

The Dissident Mind: Václav Havel as Revolutionary Intellectual

MORE THAN A DECADE AFTER THE “VELVET REVOLUTION” dislodged Czechoslovakia’s Communist regime, can we be satisfied with the common interpretation of the revolution’s origins? To this day eyewitness reports portraying the revolution as a miraculous transition from communism to Western democracy are reprinted as definitive history. Authors such as Timothy Garton Ash and Misha Glenny admit that the ambitions of dissidents could sometimes taint the progress of the transition. The dissidents, however, are described as selfless campaigners who were catapulted to power, in Garton Ash’s words, “as if in a fairy tale.”¹

A careful review of the writings of dissident intellectuals, however, tells a story that is both more human and more interesting. Far from being committed democrats campaigning to bring liberal democracy to Central Europe, Václav Havel and his colleagues were committed intellectual revolutionaries first, democrats second. Like the French *philosophes* Tocqueville described, Prague’s dissident writers and activists breathed the same intellectual air as their countrymen. The atmosphere in which they waged their campaigns was not imbued with the “love of abstractions” that Tocqueville found in prerevolutionary France, but rather with the illiberal, antidemocratic traditions of the Central European *Bildungsbürgertum*. This intellectual heritage

burdened the dissidents with the very ideas that had shaped the Communist regime they fought. If the dissidents of Central Europe fought a war of ideas against their tormentors, it was a civil war within the tradition of Romantic thought.

It might seem absurd to question Havel's democratic credentials. Havel bravely fought Czechoslovakia's Communist regime before leading his nation to freedom in its Velvet Revolution. As president—first of Czechoslovakia, then of the Czech Republic—he supported a wide range of political reforms, and never made any attempt to impose his will by force. In Havel, the Czechs found an articulate and passionate defender of human rights and political freedoms to show off on the world stage.

But was Havel as passionate in his defense of the tools of democracy, such as political parties, partisan strategy, and compromise? Here the picture is a little less clear. As a politician in the arena Havel always made a good case for democracy in the abstract, but also showed little taste for the rough-and-tumble of parliamentary horse-trading and election campaigns. Never himself the leader of a political party, Havel often went out of his way to drive parties out of Czech politics. Indeed, Havel so aggravated the leaders of the Czech Republic's two major parties that in 1998 the Social Democrats and the Civic Democrats forged an "opposition agreement" to divide the government between them. Conservative Václav Klaus and left-leaning Miloš Zeman concluded that, for all their political differences, it would be easier to compromise with each other than face Havel's presidency alone.

The problem, it seems, was not merely the "inexperience" or "idealism" often cited as the plague of the former dissidents. Havel's problems with democracy had roots in the ideas that sustained him as a dissident—especially the idea of redemption through revolution. Such ideas made the compromises of political life and the humdrum grind of parliamentary procedure seem pale shadows of the salvation that he, an ambitious Czech intellectual, had cultivated in his long absence from public life. For Havel, politics was a stage on which to incarnate a social order more elevated than that which operatives of mere parties envisioned.

One can hardly blame Havel for the intellectual atmosphere in which he formed his ideology. The dissident Czech intellectuals of Havel's generation

were heirs to a political tradition that was forged, along with their nation, in nineteenth-century German Romanticism.

Under the influence of Herder, the historian and politician František Palacký established himself as the Czech nation's instructor in its own ennobling history and the very embodiment of its high moral standing. In Palacký's history, the Czech nation became heir to Bohemia's Hussite nobility and endowed with an inherent distaste for the corruption of the Habsburg Empire and its Catholic Church. According to Palacký, Bohemia's high moral standing had been lost in 1620 with its last independent noblemen. It could only be revived by those who knew and understood the message of Czech history and culture. In a forty-year career of moving from writing history to making it as a representative in the Austrian Diet, Palacký consistently maintained that the Czechs had a unique moral mission to the nations of Europe. "Whenever we were victorious," he wrote in 1864:

It was always due rather to spiritual superiority than to physical might, and whenever we succumbed it was always the fault of a lack of spiritual activity and moral courage. . . . If we do not raise our spirit and the spirit of our nation to higher and more noble activity than our neighbors, not only will we fail to achieve an honorable place in the ranks of nations, but we will not succeed in defending finally even our original home.²

By moving the life of the nation into the sphere of letters, Palacký helped to promote a tradition in which the Czech intellectual thought of himself as the very expression of the nation's collective will. Literary and political work blended together. The intellectual assumed for himself the powers of a priest, conscious of his status above ordinary men and utterly committed to their transformation.

Palacký's vision of the intellectual as conjurer of the people was in keeping with the Romantic ideal of the intellectual as spiritual vessel. In subsequent Central European battles between ethnic nationalists and Marxist socialists, the raw material of politics appeared on the surface to differ. One camp fought for the rights of an oppressed nation, the other for liberation of a tormented working class. But an underlying similarity remained. Whether a

Marxist or ethnic nationalist, the Romantic intellectual did not aspire merely to win elections or serve in the state bureaucracy—he sought, through social and literary criticism, to reshape an inarticulate mass.

This vaunted image of the intellectual's role in politics came to Havel as the inheritance that Czech intellectual-politicians have passed down through the generations. Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, Czechoslovakia's founding president, imagined himself standing above the meanness and pettiness of mere liberalism as an independent intellectual and moral critic of its politics. Towards the end of his career in office, Masaryk looked back in satisfaction on a life that had allowed him to create a people in the same fashion that a writer creates a poem. "Politics has an element of poetry in it," Masaryk said:

in as much as it has creative power. I believe a life can and must be created; I believe life itself is a play just as a Shakespeare play is life itself. And what is politics—true politics—but the conscious formation of people, the fashioning and molding of real life . . . ?³

After Masaryk's Czechoslovakia was unable to defend itself from Hitler's predations, many postwar intellectuals fulfilled Palacký's vision for Czech intellectuals by embracing Communism. It might seem strange that a nineteenth-century ethnic nationalist like Palacký inspired twentieth-century Communists, but Communism gave Prague's postwar intellectuals an opportunity that the "father of the Czech nation" would have well appreciated—the chance to be the embodiment of the nation's character. Recalling his early commitment to the Czechoslovak Communist Party, writer and translator Antonín Liehm wrote that the Communist revolution appealed to the Czech intellectual's own sense of his noble heritage. The Czechs, Liehm explained, were "the only people in Europe to have passed through most of the seventeenth century and all of the eighteenth without possessing a national aristocracy . . ." The project of national revival had passed to "writers, linguists [and] scholars" who "assumed the role of the aristocracy; they became the spiritual elite of a subjugated nation, and eventually transformed themselves into a political elite."⁴ After World War II, writers had fallen for the Communist Party, Liehm said, because it had seemed that "the very core of the nation had to be reorganized."⁵

As Liehm's recollections show, Czech intellectuals—be they Communist or nationalist—had grown used to the idea that they were the embodiment of their nation's virtues. But there were also real affiliations between the Communist and Romantic nationalist perspectives that made moving between them rather easy. At the heart of both ideologies was a mystical confusion of writers' words and writers' deeds. Romantic and Communist intellectuals did not see speech as a mere means of persuasion; it was, rather, a means of incarnation. A writer did not merely struggle to formulate completed and convincing sentences; instead he wrote a first draft of a thought, then immediately turned on his own sentence to point out its inadequacies. This style of immediate self-reference and self-critique, labeled "ironic" by Friedrich Schlegel, was meant to make the truth manifest in a way that finished writing could not. Polished paragraphs could never completely capture the truth about their subjects. Ironic, incomplete, and self-referential writing, however, allowed the writer to become a mediator between his ideas and the reader. The ironic writer, Schlegel wrote, "truly sees the godly in himself, and then sacrifices himself absolutely in order to announce, participate in and portray the godly for all men, in habits and facts, in words and deeds."⁶

This Romantic impulse is more common in Marx's own writings than is commonly appreciated. Indeed, it is the very confusion between the writer's words and the world they describe that convinced Marx that he was engaged in empirical observation. In *The German Ideology*, for example, the author appears as an observer of his own text, watching as his own thoughts move among men. "The premises from which we begin," Marx wrote:

are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way.⁷

Here Marx's language is man himself, capable of activity and of shaping conditions of activity. Schlegel's "habits and facts," his "words and deeds" are presented mixed together by an author eager to be mediator of

his own vision. In Marx, the critic becomes a political actor in the very act of criticizing.

Like his predecessors in Czech intellectual life, Havel too imagined that he could “see the godly in himself” and reflect it in his literary work. Havel’s means might have been unconventional—a mixture of surrealism and absurdism—but the aim was familiar. Like the “fathers of the nation” before him, Havel sought to reshape the very character of the Czech nation—in his case, by exposing them to transformative works of theater.

As a young man Havel found his inspiration and artistic encouragement in the surrealists who had dominated literature in Masaryk’s time but whom the Communists persecuted. At the Slavia Café Havel and his friends would listen in on meetings of the poet and painter Jiří Kolař, literary critic Jindřich Chalupecký, and other men from the discredited surrealist movement “Group 42.” Surrealism offered shelter from the tedium of socialist-realism, even if it was not entirely a break with the Marxist tradition. André Breton himself had made note of the affinity of surrealism for revolutions in his speech to the Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture organized in 1935.

“‘We must dream,’ Lenin said; ‘We must act,’ Goethe said. Surrealism has never claimed otherwise, except that all its effort has tended toward resolving this opposition dialectically. ‘The poet of the future,’ I wrote in 1932, ‘will go beyond the depressing idea of the irreparable divorce between action and dream.’ . . . this interpenetration of action and dream . . . is everything that we have sought, everything we will continue to seek, to render more profound and effective.”⁸

This spirit had animated the members of Group 42, even when it led them to challenge Soviet-style art. Remembering the battles that Group 42 had fought in the early 1950s, Chalupecký recalled that Kolař had complained that the poetry of the Zhdanov era gave the world a “finished” quality. To write such poetry, Chalupecký declared, was to violate the very spirit of poetry, whose mission was “to show [the world’s] completion as incompleteness, to free it from severe facts, open space for it to freedom, to invite it again to life.”⁹

The writers of Havel's generation were just as frustrated by the predominance of socialist-realism, and just as enchanted by the thought that their very acts of creation manifested a new kind of reality. For them too, surrealism promised a new lease on life for the revolution that otherwise appeared "completed," with its positions assigned and agenda set. Surrealism did not promise to lead back to the political circumstances of the First Republic, but rather to the avant-garde aesthetic agenda of its marginalized authors. It did not promise to reverse the results of the socialist revolution, but rather to return to the state of engaged revolution itself.

Among the young writers inspired by Group 42, Jan Grossman and Václav Havel had the greatest success promoting the surrealist vision. In his own publication, *Generace*, Grossman wrote extensively on Kolař and surrealism. *Generace*, Havel remembered, was both "closest to my generation" of all the literary magazines and "composed by people who had participated in the free life before February [1948], which had its own magic."¹⁰

Despite the antagonism of "official structures," Grossman produced plays that used surrealism to insert the artist into the center of social transformation. Grossman's productions, a colleague remembered, offered crises rather than resolution; Grossman aimed "not to look for salvation in a completed ideal, but to experience all the chaos, overcome it and endure it."¹¹ Grossman once even echoed Marx's famous dictum from the theses on Feuerbach. Writing on the role of small theaters in society, Grossman claimed that "theatre, like all arts, should not only describe life but help to change it. An old and simple truth; tireless and new must be the way how to do it."¹²

Small theaters, Grossman thought, had an unusual opportunity to effect social change. Large state theaters were so mired in ideology, he wrote, that they could only portray human beings as abstractions; by merely repeating accepted truths, their productions became part of the static social world. By contrast, the spontaneity of the small theater allowed companies to win an audience's confidence with the self-deprecating charm of self-reference and irony. Mistakes and impromptu set design seemed unimportant in a theater where the semi-professional cast and crew could pretend merely to be "playing at theater." Indeed, the intimacy of the small theater allowed

actors to break through the barrier between audience and performance by making ironical comments on their own productions. Such spontaneity had a magical effect on audiences, whose members were trapped in their daily lives in increasingly complex, self-propagating, and meaningless bureaucratic structures. These structures were as “complete” as the ideologies behind official theater, and as threatening to human authenticity. Small theaters, then, had a social as well as an artistic mission—to rescue the individual and spontaneous from the technological and anonymous.¹³

When Grossman hired Havel to work at the Theater on the Balustrade, it proved a remarkable meeting of the minds. Havel later remembered how much he had admired Grossman’s approach. “He had a theory of theater,” Havel recalled:

“which didn’t want just to show off the story or communicate some thesis or fixed opinion of the world. We wanted to use irony and a taste for the absurd to open basic questions of human existence and the human sojourn through this world and questions of the position of people in society and their relation to it. [A play] descended to the audience in the form of a question with the assumption that the viewer would look for the answer only in himself. In no case was this ideological theater, but it was theater of ideas.”¹⁴

Grossman promoted Havel rapidly through the theater, from stagehand to dramatist. At the time Grossman was preparing a production of *Ubu Roi* by the surrealist Alfred Jarry. It was a remarkable stroke of luck. Jarry was an apt template for a writer with revolutionary ambitions that ran deeper than mere politics. In both his life and works, Jarry had aimed to completely obliterate the line between life and art.

Jarry’s most famous literary character, the nihilistic King Ubu, broke the boundary between the audience and stage in a number of ways. His abusive, foul, and nonsensical pronouncements shocked and befuddled the audience as human beings, not merely as theatergoers. Jarry, in fact, became Ubu, never dropping the role even outside the theater. By adopting Ubu’s brutal manner of speech and loutish drunkenness as his own, Jarry evoked a personal artistic apocalypse of self-destruction. This did not mean, however, that

nihilism would ultimately triumph, because the destruction of destruction itself could only be achieved by the re-establishment, in one blinding moment, of perfect order. As “Ubu” notes in an introductory note to *Ubu Enchained*, “we shall not have succeeded in demolishing everything unless we demolish the ruins as well. But the only way I can see of doing that is to use them to put up a lot of fine, well-designed buildings.”¹⁵ At the nanosecond after the ultimate breakdown of all differentiation and order, a new order of perfect harmony would appear.

Jarry had “played at theater” in the manner that suited the Theater on the Balustrade. Nothing on a Jarry set was meant to replicate real life, but only to suggest it in the crudest manner possible. One man would represent a crowd; a cardboard cutout of a horse’s head would do for equestrian scenes. This pared-down theater matched the Theater on the Balustrade’s budget, but also its agenda. Making the audience deeply aware that it was watching an artificial creation was a way of thrusting viewers into a space in which the artist was an immediate and mediating presence.

The two plays that Havel wrote under Grossman’s tutelage, *The Garden Party* and *Memorandum*, bear the mark of Jarry’s surrealism. In *The Garden Party*, written in 1963 (a year before Grossman’s production of *Ubu Roi*), a low-level bureaucrat attempts to secure his inarticulate son Hugo a job in the Liquidation Department. Hugo attends a garden party of the Liquidation office, then so effectively mimics the empty phrases and conversational games he hears around him that he is swiftly promoted. As he rises Hugo speaks no meaningful sentences, but merely repeats in new form the homespun mottos of his father (themselves nonsensical), then the phrases batted around among the bureaucrats he meets. He takes no fixed position on any issue presented to him, and loses any individual characteristics as he rises. When he appears at home at the end of the play, his own parents do not recognize him, and Hugo cannot even identify himself.

In *Memorandum*, written and produced a year after Grossman’s production of *Ubu Roi*, inauthentic speech has become the very goal of the anonymous bureaucracy lampooned. Joseph Gross, the managing director of an indeterminate office, discovers that his deputy Ballas has ordered the introduction of “Ptydepe,” an artificial language designed to eliminate the

confusion caused by ambiguity in the meaning of words. Gross attempts to stop the language's spread, but finds himself ensnared in the bureaucracy of its introduction; he cannot get a memorandum translated without proper authorization, but cannot get authorization without knowing what the memorandum says. In the bureaucratic cat-and-mouse games that follow, Gross and Ballas swap places, are dismissed and rehired, while the introduction of Ptydepe gets tangled in its own contradictions.

In both plays, Havel uses Jarry's nonsensical language to introduce chaos and entropy. Characters chase each other through meaningless but menacing conversations. No one tries to communicate; everyone tries to dominate. Time on stage is stalled, bogged down as the language itself drains the moment of its momentum.

The Theater on the Balustrade was meant to become an arena in which the static revolution finally met an end at its own hands, releasing the audience into a new realm of free thought. Postwar Communist writers preached the truth; Havel's generation merely culled it from audience reaction. The position of the artist with regard to the people and moral truths, however, remained the same: the artist's vision was to be transformative. Indeed, as half-articulate priests of theatrical ritual rather than dogmatic preachers of the truth, the artist of Havel's world had all the greater significance. Anyone could learn Marxism from books. Theatrical incarnations of the truth, on the other hand, required a venue, a play, and an author to keep the audience members guessing.

When Havel and his colleagues created their own dissident movement, Charter 77, it was designed to enact a similar ritual, this time in the political realm. At the heart of the movement was the "Charter," a petition in continual circulation, amended with new critical statements on government policy but with no program of its own. Like the theatrical tradition in which Havel had been raised, it did not promote any particular point of view, but sought to engage its audience in a process of constant questioning. The Charter was "not an organization, does not have positions, standing organs or organizational requirements for its members," its first pronouncement proclaimed. It was not "founded (in order to pursue) political activity" but rather to seek "methods of constructive dialogue with the government."¹⁶

In his essay “The Power of the Powerless,” Havel described his “nonpolitical politics” as a means of dialogue rather than of the pursuit of power. This was not because seizing power was too radical a notion. Seizing power was in fact too moderate an idea. Just as the Theater on the Balustrade had sought to transform its audiences rather than preach to them, Charter 77 would attempt to change the nature of Czechoslovakia’s citizens, not just its government. “The Power of the Powerless” was the battle cry of a dissident movement determined finally to achieve what all the dabbling of Czech intellectuals in politics had failed to bring about—reshaping society so as to allow intellectuals a place as arbiters of morality.

Once again, Havel’s opponent was not just the Communist dictatorship; it was the static society that had allowed Communism to flourish. This “post-totalitarian” world was the deeper problem. There, the ideology of Communism “offers people *completed* answers to all questions, and cannot be accepted only in parts.”¹⁷ Dissent had emerged because the political system was so “static” that “all expressions of nonconformity” were “fruitless in the realm of official structures.”¹⁸ Who could see through these false “completed” ideas of life? Men and women who led the “parallel structures” of the underground—its *samizdat* magazines, forbidden music, and private theater groups—and who were moved by the deepest sense of “responsibility to and for the world.” In fact, the very act of signing the Charter “return[ed] people to the firm basis of their identity,”¹⁹ an act that allowed people to “live in truth” in opposition to the inauthentic forces consuming modern man.

Such “living in truth” was a political act in and of itself, and one the authorities understood to be more dangerous than any overt political organizing. If the dissidents had, for example, attempted to set up a rival political party, the government would have had little trouble identifying leaders, arresting them, and portraying them as stooges of the fascist West. Ignoring the authority of the party, on the other hand, by freely choosing to stage a play or disagree with a supervisor at work, made small dents in the regime’s legitimacy that were not easily repaired. Havel believed, moreover, that mere politicking occurred in a superficial realm of technical-systematic change. The dissidents were not interested in such organizing not because it seemed too radical, “but

rather because it does not seem radical enough.”²⁰ Political change was a secondary matter—first there had to be a spiritual revolution: “the development of better economic and political models must, more than ever before, derive from a deep existential and moral transformation of society.”²¹

When the existential revolution eventually occurred, Havel believed, society would take a new shape. No longer would large, impersonal institutions dominate the landscape. People would interact instead in societies that were “open, dynamic and small” and which “emerge, live and disappear under the pressure of concrete and authentic needs” rather than merely for the sake of fulfilling the demands of “hollowed-out tradition,” such as the tradition of political parties. These new institutions would be firmly grounded in “unrestricted personal trust” rooted in “the experience of suffering [that had been] shared by all.”²²

This vision of the intellectual as the medium of public life did not leave much room for parliamentary democracy. There was no point in looking to the West for political solutions to Czechoslovakia’s problems, Havel wrote, since “the consequences of an ‘existential revolution’ go significantly beyond the framework of classical parliamentary democracy as it now appears in Western countries.”²³ Havel hoped instead for an existential revolution that would begin in the sphere of culture—the only agent capable of transforming the masses—and looked to Masaryk for his inspiration. Masaryk’s emphasis, Havel wrote, “naturally fell on elements that were enlightening, cultivating, educating, moral and humane. To Masaryk, the only possible course to a more dignified national fate lay in the people, the start of the transformation of the status of the nation was the transformation of human beings.”²⁴

The agent of transformation, according to Havel, would be the Czech intellectual himself, once again linked up to a revolutionary spirit. The “post-democratic structures” that would replace inauthentic societies in the East and West ought to remind one, Havel wrote, of “the ‘dissident groups’ or independent civic initiatives as we know them . . . Are not these informal, unbureaucratic, dynamic and open societies—the ones that compose the ‘parallel polis’—like embryonic prefigurations, symbolic micro-models of the more meaningful postdemocratic structures that might become the basis of a better-organized society?”²⁵

Havel's vision was not explicitly political. Indeed, in being so *nonpolitical*, it was far more revolutionary. The very act of creating a certain kind of art—ironic, absurdist, and in continual dialogue with its audience—put the dissident in touch with the true, authentic nature of the world that ordinary people could not see.

Shortly after Charter 77 was founded “The Power of the Powerless” became its manifesto. Here was a vision of the fate of a Czech intellectual that once again linked up life to a deep revolutionary spirit, one with the power to justify their lives on the margins of Czech society as a prefiguring of the revolution that would sweep the entire globe. There was no reason for art to serve a political revolution as it had in the 1950s. Art was the revolution. Moreover, the act of creating such revolutionary art put the dissident in touch with the true, authentic nature of the world that scientific rationalism obscured. Havel gave surrealism its political face.

Irony was the defining feature of Czech dissident writing not only because the intellectual felt the need to comment on society. As demonstrated in the writings of Karl Marx, the most influential “committed” intellectual of the modern age, irony allows the intellectual to imagine that he is engaged in the workings of his society to a degree that the actual historical record might deny. The ironic style perfected by Schlegel allows the intellectual to transcend the mere facts of political life and enter a netherworld of incompleteness in which texts and “premises” float forever unresolved, and therefore somehow forever alive. In this imaginary world, the written word takes on a new significance. It is not merely a means by which to make sense of reality, but to engage in its continual evolution. The very incompleteness of Havel's theater allowed him to pursue (and indeed, sometimes achieve) moments of social awakening in the theater that transcended the boundary between reality and art. The “nonpolitical” nature of Havel's most influential political tract reveals the depths of his ambitions to transform society from his desk.

Havel also gave his fellow dissidents, especially those of his close circle—the adherents of Group 42 and writers his own age—a reason to think that their humiliation was deeply meaningful. They may have suffered at the margins of society, but the bureaucratic, anonymous, Ubu-like monstrosity

that destroyed their lives seemed also to be destroying itself. This destruction of destruction would end in a newly authentic society—one that would honor the dissidents with the flattery of imitation. Like their magazines and private performances, it too would be spontaneous, based on trust and the solidarity once reserved for the oppressed. Until then, one had only to continue to live with the constant sense of the impending transformation buzzing in the air. A world that might have seemed meaningless to the marginalized man of ambition was instead full to the brim with meaning. Every authentic gesture of principle kept one in the embrace of the revolution to come. The revolution might be years away, but in the meantime the transformation of the future burned in every act of the present.

With such a doctrine at its core, Charter 77 was set to hold out for the long haul. “The Power of the Powerless” was itself so powerful that Havel’s position as the very embodiment of the dissident movement was assured. When the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 promised political change in Czechoslovakia as well, Havel was the natural choice of the dissidents to become the country’s first postrevolutionary president. His rise from the Slavia Café to the Castle across the river fulfilled the dissident dreams of a critical mind in power. Havel’s ascension seemed the only logical outcome of a revolution that had finally been made incarnate in the world of their painful experience, but which had always burned, timelessly, in their own hearts and minds.

After becoming Czech president, Havel proudly announced that he had little interest in the squabbling of the elected parliament. “I am happy to leave political intrigue to others,” Havel announced, “I will not compete with them, certainly not by using their weapons.”²⁶ In the democratic post-Communist society that followed the Velvet Revolution, such weapons included political parties, parliamentary factions, newspapers, and stump speeches. In showing a pronounced lack of interest in such tools, Havel showed how high above ordinary political life the engaged Czech intellectual could imagine himself to be. Some observers of the Czech political scene were confounded by Havel’s lack of interest in the workings of traditional political democracy, and disappointed with his lack of influence in the country’s politics. But the role that Havel and his fellow dissidents imagined for themselves as they worked toward their revolution was one scripted in

accord with a political tradition that aspired to more than just representing the common citizen. The “people” could vote, but they also needed to be transformed and shaped, rewritten and revised.

Since the Velvet Revolution, Václav Havel and his self-consciously “dissident” friends have repeatedly lost elections to men on both the Left and Right who were committed to a liberal vision of parliamentary democracy and all its bourgeois trappings. Havel has backed away from his original vision of transforming the Czech people, who remain, for better or for worse, who they are. We might lament Havel’s loss of influence in his country. It is worth remembering, however, that the very thoughts that inspired him to be such an effective dissident were drawn from deep wells of ambition and pointed to far more radical transformation than the gentle Velvet Revolution that transpired. We may be grateful for Havel’s ambitions. We may also be grateful that they were moderated.

NOTES

1. Timothy Garton Ash, *The Magic Lantern: The Revolutions of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 124.
2. František Palacký, “Speech at the General Meeting of Svatobor, November 27, 1864,” *Spisy drobné*, I, 205–206. Cited in Joseph F. Zacek, *Palacký: The Historian as Scholar and Nationalist* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 28.
3. Interviews with Masaryk in Karl Čapek, *Talks with Masaryk* (North Haven, CT: Catbird, 1995), 194–195.
4. Antonín Liehm, letter published in *Literární noviny*. Reprinted in Antonín Liehm, *The Politics of Culture* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 42.
5. Liehm, *The Politics of Culture*, 50.
6. Hans Eichner, ed., *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, vol. I. (Munich: F. Schöningh, 1967), 260.
7. Karl Marx. “The German Ideology,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*. 2nd ed., edited by Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 149. The German original is: “Die Voraussetzungen, mit denen wir beginnen, sind keine willkürlichen, keine Dogmen, es sind wirkliche Voraussetzungen, von denen man nur in der Einbildung abstrahieren kann. Es sind die wirklichen Individuen, ihre Aktion und ihre materiellen Lebensbedingungen, sowohl die vorgefundenen wie die durch ihre eigne Aktion erzeugten. Diese Voraussetzungen sind also auf rein empirischem Wege konstatierbar.” See “Die deutsche Ideologie” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, vol. 3. (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1962), 20. I owe this observation about this passage to Liah Greenfeld.
8. André Breton, “Speech to the Congress of Writers,” in *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 235–236.
9. Jindřich Chaloupecký, “Na Hranicích Umení: Příběh Jiřího Kolaře.” Written in 1972, reprinted in *Revolver Revue*, no. 11 (Prague, 1988). A *samizdat* journal, *Revolver Revue* did not number its pages.
10. Václav Havel, “Dělali jsme divadlo společně,” in Marie Boková and Miroslav Klíma, eds., *Jan Grossman: Svědectví Současníků*. (Prague: Pražská scéna, 1996), 52.
11. Jaromír Hořec, “Největší talent generace,” in Boková and Klíma, *Jan Grossman*, 22.

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12. Jan Grossman, "Svět malého divadla," *Divadlo*, vol. 7 (Prague, 1963), 18. Cited in Barbara Day, "The Theatre on the Balustrade of Prague and the Small Stage Tradition in Czechoslovakia." Unpublished dissertation, Department of Drama, University of Bristol, December 1985, 195.
13. Grossman, "Svět malého divadla," 18. Cited in Day, "The Theatre on the Balustrade," 196–202.
14. Václav Havel, "Dělali jsme divadlo společně," in Boková and Klíma, *Jan Grossman*, 54.
15. Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Unchained*, in Simon Watson Taylor, ed., *The Ubu Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 107. The French original is: "Cornegidouille! nous n'aurons point tout démoli si nous ne démolissons même les ruines! Or je n'y vois d'autre moyen que d'en équilibrer de beaux edifices bien ordonnés." See *Ubu Enchaîné* in Alfred Jarry, *Tout Ubu*, Maurice Saillet, ed. (Le Livre de Poche: Paris, 1962), 267.
16. "Prohlášení Charty 77," 1 January, 1977. In *Charta 77; 1977–1989. Od morální k demokratické revoluci. Dokumentace*. (Bratislava: Archa, 1990), 9.
17. Václav Havel, "Moc Bezmocných," in Václav Havel, *O lidskou Identitu* (Purley, Surrey: Rozmluvy, 1989), 58.
18. Havel, "Moc Bezmocných," 55.
19. Havel, "Moc Bezmocných," 77.
20. Havel, "Moc Bezmocných," 107.
21. Havel, "Moc Bezmocných," 86.
22. Havel, "Moc Bezmocných," 131–132.
23. Havel, "Moc Bezmocných," 128.
24. Havel, "Moc Bezmocných," 95.
25. Havel, "Moc Bezmocných," 132.
26. Václav Havel, *Summer Meditations* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), 6.

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