration* Havel reduces his setting even further and focuses on a small unit in society, a simple household. This, as we know, has been done by Ionesco, Pinter, Albee, Genet, and others. But Havel goes about it in a new way and the result is not only highly entertaining but also very disturbing. One Czech critic, realizing the universal nature of the play more clearly than Western critics, warned that it should not be regarded as merely a further comment on local social problems but that it reflected 'the problems of modern technical civilization.'<sup>33</sup> Here Havel has shown more than ever that he is a writer of world stature.

The hero is, as defined in the play itself, 'a condensed model of human individuality.'<sup>34</sup> Anyone who opens a book on behaviouralistic psychology becomes aware of the numerous variations of such terminology, used in all seriousness and with the disarming conviction of 'scientific' accuracy.

Now let us see what Havel does with this theme. The action takes place in the house of Eduard Huml, a scholarly writer working for the humanist section of the National Research Council. Huml is in the process of composing a radio talk for the 'Third Programme' of the BBC, which he keeps dictating throughout the play to his young secretary who comes to the house.<sup>35</sup> The rest of the time this 'condensed model of human individuality' is occupied in trying to keep some kind of balance between the demands of Vlasta, his wife, and his lady friend, Renata, who keeps coming for lunch and other less innocuous activities, romping about in Mrs Huml's dressing-gown while the latter is busy at her job as manageress of a toy shop. Each

---

<sup>32</sup> An American publication, for example, regards the broader vision of the play as reducing rather than increasing its appeal: 'The satire is less sharp, for its only object is the absurdity of scientific attempts to analyze man in the name of humanistic goals'; Jarka M. Burian, 'Postwar Drama in Czechoslovakia' *Educational Theatre Journal* 25 (1973) 311. A German critic, commenting on the poor quality of the Berlin production of the play, reveals his own lack of understanding by arguing approximately as follows: Since German producers, unlike Czech ones, need not camouflage their sociological opinions, this Czech 'revival of absurd theatre' inspires them less for its concealed political implications than for its comical scenes that can be played straightforwardly for good laughs; Peter Iden 'Spiele mit det Zeit oder: Schwierigkeiten mit der Verständigung' *Theater heute* 10 Jg. Nr. I (Jan. 1969) 42-3. However, in his recent article on Tom Stoppard, Kenneth Tynan has drawn attention to the importance of Havel's play (cf ch. 2 note 6).

<sup>33</sup> Hořínek 'Člověk systematizovaný' 7

<sup>34</sup> *Concentration* 60

<sup>35</sup> It is this particular aspect of the play which anticipated Tom Stoppard's Professor Moore in *Jumpers* by four years.

---

<sup>30</sup> Kafka *Der Prozess* (Frankfurt/Main 1946) 255-7

<sup>31</sup> *The Memorandum* 88

woman feels that Huml ought to be hers alone, each plies him with demands to free himself from the other. Vlasta wants him to break off his relationship with Renata, while Renata wants him to get a divorce and marry her.

Huml is obviously unable to do either and lives an exhausting, tenuous existence under mounting pressure from both ladies. This pressure, however, is constantly interrupted – hence eased – by the various demands of daily life: helping Vlasta to get ready for work, warming up lunch in the kitchen, putting on the coffee-pot, having to dress and undress, bringing coats or hanging them up, and so forth. Convenient interruptions of embarrassing questions, these daily chores become a sort of haven for Huml, to which he turns like a predictable mechanism when things get too uncomfortable. As the play proceeds, the pressure of the ladies' demands is lessened by another pressure, mounting imperceptibly before the audience's eyes and revealing itself as much more dangerous and destructive: the pressure of repetition. Here Havel is master of his trade. He succeeds in creating a kind of tightening-grip effect that shows the impossibility of Huml's ever escaping the treadmill of his existence. The women echo each other more and more in their demands and reactions. As they begin to sound the same, Huml reacts to both with exactly the same answers. The effect is strong. As amusement changes to dismay, the audience witnesses how characters become interchangeable, how a basic human situation becomes mechanized and duplicated.

In addition to these interlocked vicious circles there are two other areas in Huml's life which at first seem to provide him with the possibility of breaking out of his rut but, as the play proceeds, turn out to be variations on the same theme. There is first of all Huml's *magnum opus*, a treatise on man's happiness. Will he sublimate his practical frustrations with his theoretical speculations? Not very likely. When he gives us a sample of his philosophizing, we soon discover that his arguments have the same shape as his actions. They are like snakes biting their own tails. Huml's definition of value, for example, which begins with the pseudo-analytical statement: 'By a value we mean that which satisfies some human need – semicolon,' continues with the most banal truism: 'We distinguish material values ... from spiritual values ... full stop. Various people have at various times and in various circumstances various needs.'<sup>36</sup> The second reason for the failure of Huml's work to keep him 'human' is that his dictation sessions are counterpointed not only by coffee-breaks but also by his attempts to make love to his secretary. She, in turn, controls her properly righteous indignation, and has such experience in regaining her secretarial calm that this situation, too, has the desperate air of perpetuation about it. So much for Huml's professional career.

What remains is to consider him as a member of society. In this respect Havel, laughing grimly, shows us his hero only in the robot-like proportions of socio-behaviouralistic research. While harassed by all the other complications, Huml finds

that he has been selected as a random sample of behaviour patterns, to be tested by a research team which promptly arrives at his house with a computer called endearingly PUZUK. The machine, though cared for and pampered like a moody child (it is in turn warmed and cooled, cleaned, and allowed to take a rest), is obviously totally useless. As PUZUK becomes more and more humanized in its sensitivity and unpredictability, Huml gets impatient, which in turn upsets Dr Balcárková, a member of the research team. As Huml pats her back to calm her down, he suddenly finds himself involved in a passionate embrace, and the next thing he knows is that she has established herself as a new woman in his life by the disastrous question: 'May I ring you tomorrow? Will you have some time for me?''<sup>37</sup> The play ends as it began, with Mrs Huml bringing in supper on a tray and asking the by now time-honoured question: 'Well then?' – meaning 'Did you get rid of her yet?'

The particular originality of the play lies in the playwright's having shuffled the events in Huml's life, like a pack of playing cards and interchanged their chronological order. In a comment for the director of the play Havel says that the play is not 'a jumbled up representation of a logical event, on the contrary, rather the logical event is ... merely a jumbled up, and therefore distorting representation of the play as such.'<sup>38</sup> The result is surprising. It appears clearly that the logical sequence does not matter at all. To show the workings of causality becomes superfluous because the entire web of situations – private, scientific-professional, meditative – is based on stereotypes. Again, as in Havel's earlier plays, language reveals its mechanizing power with frightening obviousness. Each thought and each emotion that is expressed is dictated by stereotyped language. The hollow ring of duplicated words pervades the whole play.

It is in this play that Havel has mastered the task of revealing language as a killer of intellect and feeling. Man is no longer the victim of the system as shown implicitly in *The Garden Party* and explicitly in *The Memorandum*. Rather man perpetuates the system by modelling his own life on it, and he depends on it as his stronghold. At first he fails to recognize that it is also his prison and tries to escape from this anonymous monster that schematizes his daily life and mechanizes his emotions. But the way he goes about escaping shows that the harm has been done: Huml wants to escape not by breaking but by doubling the system, and he thus creates a new mechanism which, far from destroying the old one, neatly fits into the spinning cogs. By necessity Huml himself becomes doubly mechanical and begins to repeat his own responses with machine-like exactitude. The events on stage appear as in a broken and endlessly repeated mirror-reflection and as the play proceeds, we feel an increasing certainty about being able to predict with machine-like precision the actions and reactions of the individual characters.

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid 74

<sup>38</sup> Havel 'Nachbemerkung' to *Erschwerte Möglichkeit der Konzentration* tr Franz Peter Künzel *Theater heute* 10. Jg. Nr. I (Jan. 1969) 56



Imperceptibly the playwright makes us adopt the position of PUZUK, the computer, which registers a sample of individual behaviour. And as the machine seems to become more and more humanized, unsure of itself, unpredictable, and finally having something like a nervous breakdown, the audience becomes more and more certain of the predictability of events. The 'representative sample of individual behaviour patterns' has turned out to be such a stereotype that it can be registered by a stereotyped reaction. Havel has achieved a surprising tour de force. By making the audience adopt an almost automatic reaction to the characters on stage, he has shown that the tendency to mechanize the process of living resides secretly within the individual character and is therefore both more intangible and more dangerous than we take it to be.

If *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* explores man's notorious tendency to mechanize his life and thus reduce it to the primitive level of adapting to and functioning in a certain environment, Havel's next play, *The Conspirators*, is a test of what happens when this idea is applied to a political situation. *The Conspirators*, finished in 1970, is a merry-go-round of political power. The play is constructed with mathematical precision. In fifteen scenes which follow one another like hammer blows, the struggle for political power unfolds with the inevitability of a mechanism set in motion. What sets it in motion is man's greed for power which, when rigidified and mechanized by a social system, becomes a sine qua non of his life. He tries to attain it by any means and his claims about high ideals – the common good, the nation's welfare, freedom from oppression – are merely cover-ups for his ruthless struggle to get where he wants to be. All in all this is not a highly original theme: from *Macbeth* to Büchner's *Danton's Death* and Brecht's *The Rise of Arturo Ui* man's craving for political power has proved to be among playwrights' main sources of inspiration.

However, Havel's signature on the play is unmistakable. Reduced to the bare essentials, the struggle for power of four 'public figures' (the chief prosecutor and the heads of the police, the military, and culture) is stylized into a grotesque circular dance of greed and deceit in which moves are as predictable as the periodical return of, say, the fiery white horse or the leaping lion on a moving merry-go-round. The central mechanism (provided in this case by the system) has taken over and the characters seized by its rhythm not only succumb to it but, as it were, propel its motion into greater smoothness by their own weight (the make-up of their characters – in turn formed by the system).

By saying that *The Conspirators* is about the struggle for power, we have indicated the inner meaning of the play. On the surface – as far as the characters themselves are concerned – it is a play about revolution. Again, as in Havel's other plays, it is revolution studied in a test tube. Not for one instant does the action even remotely approach a concrete problem. It remains suspended in the thin air of theoretical abstractions, and in the lengthy discussions 'freedom' and 'political oppression,' 'democracy' and the 'evils of anarchy,' 'unifying action' and 'reactionary groups' remain linguistic labels which have never been exposed to a real situation. The

revolution never gets beyond the language lab. Havel's pen is getting sharper, his wit is getting more sinister. The mood of *The Conspirators* is dark indeed.

The theme of revolution is developed in several very intricate ways. At the risk of oversimplification I might suggest three ways. First of all, there is the official Revolution. It is in the title, after all, and the audience is not permitted to forget it for long. People greet each other with 'Long live the Revolution!' and there are numerous references to the great revolutionary victory which was achieved when the nation was freed from the bloody dictatorship of Olah whose past regime of terror is amply referred to in 'official' discussions. So much for the 'official' Revolution.

But there are two other forms of revolution in the play – unofficial, but much more significant than the well-advertised, institutionalized national Revolution of the past. In the first and the last scenes – the only ones that take place in a private house and not in offices – we are permitted to glance beyond the isolated world of political bureaucracy. What we learn in the first scene is coloured by hope. In the town, students demonstrate, demanding the release of an allegedly subversive political prisoner, whose harmless character (he reads philosophy, and lives a quiet life with his cat) is illustrated at various points during the play. The 'revolutionary' spirit of the demonstration grows out of a belief in justice and the dignity of the individual.

But when we are given our second glance at the outside world in the last scene, we rapidly lose what we gained in the beginning, the reassuring sense of the people's search for truth which seemed to reassert itself under any conditions. In the last moments of the play we hear that Concord Square has now become the scene for an agitated mob clamouring for the return of dictator Olah and setting up gallows for the present government. The fact that the newly formed Revolutionary Committee (consisting of our friends, the chiefs of the temporal authorities) is a step ahead of the population – they have already decided to appoint Olah their leader – does not lighten the grim picture we get of the will of the people.

At a third level of the play revolution is synonymous with greed for power. This version of revolution fills the action of the play. The struggle concerns the position of the leader of the new Revolutionary Committee and takes place primarily between Chief Prosecutor Dykl and Chief of Police Moher. Each proclaims himself in turn the new leader, as he convinces other possible contestants of his opponent's unsuitability for the job. In the course of a series of (very amusing) discussions in which everyone argues a point in order to achieve an aim that has nothing whatsoever to do with that point, the desired job swings back and forth like a pendulum at regular intervals (Dykl seems to have gained it in scenes iv and ix, Moher in scenes VIII and XII). In the meantime the job is offered as a decoy to the other two contestants in the game, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces (a sports-minded simpleton whose muscles are no real competition for his intellect – he has to take a quick swim in order to perform in the bedroom), and the Chief Censor (a voracious, vulgar nin-compoop who starts to think only when he can denounce someone).

There is a woman in the game too, the widow Helga, well known to all in every sense of the word. Clearly favouring the man with the job, she manipulates and changes her position with great agility according to who has the most chance of becoming the boss. In the course of the play she ushers the Commander-in-Chief into her bedroom, establishes herself in the Chief Prosecutor's opinion as 'the only person who really understands me!<sup>39</sup> and romps about the stage in an orgiastic flagellation-game with the Chief of Police.

We may remember that in Arthur Schnitzler's at first notorious, later famous play, *Der Reigen*, the game of sexual greed is presented as a closed circle. One partner keeps changing until the last partner couples with the first and the dance of desire can start all over again. Havel's dance of power also has a circular structure, inevitably and yet imperceptibly moving back to the beginning. The image of the exiled dictator Olah undergoes a gradual and disturbing change. In the first half of the play Olah and the 'ism' he stands for is a synonym for everything that is antisocial and destructive. As the play continues, however, Olah is mentioned less and less frequently. Since by now we know that in Havel's world things are the more important the less frequently they are mentioned, we develop an increasing sense of the return of terror, the reappearance of Olah. At the beginning of the play he had been thought safely dead; toward the end he is reported to have made an appearance in Monte Carlo.

In the last scene, when all the power seekers are assembled at Helga's house (as they were in the first scene), by now aware of the fact that no one will let anyone else assume power, the Chief of Police launches into a speech of circular logic which inevitably closes the vicious circle: 'my friends, let us finally stop beating about the bush! After all, we all know that one man exists who is able to establish order here, to return the nation to the path of disciplined work for its native country and thus secure true freedom and a truly democratic future! ... is it his fault that he governed just at a time which made it impossible for him to complete the task for which he is naturally predetermined? ... Seriously, my friends: if we do not want the leadership qualities of this man to be misused to the detriment of the people, why could we not at the same time use them for the benefit of the people? ...'<sup>40</sup> The silence of his listeners is interrupted by the maid who announces a telephone call from Monte Carlo. As the curtain falls, Moher walks resolutely to the telephone to invite tyranny to assume the leadership of the New Revolution.

The bleakness of Havel's vision is hardly tempered by the sympathetic figure of Alfred Stein, the political prisoner and adjustable scapegoat, who in the course of the

---

<sup>39</sup> Unlike the other quotations from *The Conspirators*, this quotation refers to the German translation of an amended version of the play, *Die Retter* tr Franz Peter Künzel (Reinbek 1972) 95. Because of the great difficulty in communicating with these writers in Czechoslovakia, Sixty Eight Publishers in Toronto, who produced the attractive volume of *Hry*, included an earlier version of *The Conspirators* in which the above quotation reads: 'You are the only one who is able to breathe life into me' (60).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid 101

play is tortured and brainwashed into making two diametrically opposed admissions of guilt. Moments before the fateful telephone call from Monte Carlo, the message is brought that Stein has hanged himself in his prison cell. The one character who had made some attempt to distinguish between a lie and the truth prefers to be absent, and the dance of power continues uninterrupted by anyone handicapped with a sense of ethics.

In a revealing comment on his 'forbidden' works, Havel tells us that *The Conspirators*, his first play written after he had been severed from any contact with the stage, suffered from having been conceived during a period of bitter struggle against a feeling of 'lack of air and senselessness.' He feels the play is 'lifeless, over-organized, bloodless, lacking humour as well as mystery ... a cake which has been left in the oven too long and is completely dried out.'<sup>41</sup> This stern judgment, though not really doing justice to the challenging play, is interesting because Havel thinks he wrote it in too abstract and too consciously 'universal' a manner, rather than writing it in the way he felt he should, namely 'as if my plays could be performed even here, and to address my concrete countrymen in their concrete world.'<sup>42</sup> Once this realization had become clear to him he seemed to be able to overcome the critical hiatus. In his next plays he does just that.

One of the paradoxes of Havel's career as a dramatist is that his next play, *The Beggar's Opera*, was actually written in response to a demand. Some time earlier, during a period when it still seemed remotely possible that such a play could be performed on an official Czech stage, one of the Prague theatres asked Havel to write a new version of Gay's classic. Havel tells us that he wrote the play with joy and ease – a considerable difference from his labours over *The Conspirators*. Some hope of seeing the play actually staged, coupled with admiration and love for Gay's original work, made it a pleasure for Havel to work with the text, and the final result was 'a play that is alive.'<sup>43</sup> It is interesting that *The Beggar's Opera* has not been very successful abroad.<sup>44</sup> Havel himself ascribes this regrettable fact to the Western cult of Brecht and the subsequent reluctance of Western theatres to stage a play based on a theme 'that had been touched by the great B.B.'<sup>45</sup> Whether this assessment is valid or not is a moot point. At any rate the response is regrettable because Havel's play is an important and thoroughly delightful work. Moreover, Brecht's play is doubtless a product of the 1920s and it is largely the lasting impact of Weill's magnificent music that keeps it as fresh as it is today. Havel's work is a play for the last quarter of the twentieth century. It is bound to be recognized as such sooner or later.

Let me recapitulate very briefly the content of Gay's play: Macheath, a gallant highwayman, has secretly married Polly, shopkeeper Peachum's daughter. Peachum,

---

<sup>41</sup> Havel 'Dovětek autora' 307

<sup>42</sup> Ibid 308

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> To date it has been staged in Italy, Germany, and Canada.

<sup>45</sup> Havel 'Dovětek autora' 308

backed by his wife, opposes the relationship. He finds Polly useful in his shop and wants to keep her there; moreover he dislikes and fears Macheath as a formidable business competitor. Peachum denounces Macheath to the police. Macheath goes to prison but is freed by Lucy, the daughter of the chief of the prison. Not being able to stay away from the brothel where he is a favourite customer, Macheath is arrested again and saved from the gallows only by the intervention of the Player who claims that 'an Opera must end happily' and 'comply with the taste of the town.'<sup>46</sup> Instead of being hanged, Macheath whirls off with Polly and the others in a merry dance. And so *The Beggar's Opera* ends with a jolly tune, instead of representing 'a most excellent Moral,' namely 'that the lower Sort of People have their Vices in a degree as well as the Rich: And that they are punished for them.'<sup>47</sup>

One might speculate why Havel was attracted to this play. After all, this is his first variation on his earlier theme. So far as his political surrounding is concerned, the source of inspiration could not have been more 'legitimate.' After all, the main themes of Gay's play – exploitation, the vices of the upper classes, the power of money that can buy anything, including justice – are a perfect way around censorship because they sound like the recipe for Socialist Realist works. On the surface, therefore, Havel conforms to the demands of the political climate by taking up this early 'revolutionary' work and rewriting it for the present. After all, Bertolt Brecht, whose credentials as a Communist playwright were (at least in theory) not to be doubted, had taken up the same play and sharpened its message by revealing the hypocrisy of Christian ethics, by pointing to greed and ruthlessness as the pillars of the bourgeois value scale, by providing a miniature vision of revolutionary hope, romanticized and therefore powerfully appealing, in the song about the dishwasher-girl Jenny who administers justice and ushers in a new order.

Brecht had opposed the gallant back alley crookery of Macheath with the hypocritical business crookery of Peachum. Havel too makes this parallelism the basic premise of his play, but in a different sense. Both Peachum and Macheath are chiefs of criminal organizations which are in competition with each other and ultimately hope to ruin and absorb each other. Polly, Peachum's daughter, has been asked by her father to use her female charms in order to get Macheath to reveal to her the secrets of his organization. She is successful with the charms (which is not difficult with ladies' man Mackie) but soon finds herself saddled with a similar request from Macheath with regard to her father's organization. Faced with the dilemma of having to betray either her father or her husband, Polly gets into increasing difficulties until the author mercifully removes her from the action.

In *The Conspirators* we witnessed the tricks of the power game and recognized them as such. In *The Beggar's Opera* we no longer know when anyone is pretending and when he is not. As in a Pirandello play, the role and the player seem to fall apart and

---

<sup>46</sup> John Gay *The Beggar's Opera and Polly* from the original editions of 1728 and 1729 (London 1923) 82

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid* 83

come together again as motives become transparent and mystifying in turn. And it is this tantalizing uncertainty that crystallizes the main theme of Havel's play: betrayal. It recurs in many guises and versions throughout the action, with each character in the role of deceiver and deceived. Peachum, for example, the boss of a criminal's organization, wants his daughter Polly to deceive Macheath whom she married, allegedly secretly but basically with the consent of her father who is trying to find out the dealings of Macheath's organization in order to be able 'finally to liquidate his organization, confiscate its property ... and discover at the same time sufficient evidence of his activities so that he could denounce him and achieve his deportation for life.'<sup>48</sup> Peachum, however, also works for the police for whom he acts as a sort of intelligence agent whose duty it is to gain and keep the trust of the underworld, so that he can act as a valuable informant. Peachum is therefore both a private businessman in crime as well as a government employee concerned with surveillance over and, we presume – incorrectly, as we find out later – the ultimate extinction of criminal activities.

As the play proceeds and new layers of Peachum's activities are discovered, the audience ends up totally confused as to the capacity in which Peachum is acting at the moment: whether he is pretending to be a police-spy in order to have a good camouflage for his criminal activities, or whether he is holding on to his position as the boss of his criminal organization only for the sake of being able to inform the police. At the end the impasse between guarding the law and breaking it is perfect. We can no longer tell which is which. We fail to distinguish the pretense of crime in order to preserve the law from the pretense of legality in order to preserve crime.

As usual, the last ten minutes of Havel's play have yet another shock in store for us. Lockit, the chief of police, having talked Macheath into collaborating with him, settles down to a pleasant dinner at home during which he casually reveals that he, too, is the leader of another, larger criminal organization which now has 'the whole underworld at its command.' Moreover, as his wife comments when she passes him the soup, 'No one knows about our organization and everyone serves it!'<sup>49</sup>

The deceit and betrayal theme is concentrated in the figure of Jenny, the only woman worthy of Macheath's attentions. Jenny betrays Macheath three times to the police, an archetypal pattern of betrayal. Macheath, who sees through the machinations of everyone else, falls for her false explanations every time. So does the audience.

The first time Jenny wins Macheath's trust by means of the romantic tale about the abandoned maiden: when she first meets Macheath she tells him he seduced and abandoned her five years before (Mackie's memory, overcrowded with such incidents, cannot check the accuracy of the story), and she claims to have been pining away ever since, untouched by men, faithful to his memory. As Macheath melts and they fall into each other's arms, she calls for the police and charges him with attempted rape.

---

<sup>48</sup> *Žebrácká opera* in *Hry* 1970-1976 121

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid* 184

The second time (Macheath, as we know, usually gets out of prison as quickly as he gets into it) she wins his trust by claiming to have been forced to betray him by the political system. 'They promised me,' she tells a sullen, suspicious Macheath, 'that if I did it, my father would be pardoned. You see, he has been sentenced to death—'<sup>50</sup> Unrequited love had moved the romantic criminal; now political oppression moves the man who believes in individualism. In the brothel Macheath waits a second time for Jenny's embrace but she sends the police instead of coming herself.

Jenny's third betrayal occurs near the end of the play. She visits Macheath in prison and gradually convinces him to trust her once again, by presenting him with a brilliant argument couched in pseudo-dialectics and logical fallacies. The gist of her argument is that her love for Macheath has caused a split in her personality, so that she no longer is identical with herself, which in turn means that she has ceased to exist as an individual. In other words, she had to betray him to preserve herself – she acted in self defense. As Macheath once again passionately declares his love for her, she wistfully remarks that he loves her only for her betrayals. Macheath decides to turn down the tempting offers made to him by the various criminal organizations and flee with Jenny to build a new and better life 'where no-one will find us,' but moments later he finds out that the chief of police has been informed about these intentions – that Jenny has betrayed him for the third time. It is now that Macheath capitulates and gives in to the ways of the world.

We see that Havel has kept John Gay's main themes – dog eats dog, life is more often a dirty game than not, deceit manipulates people under the guise of friendship. But he changes the thrust of the play in a significant way. Gay's Macheath has been granted grace as a literary character whose sins and crimes were merely meant for entertainment. The puritan solemnity with which Gay's play was condemned as glorifying vice,<sup>51</sup> totally missed this point.

Havel's play could also in a sense be interpreted as glorifying vice, but it is a very different form of vice from that which caused dignified eighteenth-century citizens to attack John Gay's operatic burlesque. Gay's Macheath is a character who escapes punishment for having indulged too deeply in the ways of the world. Havel's Macheath undergoes an initiation into the ways of the world. At the end he makes the decision which Alfred Stein of *The Conspirators* could not make: to play the game and stay alive. Like Wedekind's Marquis von Keith who throws away the revolver and grabs the bank note before pronouncing his credo, 'life is a roller coaster,' Havel's Macheath decides not to 'refuse the rules of the game which this world offers to a man,' shelves his ideas of honour and heroism, and joins in the game.

A word should be said concerning the première of *The Beggar's Opera* the only one of Havel's plays written after 1968 that was actually, though only once, performed in Czechoslovakia. Like its predecessors, Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, that enfant terrible of

eighteenth-century propriety, and Brecht's equally 'scandalous' *Dreigroschenoper* two hundred years later, Havel's play had an extraordinary first night performance. But it was of a different kind than Gay's tempestuous première which ushered in an unprecedented long run in January 1728, and Brecht's equally exciting first night after which a sort of 'Threepenny Opera fever'<sup>52</sup> swept Berlin in 1928.

The première of the third version of this mysteriously timeless play had very different repercussions. It took place in the small Bohemian village of Horní Počernice on November 1, 1975 – indeed an extraordinary first night performance for a play by an author of world reputation. The play was produced by a group of amateurs and ran for one single night. The audience was composed of local citizens but also included a large number of intellectuals from near-by Prague who were closely watched by the secret police. Most of those who had come to see the production were then interrogated and some lost their jobs as a result. For Havel himself, however, it meant that after many years he again experienced theatre in that deepest and best sense: 'that electrifying area of joy, truth, freedom and collective understanding.' For the author it became the première 'which I value more than any other I have ever had.'<sup>53</sup>

Although completed only in spring 1976, most of *The Mountain Resort* was written before the two short plays *Vernissage* and *Audience*. This is important because in this play the author tried to summarize his former dramatic production. *The Mountain Resort* is meant to be, he informs us, 'a peculiar scenic poem "about nothing," a play which ... becomes its own single theme, therefore being able to tell about the world only that which such a play, "a play about itself," would be able to say.'<sup>54</sup>

This somewhat abstract statement could be interpreted in two ways. First, it represents – whether Havel himself realizes it or not – an aspect of that general malaise now affecting the dramatic genre much more than the novel. The novel has been pronounced dead by various academic voices but (particularly among Czech writers) is alive and perhaps healthier than ever.<sup>55</sup> The dramatic genre, having born the brunt of various artistic Weltanschauungen for a long time, finds itself suddenly bloodless and despite such writers as Dürrenmatt and Stoppard – short of breath. As a result it has become self conscious and self analytical. Havel's amazingly fine ear for the general heartbeat of the modern world seems to have caused him to share this self-analytical tendency in his own way.

---

<sup>52</sup> C.F. Burgess ed. *The Letters of John Gay* (Oxford 1966) 72; Lotte Lenya-Weill 'Threepenny Opera' *Brecht as They Knew Him* (Berlin 1974) 62

<sup>53</sup> Havel 'Dovětek autora' 309

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>55</sup> The internationally acclaimed Czech novelist Milan Kundera commented humorously on what he calls everyone's urge to write the 'obituary of the novel ... though this is possibly the least dead of all art forms'; 'Comedy is everywhere' *Index on Censorship* 6 no. 6 (Nov./Dec. 1977) 6.

---

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid* 149

<sup>51</sup> See William Eben Schultz *Gay's Beggar's Opera, its Content, History and Influence* (New Haven 1923) ch. 21.

Second, of course, the play is a logical outcome of the author's earlier work. Throughout his earlier plays Havel had explored the impact of mechanization on thought and behaviour. In *The Mountain Resort* he takes this approach to its 'absurd' conclusion by allowing it to take over the entire action. It is as if he had fed a number of attitudes, actions, gestures, and dialogues into a computer and let the computer rearrange them until they represent an organized, geometrical structure. The result is a seemingly well-constructed five-act play, in which, however, phrases, movements, and gestures have become autonomous, and the characters entirely interchangeable.

The action takes place on the terrace of a mountain resort; the characters are a group of holiday-makers. They include, for example, a writer, a count, a middle-class couple with a tea thermos, the director of the hotel, a beautiful young woman, another somewhat older woman who switches easily from knitting to mechanically portioned-out passion in her hotel room, and a maid serving fruit juices at equally well-spaced intervals. But apart from punctually reappearing comments, objects, or gestures, like filling the tea thermos and leaving for love-making, distribution of fruit juices and reminiscing about glorious days in Paris, there is nothing constant in the play. The characters speak each other's words, remember each other's pasts, go through each other's movements. To put it in another way, the gesture or word is there, but the character who carries it out or speaks it changes from act to act; the memory of Paris is there but in each act someone else remembers and someone else forgets. Havel tried to make these occurrences the subject matter of the play, in order to find out 'to what extent they are capable – all on their own – to create meaning.' The themes of the disintegration of human identity and existential schizophrenia which Havel has repeatedly called his main concerns, are obviously apparent again insofar as they can be expressed solely by these 'automatized occurrences.'<sup>56</sup>

Although the play depends on the visual impact of the repeated, as if scenario-controlled, gestures and movements, it remains to be seen whether it will ever be made into a successful stage production. However, the author claims to have written it for himself rather than for an audience. As a laboratory piece, a sort of test for summarized literary techniques, the text might have considerable possibilities if it were used as a film scenario where the camera could act as a sort of central consciousness, observing and analyzing the fragments of human identity.

The two one-act plays *Vernissage* and *Audience* (see chapter 9 for a discussion of the latter), both with strong autobiographical components, were rapidly written, and meant basically for the entertainment of friends. The author never thought that they could be of interest to anyone abroad. Paradoxically, they have become more successful abroad than any of Havel's other works written since 1968. Starting with the Vienna Burgtheater in 1976, they have had a considerable career on stage, radio, and television, from London to Israel to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

---

<sup>56</sup> Havel 'Dovĕtek autora' 309

Havel felt a little embarrassed when foreign critics talked about his having found himself again, and called the plays examples of contemporary 'model-drama.' However, the success of the plays re-emphasized to him what he had known since he started writing: that he must 'write for someone,' for a definite spectator, and this conviction may well decide the basic direction of his work in the future.

*Vernissage* is a play about a couple who have invited an old friend to see their new apartment. When the curtain rises, the visitor, Bedřich, is standing at the door with a bouquet of flowers behind his back while the host and hostess, Michal and Věra, are ushering him in and offering him a drink. When the curtain goes down, an hour or so later, Bedřich, who has been trying to leave for some time, has been made to sit down again, a new record has been put on, another whisky is about to be poured and the whole thing can begin all over again. By now the circular structure has become Havel's artistic trademark. As in the companion piece to *Vernissage*, *Audience*, the end of the play is at the same time a new beginning, the action is reduced to a link in a chain, and the merry-go-round character of the situation is brought relentlessly home to us.

Our yearning for some kind of crisis, some intimation of catharsis, has probably grown in intensity during the action, but we are denied any such resolution. We leave the theatre with the feeling that what we have seen happening goes on ad infinitum. We escape while Bedřich, the poor guest, must stay on. Or need we not be sorry for him? After all, he is treated royally to music, exotic dishes, and the best whisky; he is confided in, and shown that he is important; he is given good advice on how better to manage his affairs, how to help his wife come out of her depression, and so on.

They are his friends, after all, and mean so very well! They show him all their wonderful new furniture, their objet d'art (which Michal brought from abroad), they tell him about their lovely little son who teaches them to live more profoundly; they reveal to him that Michal is an ideal father and Věra is not only an imaginative gourmet cook but also – if he cared he could watch later on – an incredibly passionate and resourceful lover; they demonstrate their new almond peeler (also from Switzerland, naturally) and venture the opinion – gently and benevolently, of course – that Bedřich had simply somehow opted out: that he had passively resigned, because 'you are disgusted by having to strive, to struggle, to cope with difficulties.'<sup>57</sup> He should, they both feel, finally come to terms with himself, settle things at home with his wife, start a family, fix up his apartment, economize his time, start going to the sauna, live a bit more decently, healthily, rationally, and so on.

Throughout the conversation Bedřich repeatedly tries to make the point that he likes his wife's cooking and that they actually like each other, that he does not quite see the reason for having a confessional as an objet d'art in one's living-room, that he basically lacks the feeling that he is living a rotten life. But he hardly gets a word in edgewise. When, however, he tries to leave, he is called 'a disgusting, unfeeling,

---

<sup>57</sup> *Vernissage* 292

inhuman egoist! An ungrateful character! An ignoramus! A traitor!' When Věra throws Bedřich's flowers on the floor and bursts into hysterical tears, her husband turns to the guest with gentle reproach: 'See what you've done? Aren't you ashamed of yourself?' Bedřich hesitantly puts the bouquet back into the vase and sits down again. Immediately the two hosts are entirely normal, smile and suggest they might play a little music for dear Bedřich. As Michal eagerly puts on the record player, loud music fills the theatre from all outlets; perhaps some international 'hit' song, the author suggests, like Karel Gott's 'Sugar Baby Love.' The music continues full volume 'until the last member of the audience has left the theatre.'<sup>58</sup>

Havel has revealed to us this realization: the closer his writing reflects a situation he knows personally, the better he writes and the broader his appeal will be. *Vermisage* is a parable on the hollowness of a successful life. All the clichés of 'Happiness' which have moulded the imagination of the average man from Prague to New York, from Sydney to Stockholm, are juggled throughout the play, and produce a terrible, hollow sound. It is a happiness which depends on an audience, for it is meaningless in itself; with an audience it loses its reason for being. It is remarkable that this play emerged from a 'Socialist' society and was written by an author who felt he 'had to lean on what [he] knew.' As a comment on contemporary Czechoslovakia it is certainly a fascinating document about a society, the official, constantly reiterated ideals, aims, and evaluations of which bear no relation whatsoever to the values of an individual who thrives under this regime. However, from a Western point of view *Vermisage* can plainly also be regarded as a critical comment on the materialistic values of an affluent society. Although Havel, with typical modesty, calls his two one-act plays 'miniatures, written on the side,'<sup>59</sup> both succeed in communicating strong meaning on an international scale.

Havel's most recent one-act play, *Protest*, draws even more openly on the author's basic experience as a 'dissident' writer. Translated into pithy German by Gabriel Laub,<sup>60</sup> it is to have its première in Vienna in the near future. In *Protest* Havel takes the bull by the horns and writes about the most acute problem not only of Czech writers and intellectuals but also of creative men anywhere in the world where freedom of expression has been harnessed by a stultifying ideology. *Protest* is a brilliant dialogue during an encounter between two writers. There is Staněk who has managed to swim with political currents, who is on good terms with the authorities, and whose works are still produced on television and in film studios. He knows the ropes, he writes what the regime approves of. Although he admires the dissidents,

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid 296

<sup>59</sup> Havel 'Dovětek autora' 310

<sup>60</sup> Gabriel Laub is a writer, critic, and pamphleteer who has been living in Hamburg since 1968. He is the author of several collections of satirical writings in German. *Double Barrelled Attack (Doppelfinten)*, a collection of ironic essays, with Hans-Georg Rauch's illustrations appeared in Charles Scribner jr's English translation (New York 1977).

claims to be glad that there are still 'some people who are not afraid to speak the truth aloud,'<sup>61</sup> and avidly reads their works which circulate underground, he has steered clear of any involvement with their cause.

The other writer, Vaněk (a partly autobiographical figure who also appears in *Audience*), is a playwright whose works used to be staged successfully in Czech theatres but who, after a drastic change in the political climate, has become ostracized and persecuted by the regime, writing for underground circulation only, and spending most of his time and energy in composing petitions and letters of protest which find their way into the press abroad but which have little effect on circumstances in his own country.

The play consists of a visit Vaněk pays to Staněk, whose success with things in general is reflected in the superbly blossoming magnolia tree outside his window, his recently acquired villa, and the surrealist painting in his elegant study. In the course of the conversation between the two Vaněk shy, clutching a briefcase, in stocking feet; Staněk effusive, pouring cognacs, offering cigars and his own slippers – we discover that after years of non-communication Staněk had asked Vaněk to visit him; we hear that Vaněk has been in prison and that Staněk's success is marred by his realization that 'everywhere is only selfishness, hypocrisy, fear ... sterility and intrigues.' We witness Staněk's admiration for Vaněk's courage, for those 'protests, petitions, letters – the fight for human rights,' but also his feelings that the dissidents have taken upon themselves 'an almost superhuman task: to rescue from this bog the remainders of ethical consciousness.' Vaněk shuffles his feet in his host's slippers and objects against so strong a praise. But Staněk continues his attentions, pours more cognac, comments knowledgeably but in a rather off hand manner on other dissident writers, and offers knowledgeably and by no means unfair criticism of Vaněk's last play. Finally, as his motivations become increasingly puzzling, he steers the conversation to its inevitable aim: he would like to ask Vaněk to initiate 'some kind of protest or petition'<sup>62</sup> on behalf of composer-singer Javůrek who has recently been imprisoned.

However, as Vaněk (and the audience) are trying to cope with this extraordinary request, it becomes clear that Staněk's motivation is not indignation about the persecution of innocent people but that he has a personal axe to grind – his daughter is expecting a child by Javůrek. For once Vaněk responds with assurance and efficiency. Rummaging in his brief case he produces a petition of the kind Staněk had had in mind. Staněk scans it with surprise and agitation, cannot abstain from making some editorial comments but finally congratulates Vaněk on his excellent style and on the fifty signatures which had already been collected.

However when Vaněk, encouraged by so much praise and concern, ventures the hesitant question whether he, Staněk, would not like to add his signature to the petition, the benevolent host embarks slowly but with increasing rhetorical power on

---

<sup>61</sup> *Protest* tr Gabriel Laub (Hamburg 1978) 14. The Czech original is circulating in Czechoslovakia in typescript as a publication of Edice *Pellice*.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid 10, 11, 14, 15, 25

an argument which proves, with irresistible logic, that he would do great harm to the cause of the dissidents if he did sign the document and that, due to his solidarity with those who tried to preserve the moral fibre of the nation, he would have to abstain from what he basically would like to do. Before Vaněk can assure him for the third time that he respects his decision, the news arrives that Javůrek has been freed. Generously Staněk offers Vaněk his own furnace to burn the superfluous petition in, and takes him to the garden to give him a shoot of his lovely magnolia tree.

In addition to its weighty political meaning *Protest* is an incontestable proof of Havel having grasped a basic ailment of our age. Psychology, ideology, and scientific objectivity have taught modern man to rationalize his moves. His knowledge of set patterns of behavior make him act consciously in relation to such patterns. This can be innocuous or sinister. It can spell mediocrity or evil. In his three one-act plays Václav Havel expresses what he is striving to portray, namely 'the existential dimension of the world.'<sup>63</sup>

In a way all Havel's writings are a critique of the reassuring first line of the Gospel according to St John: 'In the beginning was the Word.' That does not mean that he has created characters who indulge in the language of silence (like some of the characters of Beckett or Peter Handke). On the contrary, language is 'the primary moving force'<sup>64</sup> in Havel's plays and his characters talk a lot, too much in fact. But the more they talk, the less they say. Their conversations read like parodies of elementary phrase-books with sections like 'How to converse about world affairs with a sixty-word vocabulary'; or 'how to chat about the difference between the humanities and the sciences at a cocktail party.' It would take a volume in itself to define and order the great and resourceful variety of stock phrases in Havel's plays. All we can do here is suggest a few and point out the thing they have in common: they consist of words which no longer express reality but obscure it. Isolated from the real world, they create a solipsistic universe of abstractions which obliterates both rational thought and common sense.

In this sense Havel's language is at the end of a long line of development. It seems that the crisis in language that began at the beginning of the century has left its mark more strongly on the theatre than on other literary genres. The playwright – because he is dealing with the spoken word – seems to reflect most acutely the new awareness that man does not use language as his personal tool but rather that language, with its inherent structures and meaning, rules man. We may think of the conversation between two characters of the Austrian playwright Ödön von Horvath. In a simplistic two-pronged aphorism they summarize what they feel the twentieth century has done to human nature: 'Nobody is allowed to do what he wants,' complains one of them;

the other complements: 'And nobody wants to do what he is allowed to.'<sup>65</sup> Or we may remind ourselves of the scene in which a Ionesco character reduces all communication to the word 'cat';<sup>66</sup> or perhaps of the two Pinter characters whose critical assessment of another man has shrivelled to whether he is 'funny' or 'not funny.'<sup>67</sup> However, we have not witnessed there a sustained display of the corruption of intellect and emotion by language. For that we have to go to Havel. Whether you choose to quote hollow statements like 'I myself – sort of personally fancy art. I think of it as the spice of life'; soap-bubble morality like 'He has his faults, you know, but does his share'; vacuous encouragement such as 'You must not lose your hope, your love of life and your trust in other people!'<sup>68</sup>

One area of Havel's critique of language that provides ample comedy is his treatment of the unnatural quality of bureaucratic language mechanically tied to bureaucratic procedures. Take the conversation between the director and Hugo Pludek in which they plan well-balanced training sessions for inauguration and liquidation and arrive at the conclusion that "Another training will have to be organized. Inaugurationally-trained liquidation officers training liquidationally-trained inaugurators and liquidationally-trained inaugurators training inaugurationally-trained liquidation officers."<sup>69</sup>

But there are also some jewels of pseudo-humanist jargon: 'We are concerned with the man in the round,' says one character, 'a man whose complexity has not been simplified, whose human uniqueness has been preserved.'<sup>70</sup> Ironically, these words are spoken by the member of a research team computing samples of human individuality. Or listen to the sales talk of Madam Diana in Macheath's favourite brothel when she comments on the personalized service in her establishment: 'I am of the opinion that services of this kind must not be provided as on an assembly line, and I abhor those large anonymous gatherings which mechanize and dehumanize the whole thing, and debase it to the level of the consumers' attitude.'<sup>71</sup> This statement is mechanically repeated twice verbatim to two different customers. The fact that the remarks are totally false as such (the girls sell only what there is to be sold and consider any show of tenderness a vulgar breach of business ethics), is amusing but less interesting than its wider implication.

Our primitive ancestors believed that once a force was named, its power-spell was broken. Contemporary man, by constantly repeating the great cliché nightmares of his age, somehow believes he is dealing with them. Modern psychology has frequently used this ancient insight: formulating your fears and doubts will help you to

---

<sup>63</sup> Havel 'Dovětek autora' 3100

<sup>64</sup> Paul I. Trensky 'Václav Havel and the Language of the Absurd' *The Slavic and East European Journal* 13 (1969) 44. This article contains perceptive comments on Havel's language.

---

<sup>65</sup> Ödön von Horvath *Geschichten aus dem Wiener Wald* (Frankfurt/Main 1970) 43

<sup>66</sup> Ionesco *Jack or the Submission in Four Plays* 109

<sup>67</sup> Harold Pinter *The Caretaker* and *The Dumb Waiter* (New York 1961) 51-2

<sup>68</sup> *The Garden Party* 32, 38; *The Memorandum* 109

<sup>69</sup> *The Garden Party* 53

<sup>70</sup> *Concentration* 32

<sup>71</sup> *Zebrácká opera* 158

overcome them. Havel shows us again and again that this act of the recognition of a problem can be useless if it takes place in language only. He modifies the psychology-textbook theory as well as the archaic beliefs behind them, 'if you name it you put yourself under the illusion of having mastered it,' and you can then afford to dismiss it. But under the protective shelter of your words the power of the illusion continues. The words can prevent rather than further the act of recognition.

In this instance the meaning of Havel's works for our Western society becomes particularly obvious. Although certain forms of standardization and mechanical conformism have for some time been the targets of attacks by some of those believing in 'individualism,' another form of standardization has developed among them. The 'non conformists' have formed another standardized group, whose reactions and type of language (not to mention clothes or haircuts) have become as predictable as those of the 'conformists.' Havel's comment on this kind of phenomenon has not been matched by a Western playwright.

Another target of Havel's is folksy wisdom mechanized by habitual thoughtless usage. In *The Garden Party* the hero's father, Pludek senior, reacts to most things with comments that have the ring of proverbs but are sheer nonsense. The form is empty, the content has gone: leather-bound volumes of Shakespeare and Milton contain whisky bottles, the opening line of an ancient song is used to sell shaving lotion. When old Pludek quotes proverbs, only the grammar is right: 'Well, have you ever seen a Hussar of Cologne carry hemp seed to the attic alone?'<sup>72</sup> We hear the proverbial rhythm, note the implied comparison to an actual situation, the built-in warning and good example – all is there, only the sense is lacking.

One of the best examples of Havel's linguistic inventiveness is of course the actual creation of an artificial language, Ptydepe, which is the thematic core of *The Memorandum*. A rich variety of comic effects is obtained from the actual use of this language on stage. There are, for example, the Ptydepe lessons – a MUST for all employees of the establishment – conducted by Ptydepe teacher Lear:<sup>73</sup>

LEAR And now I shall name, just for the sake of preliminary orientation, some of the most common Ptydepe interjections. Well then, our 'ah!' becomes 'zukyбай', our 'ouch!' becomes 'bykur', our 'oh!' becomes 'hayf dy doretop', English 'pish!' becomes 'bolypak juz', the interjection of surprise 'well!' becomes 'zyk', however our 'well, well!' is not 'zykzyk', as some students erroneously say, but 'zykzym' – ...

---

<sup>72</sup> *The Garden Party* 14

<sup>73</sup> In the original Czech, the author has here achieved a double comic effect. The teacher's name is Peřina, which sounds as synthetic as any piece of Ptydepe vocabulary, but a Czech audience is bound to think of its similarity to 'peřina,' meaning feather bed. Věra Blackwell's choice of the name 'Lear' for this character in her English translation of the play does not seem particularly fortunate.

Later we get the following exchange of dialogue:

LEAR *correcting pronunciation* Listen carefully: m-a-1-u-z  
 THUMB *eager student* M-a-1-u-z  
 LEAR Your pronunciation isn't too good How do you say well?  
 THUMB Zyk.  
 LEAR And well, well?  
 THUMB Zykzyk.  
 LEAR Zykzym!!  
 THUMB I'm sorry, I forgot.  
 LEAR Mr. Thumb! Mr. Thumb! Yippee!  
 THUMB We haven't learned yippee yet, sir.  
 LEAR Don't try to excuse yourself. You simply don't know it. Hurrah!  
 THUMB Frnygko jefr dabux altep dy savarub gop texeres.  
 LEAR Goz texeres!!  
 THUMB I mean, goz texeres.<sup>74</sup>

Another instance is the shouted behind-the-scenes conversation between the hero Gross (sadly ignorant of Ptydepe) and another official (well versed in Ptydepe):

GROSS Well, why didn't you answer me?  
 GEORGE *off stage* I wanted to test you out.  
 GROSS I beg your pardon! Do you realize who I am? The Managing Director!  
 GEORGE *off stage* Habuk bulugan, avrator.  
 GROSS What did you mean by that?  
 GEORGE *off stage* Nutuput.  
 GROSS *looks at his watch, then walks quickly to back door, turns at the door* I won't put up with any abuse from you! I expect you to come to me and apologize. *exit by back door*  
 GEORGE *off stage* Gotroch!<sup>75</sup>

The patterns of repetition in Havel's plays seem at first arbitrary, even chaotic, but on closer inspection one discovers highly structured, almost geometric forms. Scenes are re-enacted with reversed characters; identical situations have opposite meanings because the context is different. Like a hall of mirrors Havel's work reflects itself. For example, Huml's request, made in quick succession to his wife, then to his mistress, that they straighten things out between them, is countered, indignantly by both women in virtually the same words: 'For heaven's sake, what would that look like! Nonsense! You have a word with her today and that's that!'<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> *The Memorandum* 72-3

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid* 40

<sup>76</sup> *Concentration* 49-50, 55



What must not go unmentioned is Havel's sustained ability to create a grotesque counterpoint between the characters' linguistic abstractions and their preoccupation with physical needs. Take the following example from *The Memorandum*. Trying to get some information regarding Ptydepe, Gross tries to approach a group of officials:

GROSS Miss Helena  
HELENA Why don't you call me Nellie, love? What is it?  
GROSS Miss Nellie, do you issue the documents one needs to get a translation authorized?  
STROLL Goose, vodka, and a cigar, that's what I call living.  
SAVANT What a cigar!  
GROSS I said, do you issue the documents one needs to get a translation authorized?  
HELENA *calling towards side door* Where do you get water?  
MARIA *off stage* I'll get it. *runs in by side door, iron in hand, grabs kettle, and runs out back door*  
HELENA *to Gross* What?  
GROSS Do you issue the documents one needs to get a translation authorized?  
HELENA Yes. To anybody who hasn't recently received a memo written in Ptydepe.  
GROSS Why?  
SAVANT Downright heady!  
STROLL I should say!  
GROSS I said, why?  
HELENA *calling towards side door* Where do you keep the cups?  
MARIA *off stage* Coming!<sup>77</sup>

In *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* this theme has a subtle new implication. The central character Huml, caught in the complex mechanics of his relationships with women, uses the necessity of attending to his body's biological needs as a sort of haven from the increasing pressures of his life. Observe his conversation with his mistress, Renata, who is getting impatient with the situation and wants him to get a divorce:

RENATA If it's not worth your while to break it off on my account, you ought to do it for your own sake – just look at yourself! Can't you see the way you're slipping?  
HUML I told you, didn't I, I want to do it in stages. What about some lunch?  
RENATA I know your blessed stages, so far you haven't budged!  
HUML What do you mean? Only this morning I began to prepare the ground.  
RENATA Did you? How? Did you tell her you love me?  
HUML For a start, I said I find you sexually exciting.  
RENATA Well, that's at least something. What did she say?

HUML She insisted I should part with you. What about some lunch?  
RENATA I hope you didn't promise her any such thing!  
HUML She was so insistent, I had to agree – on the surface. But deep down I kept my own counsel and I didn't commit myself to anything definite.  
RENATA Really? And then? Did you suggest to her you want a divorce?  
HUML I said you were rather counting on it – prospectively. What about some lunch? There's some stew –RENATA I'll have a look –<sup>78</sup>

In the same play Havel explores the most disturbing aspect of the destruction of man by language. When Renata wants to know whether he is still in love with his wife, we hear the voice of Huml (who is busy hanging up her coat back-stage) 'You know very well I stopped loving her long ago! I just like her as a friend, a housewife, a companion of my life –.'<sup>79</sup> In this brief scene Havel shows us how the cliché can be used to prove or disprove anything. A clichéd image of 'love' has taken over the form of the word like a parasite and pushed out its real content. Here this process of forcing out the true meaning of a word is demonstrated before our very eyes. The word we are left with becomes an empty shell.

Toward the end of most of Havel's plays the protagonist gives a lengthy speech in which he summarizes his outlook on man, society, and life in general. The speeches are highly amusing conglomerations of logical fallacies, pseudo-dialectics, and false analogies. With his acute sense for the mechanizing power of the word, Havel explores man as the victim of the language he has created. He does so by exploring the area where the system and the individual meet, where standardization penetrates into every fold of life. It has been pointed out repeatedly that this is obviously the work of a man who has grasped the enormous effect of a centralized political system on the life of the average man.

But it would do injustice to Havel's dramatic genius if his work were to be interpreted merely from a political point of view. The playwright himself has told us that 'the theatre shows the truth about politics not because it has a political aim. The theatre can depict politics precisely because it has no political aim. For this reason it seems to me that all ideas of the so-called "political theatre" are mistaken...'<sup>80</sup> By trying to give expression to the tensions between the individual and the social system in his own society – and there is no question as to who remains the victor there – Havel has also made one of the most intelligent artistic comments on man in modern mass society in general – applicable in New York as well as Prague, Stockholm, Rome, or Warsaw.

He does this by taking to task the nature of language itself, particularly the catchphrase or slogan whose power, well known to dictators of all kinds, is mostly

---

<sup>78</sup> *Concentration* 42-3

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid* 57

<sup>80</sup> Havel 'Politics and the Theatre' 879

---

<sup>77</sup> *The Memorandum* 58-9

misjudged by well-meaning defenders of the humanistic values of a free society. It is here that Havel's main contribution to the Theatre of the Absurd is to be found. For example, take the incident in *The Garden Party* where Hugo Pludek reproaches his father for a simplistic question: 'You think a question can be put in such a simplified way? No matter how you answer this kind of question – you can never attain the whole truth, always only a limited part of it.'<sup>81</sup> So far so good. Hugo's words can hardly be disputed, and his subsequent statement about human nature is still equally acceptable. Who could deny that man is 'rich, complex, changeable and multi-form'? It is only with the next words that Hugo's reasoning begins to crack up under the absurdity of his language. While we still find ourselves nodding in agreement, the argument becomes the very opposite of rational. 'There's no word, no sentence, no book, nothing that could fully describe and contain him [man]' says Hugo.<sup>82</sup> On the surface the statement seems true. No book can describe man in his entirety, no sentence, no word..., and here we hesitate. This is obviously a nasty cul-de-sac. How did the playwright ever get us there?

Havel has forced us into literal logic. Beginning with a sort of Kantian proposition that man cannot perceive or express truth in its entirety, he then reverses the argument by reducing the possibilities of expression to *one* word. He therefore implies that, under certain circumstances, one word *could* express a complex phenomenon. In other words, Hugo claims that one single word can wield great intellectual weight – which is, of course, a fallacy, but is also an astute observation of the power of slogans which carry a built-in, incontrovertible evaluation. This is explosive material in quite different types of modern society where slogans – whether they be 'enemies of the people' or 'women's liberation' – with their absolute evaluations are part and parcel of the daily life of the average citizen.

Also the next page of Hugh Pludek's speech bears quoting: 'And today we've passed the time of static and unchangeable categories, when A was only A and B always only B; today we know very well that A can often be simultaneously B and B simultaneously A ... that under certain circumstances even F could become Q, Y, indeed even Q with a nasal! ... The truth is as complex and multiform as everything else in the world – the magnet, the telephone, Branislav's verse, the magnet – and we are all a bit what we were yesterday and a bit what we are today; ... as a matter of fact we all are constantly a bit and constantly we are a bit not ... so that no-one among us completely exists and at the same time no-one exists completely ...'<sup>83</sup>

A political scientist in the audience might interpret this as a parody of Engels' theory of constant change; a humanist might consider it an example of a pretentious, half baked display of scientism; while others may merely enjoy it as a brilliant show of lopsided logic. Havel's 'dialogue' with any audience occurs on many levels.

Josef Gross, the hero of *The Memorandum*, delivers his tirade on man for the benefit of the loyal secretary Marie, who, by trying to help him keep his position, lost her own. By now Havel's linguistic weapons are sharper and cut more deeply. Again Gross begins with an indisputable truism: 'Dear Maria! We're living in a strange, complex epoch. As Hamlet says, our "time is out of joint." Just think, we're reaching for the moon and yet it's increasingly hard for us to reach our selves; we're able to split the atom, but unable to prevent the splitting of our personality; we build superb communications between the continents, and yet communication between Man and Man is increasingly difficult ... Like Sisyphus, we roll the boulder of our life up the hill of its illusory meaning, only for it to roll down again into the valley of its own absurdity. Never before has Man lived projected so near to the very brink of the insoluble conflict between the subjective will of his moral self and the objective possibility of its ethical realization. Manipulated, automatized, made into a fetish, Man loses the experience of his own totality; horrified, he stares as a stranger at himself, unable not to be what he is not, nor to be what he is.'<sup>84</sup>

This is surely an irresistible string of arguments. Havel uses dialectics like a bouncing see-saw, and hurls images and banalities with the finality of a visionary. Marie has, understandably, no answer to all this, and her whispered comment: 'Nobody ever talked to me so nicely before,'<sup>85</sup> is the final stroke of deadly irony before the curtain falls. Again Havel starts safely with a comment we might hear any day on the street. Then he brings in the well-known quotation from *Hamlet* which legitimizes his whole speech by supposedly anchoring it in our cultural heritage. The three contrasts which follow might be a lesson to any public speaker. Their obviously fallacious aspects (the use of verbs in a literal sense in an image that does not bear literal interpretation) somehow strengthen the argument because the speaker seems to have used them quite frankly as rhetorical devices. This impression is, of course, dispersed as soon as the Sisyphus image is brought in. From now on the argument races uncontrollably to its disastrous conclusion – the nonsensical equation that cancels itself.

Here Havel has taken up the dominant themes that have caught the critical imagination of our age: the march of science as opposed to the 'static' values of the humanist; the crisis of man's identity; the inability to communicate – all providing fertile soil for catch-words and slogans to sprout and proliferate. Finally Havel conjures up the figure of Sisyphus, the patron saint of absurdist writing, and creates an existentialist hodgepodge of images that makes our heads spin – but not enough not to realize that the parody constantly moves precariously close to reality. And here comes Havel's prime move. For a brief moment he uses Gross, the main example of manipulated and automated man, as the play's *raisonneur*, by letting him comment critically and lucidly on the predicament of modern man. For one flash the 'absurd'

---

<sup>81</sup> *The Garden Party* 63

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid* 64

---

<sup>84</sup> *The Memorandum* 107-8

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid* 109

world of the play and the 'real' world of the audience have become one. The effect, if utilized by a perceptive director, is bound to be strong.

In *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, Dr Eduard Huml launches an impassioned attack on the automatic calculator that was to register his reactions and compute them into an orderly, predictable sample of individual behaviour. Not only does PUZUK, the hapless calculator, break down, but it also goes berserk over its task. Huml, who considers the whole project 'nothing but an unfortunate mistake,'<sup>86</sup> explains his attitude by taking on the whole question of scientific predictability versus philosophical speculation. And he makes no bones about being a humanist – a man who believes in feelings! For example, he remarks: 'your endeavour to isolate the element of coincidence and use it as a means of shaping human individuality bears no relationship to science whatsoever. Moreover, it is bound to miss its goal completely ... In other words, the personal, human, unique relationship which arises between two individuals is so far the only thing that can – at least to some extent – mutually unveil the secret of those two individuals. Such values as love, friendship, compassion, sympathy and the unique and irreplaceable mutual understanding – or even mutual conflict – are the only tools which this human approach has at its disposal ... Hence, the fundamental key to man does not lie in his brain, but in his heart.'<sup>87</sup>

Again, as in the other two speeches, the argument is circular and cancels itself: man's complexity, it turns out, can be dealt with after all; only the place that provides the key has been switched from one area to another – from head to heart. Abstraction and reality never meet. Phrases like 'the secret of man' and 'unrepeatable human understanding' have taken the place of 'the coherent pattern of received information' or a 'condensed model of human individuality.' Ptydepe has been replaced by Chorukor. We may be surprised, indeed disturbed, by the way in which this use of language reflects certain situations in the daily life of this society – be it in an insurance office, or at a 'teach-in.'

Macheath, the gallant big shot of the underworld, also likes to give speeches. In fact, he gives three of them in the course of Havel's *The Beggar's Opera*. The playwright has expanded the area of his critique of language with excellent results. In his first bout of rhetoric Macheath convinces Lucy, who is visiting him in prison, that he still loves her, despite his rampages with other women. He paints for her a glowing picture of an eighteenth-century lover's utopia from the viewpoint of an average citizen of a twentieth-century socialist state: 'You must believe me, Lucy! ... If you only knew how much I have been thinking of you! Every day I have been conjuring up in my mind a little country castle built of red brick ... surrounded by green meadows and beech groves – and I have imagined the way the two of us setting up house there, romping around in the meadows with our greyhounds, riding on horseback, hunting exotic game, bathing in the nearby brook, gathering mushrooms, cooking ancient Old-English dishes, arranging soirees for the neighbouring rural

aristocracy, growing sunflowers – and I have imagined afterwards, in the evening, sitting by the big Renaissance fireplace, gazing into the flames, telling each other about our childhood, reading together old books from the castle library, sipping mead – and then – slightly intoxicated – retiring to the castle bedroom – ... drowsily taking off our clothes, and lying down together in our big canopied gothic bed and then first of all kissing each other tenderly for an awfully long time, and then loving each other and loving each other – our hot, sun-tanned bodies intertwined in spasms of frustrated love – and then finally, ecstatically happy and sweetly exhausted – we fall asleep – to be awakened the next morning by the sparkling summer sun, by birdsong, and by the butler, bringing in bacon and eggs and cocoa.'<sup>88</sup>

The playwright has managed to summon all the clichés of latter-day romanticism, mixing confused scraps of history and former cultures with the banal desires of a chambermaid, and concocting an irresistible potpourri of 'dreams come true.' Again it is language which has moulded fixed images, used in order to conjure up false pictures of happiness. The talker achieves his purpose and the stale models work on Lucy, who bursts into tears and promises to find a hacksaw and get her Mackie out of prison.

Macheath's second speech, also addressed to the female sex, is another feat of rhetoric like Marc Antony's speech to the Romans. It begins with a vocative, after which it launches into a series of protestations of love and devotion. The only unusual thing is that the speech is addressed to two women instead of one. Polly Peachum and Lucy Locket, both of whom have a claim on his love, have come to the prison cell to get things straightened out. The scene is famous in Gay's as well as Brecht's version. In both cases it is the women who carry on the battle of rhetoric and deride the 'perfidious wretch'<sup>89</sup> for having deceived them. In Havel's version the silken tongue of the man with the gift for language settles the matter again, reducing the girls to tears and the realization that they have 'done him wrong.' Macheath's successful speech consists simply of expounding the situation as it is and making the best of it: 'What, tell me, have I really done wrong? Was it my fault that I married you both?'<sup>90</sup> What should I have done when I was in love with you both? Naturally what is more acceptable for society nowadays and more comfortable for a man, hence more usual, is another procedure, namely that a man takes as his wife only one of the beloved women and – making acceptable excuses to his legitimate wife – he reduces the other one to the debasing position of a so-called mistress, that is, a sort of superior courtesan, whose duties are almost identical with those of his wife, but whose rights, in comparison with the wife, are decidedly severely limited ... The situation of the wife is, however, no more advantageous: the mistress knows about the wife and often, one might conjecture, discusses her at length with her lover, the

---

<sup>88</sup> *Žebrácká opera* 138-9

<sup>89</sup> *Gay Opera* 51

<sup>90</sup> Czech has different forms for singular and plural of nouns and verbs, and this renders the speech even more amusing. Some of the effect gets lost in English.

---

<sup>86</sup> *Concentration* 70

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid* 71-2

latter's husband, while the wife, on the other hand, must remain submerged in the swamp of ignorance which naturally alienates her from her husband ... Are you aware how ruthless such a solution would be to both women? And you mean that I should have proceeded in this way? No, girls, if I wanted to fulfill my duties toward you to the best of my ability I could not follow the actions of other men in this matter, and I had to strike out on my own, take a path perhaps not yet walked upon, but definitely more moral, namely the way, which gives you both the same amount of legitimacy and dignity. Such is the truth: Please judge me on its basis! ...<sup>91</sup>

When Macheath finishes his speech to his two wives with a final flourish about the happy moments that the three of them will *not* be able to experience (after all, he is going to be executed in the morning), the two women fly to his chest and weep with gratitude for having been spared the ignominy of being either the deceived wife or the downtrodden mistress. Macheath has not only been forgiven but has also convinced them that he acted logically as well as morally and, above all, honourably. By basing his whole speech on rigidly clichéd concepts, Macheath develops a seemingly logical argument which no-one notices to be based on a false premise. With the help of two words he establishes two isolated areas of values which, though based exclusively on a threadbare and banal stock image, carry great weight with minds that do not respond rationally but emotionally. With a humorous insight that seems to me unmatched in contemporary theatre, Havel explores the theme of 'man at the mercy of language'<sup>92</sup> – a problem that has gained increasing importance in our century.

Macheath's third speech, delivered at the end of the play, is no longer a parody. It seems that here the playwright has ceased to use language as a false front. Macheath, caught in the mesh of pretense, no longer able to distinguish a lie from the truth, betrayed three times by the woman whom he had thought an exception to the general corruption, draws his conclusion: 'If everyone around me betrays me, as has become obvious, it does not mean that they expect anything else from me, but the exact opposite: by acting in this way they offer me some sort of principle of our mutual relationship.'<sup>93</sup> Accordingly he decides to play along on the principle, 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do,' or 'if you can't beat them, join them.'

Macheath's speech, supported by a number of significant arguments, strikes a puzzling new note in Havel's work. Is Macheath, the professional betrayer of women, the boss of a shady organization, the ruthless businessman, to be taken seriously as Havel's *raisonneur*? Like Gay and Brecht before him, Havel has engaged all our sympathies for the gallant crook who, by means of his wit, generosity, and ability to deal with life in a grand manner, had distinguished himself from the petty schemers around him. Does his parodistic 'existentialist decision' mean that he will join the

ranks of those petty schemers? Is Havel serious about the uselessness of heroism or is he merely presenting us with another logical fallacy under the mask of a seemingly rational argument – namely that corruption can be fought by adding more corruption? Waters run deep at the end of Havel's most boisterous work.

Havel's most recent play *Protest* takes his exploration of language as a vehicle for a certain mode of thought still another significant step further. In a long speech, Staněk, faced with the request to sign a petition on human rights, explains to Vaněk (who has handed him the petition) that, if he wants to act 'truly ethically',<sup>94</sup> he must abstain from signing the document. The arguments which lead to this conclusion seem to me to contain the most brilliant tour de force of logic which Havel has written to this point. In fact they are so irresistible in their lucidity that it remains to be seen whether the play will not make its impact as a plea to consider the dilemma of those who have decided to live with the regime, to think of their families, and avoid unnecessary destructive struggles against forces much too powerful to be affected.

In *The Memorandum* Gross's argument had gone up in a cloud of contradictions; Huml, in *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* had indulged in a circular argument which cancelled itself in the end; Macheath of *The Beggar's Opera* moved precariously closer to reality by raising the question of the uselessness, in fact the pig-headed arrogance, of heroism in a world where betrayal had become the common form of behaviour. Staněk in *Protest*, assessing the consequences of certain political moves in a totalitarian country which tries to cope with a small number of people who try to show that they do not agree with the regime, does so with the foresight of a brilliant chess player. 'Let me tell you something, Ferdinand,' he explains to Vaněk, 'without noticing myself I have become used to the perverse thought that the dissidents are taking care of morality. But they themselves – without becoming conscious of it – also got used to that idea! ... What if I, too, were yearning finally to become a free human being? What if I, too, wanted to renew my integrity and throw off this burden of humiliation?' And he continues, revealing that 'after years of uninterrupted vomiting I would – if I were to sign your paper – win back my lost freedom and dignity, perhaps even the recognition of those who are close to me ... I would be able to look without shame into my daughter's eyes ... My son would not be able to go to college but he would respect me more than if I had assured his acceptance by refusing to sign the petition for Javůrek whom he worships ... This is the subjective side of the whole matter. And how does it look from an objective point of view?'<sup>95</sup>

It is clear that Staněk's description of the situation is realistic. Indeed his argument does not seem 'subjective' at all. If the allegedly 'subjective' point of view was so loyal to the truth, the 'objective' point of view would have to be more than perfect. In our age we gladly allow for distortion in what we have come to call 'subjectivity,' but at

---

<sup>91</sup> *Žebrácká opera* 160-1

<sup>92</sup> One of the section headings in ch. 3 of Peter Farb's *Word Play: What Happens When People Talk* (New York 1974), a full exploration of this topic

<sup>93</sup> *Žebrácká opera* 182

---

<sup>94</sup> *Protest* 51

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid* 43, 45-6

the promise of 'objectivity' our eyes brighten with immediate credulity. The popular credo for our times could easily be: If it is objective it must be good. Havel has prepared us well for what is to come.

'What happens,' Staněk says, launching into his 'objective' argument, 'when among the signatures of a few widely known young dissidents ... there appears ... also my signature? The closed circle of notorious signers (whose signatures are gradually losing their importance because they do not have to be paid for by anything, since those people have nothing more to lose) will be broken ... The political powers will want to demonstrate that they are not likely to panic and cannot be unbalanced by such surprises.'<sup>96</sup>

What is left to discuss is the question of what influence Staněk's signature would have on the vast circles of those who are trying to conform, who don't ask many questions as long as they can afford a holiday, or in some cases a car, or perhaps a weekend cottage. Here again Staněk makes his deductions with relentless logic: those conformists basically dislike the dissidents because they see in them their own bad conscience and as a consequence they would be bound to regard him, Staněk, as a victim of the dissidents' cynical appeal to his humanism. The police, of course – no need to conceal that fact – would support and try to spread this attitude. Moreover, 'the more intelligent people will perhaps observe that this sensational news – my signature – detracts from the issue itself, i.e. the matter of Javůrek, and in the final analysis makes the whole protest appear in rather sinister a light by raising the question of whether you really wanted to help Javůrek or show off me as a freshly baked dissident.'<sup>97</sup>

There might even be people who would claim that Javůrek had become the dissidents' victim because the latter used his misfortune for purposes which had nothing to do with his fate. Now Staněk is ready for the final moral sum-up: 'Considering all these circumstances, the question must be asked: What is more important – the liberating feeling which my signature would give me, paid for by its basically negative consequences? ... In other words: If I want to act truly ethically – and I feel sure you will not doubt now that I do – what shall I go by? By relentless objective reflection or by my own subjective inner feeling?'<sup>98</sup>

I could easily envisage a critic who would interpret this string of oddly indisputable arguments as an attempt on Havel's part to reveal a moral dilemma where it is rarely looked for: not in the dissidents' glowing beliefs but in those grey hangers-on of the regime who compromise and keep silent, who – as Havel's Macheath, pushed by circumstances, finally did would play the game that everyone played. In a way the imaginary critic would be right. The moral Struggle in *Protest* surely does not take place in Vaněk's mind. But – and here we see Havel's finest display of a writer's

profound grasp of the world he lives in –, it does not really take place in Staněk's mind either.

Staněk's weighing of pros and cons corresponds to reality but only to a reality within the patterns of thought which permeate a society which has been forced to think in these patterns. Staněk has applied the reasoning process of a closed system of thought to a simple ethical question: Should I lend my voice to try to help an innocent man who is in trouble? The whole intricate net of reasoning which he unfurls before our eyes is the type of reasoning he has been taught by the system he lives in. It is pseudo-reasoning, and totally false in absolute terms. It is, in a nut-shell, perhaps the best portrayal of perverted 'rational' thinking that has ever been put on stage in modern theatre. As such, Staněk's arguments are also more important than might appear at first sight for a Western democratic society where moral norms are questioned and relativistic points of view have often become ethical guide-posts. A Polish cartoon sums up the issue in a humourous way: Two men are having a discussion. One has just finished his argument. The other scratches his head thoughtfully: 'Clearly you are right ... But ... from which point of view?'

There is no question that Havel's plays deal with the burning issues in his own society. However, they not only turn out to contain surprisingly apt comments on another society that wrestles with different kinds of problems, but they also reveal themselves in their timeless aspects – wisdom expressed in terms of excellent theatre. Havel himself seems to know how these things work: 'Drama's success in transcending the limits of its age and country depends entirely on how far it succeeds in finding a way to its own place and time ... If Shakespeare is played all over the world in the twentieth century it is not because in the seventeenth century he wrote plays for the twentieth century and for the whole world but because he wrote plays for seventeenth-century England as best he could.'<sup>99</sup> Without wanting to compare Havel with Shakespeare we can nevertheless see that the principle is the same. Havel writes for Czechoslovakia as best he can, therefore (as he would say) his work carries so strong a message outside its borders.

In his by now famous *Open Letter* to the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia written on 4 April, 1975, Havel makes a statement which describes the arid atmosphere he is trying to reveal in his plays, by pitching his artistic imagination against the stultifying order of rigid values and suppression of truth. 'True enough,' he writes, 'order prevails: a bureaucratic order of grey monotony that stifles all individuality; of mechanical precision that suppresses everything of unique quality; of musty inertia that excludes the transcendental. What prevails is order without life.'<sup>100</sup> In one play after another Havel reveals the life-destroying nature of rigid forms of 'order.' The spectrum is vast and the consequences differ greatly in significance; they can affect, say, a university curriculum, the categories of behavioral psychology, or the rules governing life under totalitarianism. We cannot escape the

---

<sup>96</sup> Ibid 46-7

<sup>97</sup> Ibid 49-50

<sup>98</sup> Ibid 51

---

<sup>99</sup> Havel 'Politics and the Theatre' 879

<sup>100</sup> Havel 'An Open Letter' *Encounter* 45 (Sept. 1975) 24

bitter realization that Havel in his letter not only describes the fictional atmosphere in his plays but also the real situation in his country. And yet another, brighter, thought is bound to emerge: abstracted from the situation in which they were written, his words formulate a diagnosis of mass society throughout the world.

In: Goetz-Stankiewicz, Marketa: *The Silence Theatre*. Toronto – Buffalo – London, 1979.