

Bond University
Research Repository



Vaclav Havel, Jan Patočka

The powerless and the shaken

Brennan, Daniel

Published in:

Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy / Revue Canadienne de Philosophie Continentale

Published: 01/01/2014

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Bond University research repository.](#)

Recommended citation(APA):

Brennan, D. (2014). Vaclav Havel, Jan Patočka: The powerless and the shaken. *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy / Revue Canadienne de Philosophie Continentale*, 18(2), 149-168. [1917-9685].

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

For more information, or if you believe that this document breaches copyright, please contact the Bond University research repository coordinator.


2014

Vaclav Havel, Jan Patočka: The powerless and the shaken

Daniel Brennan

Bond University, daniel_brennan@bond.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: http://epublications.bond.edu.au/fsd_papers

 Part of the [European History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), and the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Daniel Brennan. (2014) "Vaclav Havel, Jan Patočka: The powerless and the shaken" *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy / Revue Canadienne de Philosophie Continentale*, 18 (2), 149-168: ISSN 1917-9685.

http://epublications.bond.edu.au/fsd_papers/416

VÁCLAV HAVEL, JAN PATOČKA; THE POWERLESS
AND THE SHAKEN

[Originally published in Symposium Vol 18 No. 2
2014]

Daniel Brennan (Bond University)

Václav Havel passed away in December of 2011, leaving behind a legacy that is yet to be fully appreciated. Besides his career in drama and his extraordinary political trajectory from leading dissident to President of Czechoslovakia and then the Czech Republic, Havel also wrote on matters of philosophy. It is to this that I will turn my attention in this paper, as this has been largely overlooked in the immediate wake of his death. My claim essentially is that Havel's concept of living in truth is heavily influenced by a call for dissent made by his mentor, the phenomenologist Jan Patočka, which he makes in the last essay of his *Heretical Essays*, "Wars of the Twentieth Century and The Twentieth Century as War". Here I will explain how Patočka's paper informs the philosophy of Václav Havel, especially in his work, "The Power of the Powerless," which is Havel's most famous essay. But more importantly I will carve out a space where Havel can be assessed on his own merits, that is, not merely as a vehicle for Patočka's ideas, but a presenter of his own.

Jan Patočka's contributions to philosophy are mainly in the tradition of phenomenology. An excellent intellectual biography of Patočka is provided by Erazim Kohák.¹ Kohák writes that Patočka is best understood as an heir of Edmund Husserl, who Patočka worked closely with from 1933 whilst Husserl was working on the critique of subjectivity and technology that is contained in *The Crisis of the*

¹ Erazim Kohák, *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as JP.

European Sciences.² Patočka, whilst studying under Husserl, also attended lectures by Heidegger and hence there is a strong presence of Heidegger's work in his philosophy as well. The third major figure that would help to situate Patočka is the towering figure in Czech history of Tomáš Masaryk.(JP, 10) Both Masaryk and Husserl had diagnosed a state of crisis in contemporary Europe, but both thinkers had different approaches to the problem. As Kohák notes, Masaryk turned to an objective sense of truth in order to infuse meaning and order into the cosmos whereas Husserl, exploring the manner in which objectivity is only meaningful in subjective experience, finds a phenomenological analysis of subjective experience to be the key to recovering from the pitfalls of scientism.(JP, 13) Patočka, conversely, engages with both philosophical solutions and Kohák claims that his later philosophy represents a synthesis of Masaryk's objectivism and Husserl's analysis of subjectivity.

That Havel's philosophy owes a debt to Patočka is not a new theme. Edward Findlay explains that a reading of Havel's philosophical writings is heavily illuminated by understanding something of Patočka's philosophy first.³ Findlay is not friendly to Havel's thought, however, claiming that it lacks the rigour of Patočka. This is a claim which at first glance seems correct, but is, I maintain, not fair to the depth and breadth of Havel's thought. Hence a further exploration of this link is vital to fully appreciating Havel's legacy. It is my contention that Havel gives an interpretation of Patočka's philosophy which is more politically engaged than that found in Patočka's writings. In other words, Havel lifts Patočka's thought out of the theoretical and strives for an understanding of how Patočka's ideas on dissent can be utilised practically. The result is something new and unique and well worth exploring.

² Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr, (Evanston: Northwestern University press, 1970).

³ Edward Findlay "Classical Ethics and Postmodern Critique: Political Philosophy in Václav Havel and Jan Patočka", *The Review of Politics*, vol.61, no.3 (1999): 403-438. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CE.

Havel brings to the table a rigour for exploring concrete political realities and he leaves behind the analysis of history that marks Patočka's thinking. I will argue here that what Havel offers is a political philosophy that is rooted in Patočka's thinking, yet essentially Havelian. Havel's life, of course, is the life of a politically engaged dissident and politician and hence it is no surprise that his writing is about concrete and present political issues; but that is not to dismiss his writings as simply a reflection of his life. Havel brings to political philosophy a unique understanding of the role of ideology in politics and a unique understanding of how ideology can be overcome. The second part of this paper will demonstrate that uniqueness.

Patočka's writing on dissent begins in his philosophical look at the history of the twentieth century. For Patočka, the defining events of the twentieth century were the two world wars, brought on as a result of revolutionary Germany's industrialisation of warfare, and the playing out of the idea, represented in the philosophy of Nietzsche, that meaning is superfluous to power.⁴ Patočka argues that the First World War's creation of the front line is a disgusting result of technology influencing warfare. The terrible conditions in the trenches were compounded and necessitated by massive increases in fire power. Patočka calls the front line of WWI "absurdity par excellence" (HE, 126) — the space where everything that is valued by humanity is destroyed. The result of this is the creation of a desire to follow any leader or idea that promises to make the possibility of the front line disappear. This desire led, in Patočka's eyes, to a transformation of the will to war from fighting for a result to fighting for peace. The Second World War can be understood in this context. With the increase in industrialisation and technological sophistication, the front of the Second World War is less easily defined. It impinges upon the homes of ordinary, non-

⁴ Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, (tr.) Erazim Kohák, (ed.) James Dodd, (Illinois: Open Court, 1996). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as HE.

enlisted citizens and thereby becomes an experience for anybody. Running with Patočka's analysis, we can claim that with the development of nuclear weapons, that war becomes a constant and immediate possibility. It could start and finish before most are informed of it. War in recent times can be hot, cold or smouldering. With war being fought in different modes, it is hard to tell when war begins or ends, if it ends at all. The demobilisation of Europe after World War II, for Patočka, has not made for a state of peace in the sense that war is not present. Instead war has appropriated peace into itself. This appropriation is, for Patočka, perhaps more cruel than hot war, as peace has become an instrument of war. Patočka writes,

We continue to be fascinated by force, allow it to lead us along its paths making us its dupes. Where we believe we have mastered it and can depend on it for security, we are in reality in a state of demobilisation and are losing the war which has cunningly changed its visage but has not ceased. (HE, 132)

Life desires peace, but for Patočka, life's attachment to force creates the will to war, hence within life there is a tendency for war. (HE, 128) What is most interesting about Patočka's descriptions of the two world wars and the logos of the twentieth century is his assertion that the Second World War did not result in peace, but a continued state of war, not war as traditionally understood, but a kind of war-like state nonetheless. This state is a war of economics where, although in appearance a state of demobilization, there are mobilized "armies of workers, researchers, and engineers" and all work to the beat of the state's drum.

Patočka asks if the demobilisation of Europe and the gradual disappearance of systematic terror at extremes such as with Stalinism, represent a true demobilisation,

or a “cynical demobilisation” where individuals are forced to make a separation between truth and the public realm, as they are mobilised into obedience with new forms of power. (HE, 130) Patočka anticipates here some of the major themes of critical theorists and their analysis of bureaucracy and industrialisation of modern lives. However, what is quite remarkable in this analysis is Patočka’s insistence that it is through confronting the reality of the front, rather than running to life, that true demobilisation can be possible. Patočka locates power, or more accurately, freedom, in “the solidarity of the shaken.” The shaken are those who can translate a certain kind of freedom which Patočka locates in the WW1 front line combatant into the combatant in the demobilised war for peace.

Patočka draws on the experiences of the front of Ernst Jünger⁵ and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.⁶ Both writers described a sense of transcendence in their front line experience. Jünger noted that the front was an experience of transcendence from what one previously was — that is, one cannot retreat from what one is taking part in. Patočka quotes Teilhard de Chardin to describe this transcendence.

The front is not simply a flaming line where the accumulated energies of hostile masses are released and mutually neutralized. It is also the locus of a distinctive Life shared only by those who dare step right up to it and only for as long as they dare remain there. It seems to me that one could show the front is not simply a line of fire, the interface of people attacking each other, but it is also in some way the “crest of a wave” that bears the world of humans toward its new destiny. (HE 125)

⁵ Ernst Jünger was a German novelist and essayist famous for his conservative outlook, which some consider to be sympathetic to fascism.

⁶ Teilhard de Chardin was a French Jesuit philosopher who wrote on his experiences of the front line in World War 1.

This destiny, Patočka writes, is the destruction of the world which was horrible enough to create this front line in the first place. (HE, 125) The force which created the war uses the soldier's lives as a kind of statistics of peace. It is symptomatic of a technological society which measures life, and calculates the good. The soldiers die at the front in the service of peace. The sacrifice is celebrated by those at home, for whom the aims of life are still paramount, just think of the repeated line "lest we forget" said at every ANZAC day memorial — because of our attachment to life we are told, these soldiers must die.⁷ WW1 was hence, in a perverse way for Patočka, a war for peace.

For Patočka, what is useful about the front is the complete suspension of involvement in the world to take part in the events immediately at hand — "freedom from all the interests of peace, of life, of the day." Day and night are two symbols in the *Heretical Essays* for life and death. Both are equally a part of the human condition, yet we turn more to the day, ignoring the night. War, as the experience of the night, is an experience of something as equally human as life. Patočka writes that the front line combatant, in turning towards the night manifests a terrible freedom:

This absolute freedom is the understanding that here something has already been achieved, something that is not the means to anything else, a stepping stone to..., but rather something above and beyond which there can be nothing. This is the culmination, this self-surrender which can call humans away from their vocations, talents,

⁷ On April 25th Australia celebrates a national public holiday commemorating Australia's involvement in World War One, specifically a battle in Turkey which sustained many Australian casualties. The Australian War Memorial claims that ANZAC day celebrates the spirit that Australian soldier exhibited in World War One, and continue to exhibit in conflict today. "The spirit of ANZAC, with its human qualities of courage, mateship, and sacrifice, continues to have meaning and relevance for our sense of national identity." The death of soldiers in the combat is portrayed as a sacrifice that gave Australia a national identity. See Australian War Memorial "ANZAC Day", <http://www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/anzac/> (Accessed 11/8/2012).

possibilities, their future. To be capable of that, to be chosen and called for it in a world that uses conflict to mobilize force so that it comes to appear as a totally objectified and objectifying cauldron of energy also means to overcome force. (HE, 130)

Patočka is arguing that the motives that led to the front, are consumed in the front. The danger of the front, coupled with the immense freedom of the front, negates the will to life that created the conditions for the front in the first place.

All everydayness, all visions of future life pale before the simple peak on which humans find themselves standing. In face of that, all the ideas of socialism, of progress, of democratic spontaneity, of independence and freedom appear impoverished, neither viable nor tangible. (HE, 130)

For Patočka, the willingness to sacrifice one's life at the front is traceable to a Christian appropriation of pre-history's understanding of the necessity of death, and Plato's taming of death with the immortal soul and Christianity's appropriation of this. (HE, 130) Patočka is scathing of those who would accept everydayness in its givenness: "Humankind will not attain peace by devoting and surrendering itself to the criteria of everydayness and of its promises. All who betray this solidarity must realise that they are sustaining war and are the parasites on the sidelines who live off the blood of others." (HE, 135)⁸ This is one of the rare times that Patočka makes a judgement so boldly. Normally such a strict practitioner of the phenomenological

⁸ Ibid., 135.

method, this political statement is full of pathos and is directed squarely at those who are participating in the state of war Patočka points to.

If the wars could produce this kind of freedom, then why have they not made any lasting peace? Lubica Ucnik gives the following answer from her reading of Patočka:

Peace has become nothing more than war fought with other means, “appealing to the will to live and to have”. Leaving their front experiences behind, survivors accept that life is geared only towards things, life of consumerism: *carpe deum*, enjoy the pleasures of the moment without concern for the future! Not life in itself, but things make life pleasurable.⁹

In other words, the war continues on, in a demobilized form, using ordinary citizens as peaceful combatants, in a war of economics. Citizens are persuaded that happiness lies in consumerism. Consider political rhetoric in the War on Terror. On October 11 2001, one month after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre buildings in New York, then President George W. Bush announced “Now, the American people have got to go about their business. We cannot let the terrorists achieve the objective of frightening our nation to the point where we don't — where we don't conduct business, where people don't shop. That's their intention.”¹⁰ The normal activity of a U.S. citizen is hence defined as consuming. Any actual combat is far from our shores, and used as evidence that our (consumerist) way of life is superior for attaining eudemonia. Political rhetoric maintains that soldiers in the far away middle east are making a sacrifice for our way of life. The former Australian Prime Minister John Howard, in committing troops to the invasion of Iraq, argued that the invasion of Iraq

⁹ Lubica Ucnik. “Patočka on Techno-Power and the Sacrificial Victim”, in *Jan Patočka and the Heritage of Phenomenology: Centenary Papers*, (ed.) Ivan Chvatik and Erika Abrams, (New York: Springer, 2011): 195-196.

¹⁰ White House Archive, “President Holds Prime Time News Conference” October 11, 2001, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011011-7.html>

was in the national interest.¹¹ The current Prime Minister Julia Gillard has argued that Australia has a military presence in Afghanistan so that it does not again become a training ground for Al Qaeda who conspire to kill westerners there.¹² Again, we are made to feel that the things of this world are worth the war's continuation.

The contemporary front, for Patočka, is a battle of logos. Those who suspend the given, who escape the ordinary everydayness and realise human freedom, have a responsibility to speak, Patočka writes, "like Socrates *daimonion*" in warnings and prohibitions. (HE, 135)¹³ I mention Patočka's use of the Socratic term *daimonion* because it appears to me that Patočka is referring to the wisdom that appears to come from outside of the cave to refer to Plato's allegory illuminating the inside of the cave. Socrates' inner voice speaks with divinity, but refers to the mundane. It is for Patočka the voice of freedom. In a demobilized age still in the mode of war, Patočka again urges strife in the form of warning and dissent against whatever regime or form of force is manipulating human being. This is a rare explicit incitement to action in Patočka's work. In the sixth essay of the *Heretical Essays*, Patočka urges action in the present through recapturing logos by renouncing whatever meaning one already has been given.

Patočka, as mentioned, talks of "the solidarity of the shaken," the shaken are those who understand that they can say no to the forces which make this state of war continuous. Those who can recapture the freedom of the front and bring the historical situation into doubt effect change. Patočka claims:

The solidarity of the shaken is built up in persecution and uncertainty: that is its front line, quiet, without fanfare or sensation even there where this

¹¹ "Howard Commits Troops to War", in *Sydney Morning Herald* March 18, 2003, <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/03/18/1047749732511.html>

¹² "Gillard Begins Debate on War" Australian Financial Review, October 19, 2010, http://afr.com/p/national/gillard_begins_debate_on_war_i0E3BgbqAIAK46EYsxq7PO

¹³ Ibid., 135.

ruling Force seeks to seize it. It does not fear being unpopular but seeks it out and calls out wordlessly. Humankind will not attain peace by devoting and surrendering itself to the criteria of everydayness and its promises. (HE, 135)

Patočka then invokes Heraclitus whom he claims saw his idea of war, that is, a struggle for freedom, as a divine law which sustained life. Patočka calls this the will to the freedom of risk in the *aristeia*. The *aristeia* is the scene in an epic work where the hero has their finest moment, for example, Achilles kills Hector. Essentially Patočka is asking people, in order to achieve real peace, to risk their comfort, to be a sacrifice not for the things of life, but for life itself, to choose not to live if living means not living with the Good. Patočka is not advocating martyrdom, because the irrational death of the martyr, for glory, or for however many virgins, forgets that we are finite human beings that are not reducible to calculable and therefore controllable beings; this brings a sense that life is meaningful when lived in other ways. Patočka means living responsibly, responsible for ourselves, and for others, and for the world, because life is not about living in the sacrifice of others, nor of consuming finite resources.

The solidarity of the shaken and their emphasis on sacrifice for responsibility, I take to be the driving idea behind Václav Havel's influential essay 'The Power of the Powerless'. This essay is an attempt to supply meaning to dissent in order to overcome the oppressive power of ideology. I will from here demonstrate how reading Patočka's thoughts on the solidarity of the shaken can illuminate an understanding of Havel's essay, and how Havel has moved past Patočka.

In the two book length studies of Havel, by James Sire, and James Pontuso respectively, there has been no mention made of the link between ‘The Power of the Powerless’ and the final *Heretical Essay*. Edward Findlay, in his discussion of the link between Havel and Patočka is explicit that Havel’s essay is related to Patočka’s essay; but his analysis is, as already stated, unfair to Havel. Findlay writes that Havel merely echoes the themes of Patočka’s analysis. (CE, 407) Aviezer Tucker only mentions that ‘The Power of the Powerless is an encounter with Patočka’.¹⁴ Hence a further analysis of the link between these essays is important.

Findlay claims that Havel’s thought can only be considered in light of Patočka’s work. (CE, 403) He also criticises Havel for not being the rigorous philosopher that Patočka was. For Findlay, there is no political philosophy in Havel’s works, just a spattering of themes which resonate with political readers.(CE, 404) I think this is unfair to Havel. There is a key difference between Havel’s and Patočka’s critique of ideology which separates Havel and delineates him as an original thinker, which is the removal of Patočka’s philosophy of history from Patočka’s critique of ideology. The key question driving Patočka’s critique of ideology, as is well noted by Derrida, is “why does [Europe] suffer from ignorance of its history, from a failure to assume its responsibility, that is, the memory of its history as history of responsibility?”¹⁵ The *Heretical Essays* aim to give a philosophical explanation to the problems of historicity from Patočka’s view that historicity removes the possibility of man being a historical construction. The *Heretical Essays* are heretical precisely because they allow the reader to rupture with history to have better access to history, that is to momentarily step out of historicity and be responsible for history. On the other hand, Havel, whilst

¹⁴ Avazier Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 2nd Ed., (tr.) David Wills, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 10.

sharing Patočka's Heideggerian conception of Being, does not share Patočka's valuation of the philosophy of history. Instead, Havel's philosophy is a markedly more dissident philosophy. Where Patočka elaborates on the historical concealing of Being, Havel elaborates on the possibility of uncovering in the present. In his essay to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Prague Spring, "Farce, Reformability, and the Future of the World" Havel, instead of describing the historical formulations of ideology, explains the historical attempts to disrupt ideology. Rather than explain the Hungarian Revolution, Prague Spring, Khrushchev's thaw and many other individual attempts to upset totalitarian regimes as separate historical occurrences, Havel contends that they represent a single historical trend towards the natural state of diversity, uniqueness and autonomy.¹⁶ Havel is concerned with history in so far as history can explain the attempt to ground an openness to Being in a particular present. The question of Europe's identity from the perspective of the philosophy of history is not Havel's concern.¹⁷ Hence Havel's philosophy separates from Patočka's in the scope of their concern. The analysis of history which informs Patočka's critique of ideology is not present in Havel. That does not mean that Havel disagrees with Patočka; instead Havel frames his thought differently.

Havel's thought is no less dense than Patočka's for the lack of historical analysis. Instead, Havel directs his thought directly against the contemporary Czech and world situation. Whereas the call to dissent is barely explicit in Patočka, couched in strict explication of the phenomenological method, Havel is much more practical than Patočka. Havel directs his writing explicitly at whatever situation is most concerning

¹⁶ Václav Havel *Open Letters*, (tr) Paul Wilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 360. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as OL.

¹⁷ Havel, especially Havel the politician, is very interested in the identity of Europe, however, only in so far as Europe can be made to be an open society encouraging diversity and freedom. He is a supporter of the EU and European integration.

to him. For example, in *Plato and Europe*, Patočka elaborates at length on a phenomenological analysis of Plato, Aristotle and Socrates, discussing ways that the political example of Socrates represents a life that is open to Being.¹⁸ The life then that Patočka espouses is, due to the phenomenological distancing from the historical situation, a life for all times. Socrates's example is an example for us. Patočka's concern for life under totalitarian communism in Czechoslovakia is displayed through his presentation of the timeless way to live in openness to Being. Havel, in contrast, does not need to hide his concern for the Czech situation. Havel is not a strict phenomenologist—hence he is not corrupting the phenomenological method in writing open letters to Czech leaders, or writing essays on dissident events immediately as they happen. In short, Havel grounds his philosophy in an analysis of the present. Jean Bethke Elshtain writes that Havel's philosophy represents an answer to a real crisis in responsibility in the present world.¹⁹

This focus on real current events that fills Havel's writing and speeches is criticized by Karel Kosik in his article 'The Third Munich.' He argues that concern for realpolitik lacks imagination and lumps Havel's party-free politics in with left and right wing ideologies as lacking real imagination.²⁰ I think this is unfair. Kosik makes the point that "any politics that considers the cave its field of action sooner or later degenerates into a bad routine, into a politics not worthy of the name." (TM, 154) I do not think that Havel, despite being concerned by the real political events happening around him, debases his thought. At all times Havel is careful to step back and consider his responsibility in the situation he is responding to. It is an arrow in Havel's quiver that he manages to fuse together his concern for realpolitik and for

¹⁸ Jan Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, (tr) Petr Lom, (CA; Stanford University Press, 2002).

¹⁹ Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Václav Havel on Freedom and Responsibility" in *Theory and Practice*, (ed.) Ian Shapiro and Judith Wagner DeCew (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 478.

²⁰ Karel Kosik, "The third Munich" trans. Miloslav Bednar in *Telos: A Quarterly Journal of Critical Thought*. No. 94 (Winter 1993-1994): 154. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as TM.

moral theory. Havel argues that when ideology coerces a citizen to live as the ideology dictates the moral dimension to life has been lost.²¹ Havel's concern is for returning the moral dimension to the political. The thrust of 'The Power of the Powerless' is an attempt to create such a return, despite Kosik's worries.

The two main concepts analysed in "The Power of the Powerless" are "living a lie" and "living in truth." When an individual acts according to the dictates of an ideology they are living a lie and when they act according to the dictates of morality they are living in truth. For Havel, ideology coerces behaviour from individuals. It does so through a mechanism of inducing fear; either a fear of punishment or a fear of a loss of comfort. (PP, 27) Havel, in this essay, tells the famous story about the greengrocer placing a sign in his window proclaiming "Workers of the World unite!" Havel questions the greengrocer's motives in placing the sign in his window:

I think it can safely be assumed that the overwhelming majority of shopkeepers never think about the slogans they put in their windows, nor do they use them to express their real opinions. That poster was delivered to our greengrocer from the enterprise headquarters along with the onions and the carrots. He put them all into the window simply because it had been done that way for years, because everyone does it, and because it is the way it has to be. If he were to refuse, there could be trouble. (PP, 25)

The world that the greengrocer engages in, that is actually lives in, involves a set of ritualistic practices that maintain his existence in the social world. Havel intended this story to be a critique of socialist governance; however the moral reaches much further

²¹ Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1985), 28. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PP.

than this. The actions of the greengrocer, whether it be to perform his job (placing of carrots and onions), or his social duty (the sign), for Havel represent a thrown state of Being. It is the job and the social structure which determines or coerces action from the greengrocer that in a sense determines his identity in the world. As a greengrocer it is natural to place the onions and the carrots, yet as a greengrocer there is something a little bit odd about the placing of the socialist slogan.

What is it that compels the greengrocer to place the slogan in his window? Havel writes that it is fear. Havel writes that the placing of the slogan is “one of the thousands of details that guarantee him a relatively tranquil life ‘in harmony with society’, as they say.” (PP, 25) The combined placing of slogans by all citizens affirms an ideology. What Havel calls “the aims of life” are put aside in order to live in harmony with ideology. (PP, 25) One can already note the similarity to Patočka’s pronouncement regarding a life lived for the things of life. Life within the system, for Havel, is life within a lie, as one’s actions are being determined by one’s desire to not upset a system rather than being determined by a desire to live an authentic life. The totalitarian system is created and affirmed through the greengrocer’s actions. He shares the guilt, along with all of the other participating citizens, in making normal the practice of affirming the totalitarian system. The identity of the greengrocer is tied in with his participation in the ideology’s rituals and practices.

The greengrocer need not even believe the slogans he is placing. Havel identifies that the ideology does not care if the greengrocer believes in socialism or not; what is important is that he behaves. Havel writes that individuals need not believe the mystifications that the system throws up to maintain itself, such as that ideology respects human rights and promotes freedom; “but they must behave as though they did.” (PP, 31) This bad faith of sorts is living a lie. Through living a lie, the ideology

maintains its power. Havel writes that through living a lie, “Individuals confirm the system, fulfil the system, make the system, are the system.” (PP, 31)²² The post-totalitarian world is thus maintained by citizens living a lie and adopting a world of appearances in the place of reality in order to maintain a comfortable life free from risk.

For Havel, all citizens are required to live a lie to maintain the power of the ideology. The greengrocer is just one of many who ritually place placards in their window that mean something very different to the semantic content printed on them. The greengrocer’s identification with the placard is not one of socialist solidarity; rather the placard, Havel claims, is a sign that announces “I, the greengrocer XY, live here and I know what I must do. I behave in the manner expected of me. I can be depended upon and am beyond reproach. I am obedient and therefore have the right to be left in peace.” (PP, 28) The system requires every citizen to also engage in similar rituals which sustain the ideology’s power. It is a point of interest that Havel focuses a great deal of thought on the way that ideology distorts language to create a world of appearances for living a lie within. This critique of political manipulations of language is of critical importance in understanding Havel’s response to ideology.

Throughout Havel’s writing, language is seen as a political phenomenon. In his first major speech, delivered to the union of Czechoslovakian Writers, Havel lambasts the organisation which is responsible for allocating funding to literary projects for selectively privileging safe and homogenous literary styles, thereby manipulating the political sphere with a stagnating force. The speech has been published as the essay, ‘On Evasive Thinking.’²³ The opening of the speech has Havel paraphrase a newspaper article that chastises citizens for complaining about window ledges falling

²² Ibid

²³ Havel, Open Letters, 10-24.

in the centre of Prague, causing deaths. The writer urges citizens to focus on the good points of progress in Czechoslovak living conditions and to illustrate his point he notes that women now wear the latest fashions from the streets of Paris rather than the grim grey clothes usually associated with socialist homogenising of fashion. The problem for Havel is that the author of the article is trying to make citizens forget or evade thinking about the very real issue of falling window ledges. The article employs language manipulatively to institute what Havel terms ‘evasive thinking.’ Women’s fashions have nothing to do with the very real issue of poor building maintenance. For Havel, there is a responsibility to use language to point to things as they really are. This is not a metaphysical attempt to uncover things in themselves, but to reveal things as they appear to us. That language can change the manner of appearance of an object is a cause for concern as well as for hope. Hence Havel is distrustful of the manipulative nature of language, yet hopeful of a language that can possibly enliven the political sphere. I am reminded of an old soviet joke that illustrates Havel’s concern. Two farmers are looking at a tractor with a broken wheel, one farmer laments, ‘It is useless, the wheel is broken.’ The other farmer retorts, ‘You are looking at this all wrong comrade; three wheels are working fine.’²⁴ The suggestion of the joke is that simply by changing the language that describes the situation, the understanding of the situation changes.

Havel’s play *The Garden Party* is a perfect example of his interest in, and critique of, language.²⁵ It is a difficult play due to the constant twists and turns of the language used by characters. Even characterisation is difficult to fathom as characters take on roles of other characters mid-dialogue simply by taking over another character’s

²⁴ Ben Lewis, *Hammer and Tickle*, Film, Directed by Ben Lewis, 2006.

²⁵ Václav Havel, “The Garden Party,” trans. George Theiner, in *The Garden Party and Other Plays*, (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 1-52. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as GP

conversation. In the opening scene, the protagonist, Hugo Pludek, is playing chess with himself whilst his father and mother attempt to give him life advice in the form of muddled clichés. As Hugo jumps from side to side of the chess table he is repeatedly asked how he is going. Depending on which side of the table he is standing, he says either, “badly” or “really well.” The point, at this moment of the play, is the deceptive nature of language use: how, to draw on the earlier joke, the tractor can either have one broken wheel, or three working ones. Both are correct and true statements, and this illustrates the point that simply calling ideology a form of lying is too simple. In the play, the audience is positioned to be unsettled by the exchange. All the relevant statements are true; none of them indicate what is really going on. This is a persistent theme in the play and is well illustrated by an example from the text where Hugo is finishing the game of chess.

Hugo: Super, Mum! (Makes his move) Checkmate!

Pludek: You lost?

Hugo: No, I won.

Mrs Pludek: You won.

Hugo: No, I lost. (GP, 7)

Rather than gaining an insight into the nature of any character, it seems that the discourse has a stronger presence than the characters. That is that the personalities of the characters are lost in multiple meanings and broken clichés.

For Havel one can lose oneself in cliché. In *The Garden Party*, a clerk and secretary, attempting to have a real conversation after the prompting of a motivational inaugurator, ultimately fail to have a meaningful discourse. They give up and return to the mechanistic and meaningless use of paradoxes and muddled clichés that every character in the play uses. For example, at the prompting of the inaugurator, who

keeps appearing and asking how the conversation is going, the two attempt to have a conversation about what is immediately before them in the garden.

Clerk: Look-

Secretary: Yes?

Clerk: Look – a sparrow! It’s flying – moss blossoms – meadows are a-humming – nature!

Secretary: What?

Clerk: I say, sparrows are flying – the boss mlossoms – the meadows are a-humming –

Secretary: Oh, I see – nature!

Clerk: Yes. Well now. You have hair! It’s pretty – gold – like buttercrumbs – I mean buttercups – and your nose is like a rose – I’m sorry – I mean like a forget-me-not – white –

Secretary: Look – a sparrow. (GP, 18)

My reading of this fragment is as a declining move away from the sight of the sparrow into a muddled mess of a conversation, with mixed up clichés and a complete failure to describe what is seen. The conversation continues in this way until the Clerk responds to the Secretary, “The Large Dance floor A is indeed large. I admire the courage with which it has been revealed to us.” (GP, 18) The absurdity of this conversation should be read within the context that the inaugurator is encouraging free conversation to promote motivation at work. Read in this light the whole garden party is an ideologically controlled life. People feel they are living, but are mere cogs in an ideological machine, which is turned by a false identification by the characters with work rather than with what Havel might term the real aims of life. Hence the failed attempt to describe the sparrow and the flowers becomes a comfort taken in the

ideology's interpretation of the size of the dance floor, a matter the two had been debating for some time previously in a glut of bureaucratic language. Ultimately, as the secretary and the clerk identify with the language of their profession, they fail to have a real conversation about a phenomenon as it is. Indeed it is as if no specific character is even necessary in the play for any role as all it takes to become another person is to start speaking for them. The loss of self is taken to an extreme conclusion in the final act of the play as Hugo arrives home from his new job, awaiting the return of Hugo, asking, as the doorbell rings, if that is himself. Hugo has lost a sense of self identity because he has assumed a role in the machine of the ideology which has demanded a certain kind of speech and this has taken Hugo away from his authentic self.

Such a reading of the garden party is supported by Paul Trensky, who writes that

[Havel] shares with other absurdist playwrights the conception of modern man's identity as a vacuum; consequently, man can become anything at any time, depending largely on the influences to which he is exposed. All his characters are soulless, mechanical creatures who are formed and defined only by their environment. The human world is an impersonal world in which humans are exchangeable.²⁶

I share with Trensky the idea that the language of the play, or its manipulation, is more important than the characters. For Trensky, words loom as a threatening presence in the play and give the impression that they could take over the play and their victims. (GPR, 161) The ritual that sustains the ideology is more important than the individual performing it. (PP, 30) The behaviour involved in living a lie acts,

²⁶ Paul Trensky, "Havel's *The Garden Party* Revisited" in *Critical Essays on Václav Havel*, (ed.) Marketa Goetz- Stankiewicz and Phyllis Carey, (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1999), 161. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as GPR.

Havel claims, like “a collection of traffic signals and directional signs, giving the process shape and structure.” (PP, 32)

Anything which leads an individual to not follow their ideologically predetermined role, the system sees as an attack against itself, like an interruption to the traffic signals. (PP, 30) This is where Havel locates the importance of dissent. Dissent is a difficult word for Havel: the dissident is a person who lives in truth, but Havel notes that not all people who attempt live in truth are called dissidents. (PP, 67-67) Havel argues that any activity that “attempt[s]” to create and support the ‘independent life of society’ as an articulated expression of ‘living within the truth’ is a meaningful action against ideology. (PP, 67) Havel stresses throughout ‘The Power of the Powerless’ that living within the truth exposes the mendacious structures of ideology.

[T]he moment someone breaks through in one place, when one person cries out, “The emperor is naked!” —when a single person breaks the rules of the game, thus exposing it as a game — everything suddenly appears in another light and the whole crust seems then to be made of a tissue on the point of tearing and disintegrating uncontrollably. (PP, 43)

To put it simply, every act that is not ideological has the potential to deny the ideology’s power, as that power is maintained through the behaviour that recognises it.

Havel’s plays are an attempt to live in the truth. They aim to point out to the audience that the emperor is naked and thereby shake or rupture the machine. Havel never classifies dissent as combat, or war-like behaviour as does Patočka, instead I think Havel is too grounded in the world of politics to make such a distinction. Havel

understands at all times that the dissident is not tearing down a new world, but rather demonstrating the possibility of life lived in other ways. His attitude to the theatre demonstrates this. This attitude is spelled out in *In Letters to Olga*, a collection of letters Havel wrote to his first wife Olga Šplíchalová from his imprisonment from May 1979 to March 1983.

In order for the letters to pass the censor, Havel concealed a great deal of thought in a cryptic and somewhat Heideggerian language. The musings in the letters range from mundane concerns about electricity availability to meditations on the nature of responsibility to Being. These letters are great works of dissent, and an attempt at a life in truth. I think there is a direct connection between these letters and Patočka's call for action in the *Heretical Essays*. Of course as Havel was writing from prison, the meaning and method of dissent is not a topic that would be able to pass through the censors, and so there is no clear statement of the aim of the letters. But there is definitely expressed throughout his imprisonment a clear desire to suffer what may, rather than become a complicit actor in the ideology's schemes by admitting guilt to some made-up charge. Havel's letters are a reminder that his actions do stretch beyond himself. They stand as a meaningful attempt to find meaning in his suffering, in a cause beyond himself, rather than give in to comfort.

Havel, in *Letters to Olga*, writes that the theatre allows him to "grasp the world" in three meaningful ways. (LO, 289) The first is as a bridge to "interexistentiality;" as the theatre creates a community of others whose common participation brings the community together as a morally responsible and authentic presence. The second is that the theatre has the immediate power of demystifying the world of appearances. That is through the depiction of a reality on stage, and through the reflection by the audience on their own life's relationship to the reality of the stage's life, a mirror is

held up to the mendacious elements of the audience's own life. The ideological and therefore inauthentic behaviour coerced by ideology is revealed through the theatre and the impetus is then to be authentic with the knowledge that one has not been authentic. The third way that the theatre allows Havel to grasp the world is through the theatre's power to represent the importance of structure and order in that it is structure and order which organises the performance. I take this to mean that Havel understands that dissent or living in truth is not a form of anarchism, that the structures of everyday life are to be explored and examined, but not necessarily completely abandoned. In other words, the theatre shows that the world of politics is a human construction and that the construction itself is very important; but within that structure, there needs to be a constant re-examining of the authenticity of behaviour. Living in truth is this constant re-examining and is the key maxim of Havel's writings.

Findlay points out that in Patočka's analysis of the twentieth century, a tendency has emerged, as a symptom of the demobilised war, to identify oneself with a job role.²⁷ This is problematic, and a result of his Heideggerian analysis of an increasing technologisation of thinking. The human has been, for Patočka, reduced to a mere physical force. (HE, 114-15) The problem of the liberal state, with such a reduction in mind, is that it offers the illusion of freedom when in reality people are only able to choose the roles they perform in the continued war. (CS, 135) Findlay writes that for Patočka, in participating in a modern liberal society the individual gives up their humanity and becomes disinterested in his or her own being as a problem and a question. Havel shares this view in his analysis of technological civilization, but I think a key difference emerges. It is a point of major interest to me that Havel uses the

²⁷ Findlay, *Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 134. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CS.

example of a greengrocer to make his strongest points about dissent. My interest lies in the obvious fact that the greengrocer, even when he becomes a dissident, keeps his position as a greengrocer, and loses none of his authenticity for it. The normal and everyday are never under full assault from Havel, instead there is a focal difference from Patočka which makes, in my view, Havel's thought the more responsible. For Havel, the crisis in responsibility that ideology creates is combatted by being responsible for the concrete conditions in which one lives.

A crisis in responsibility (the “intrinsic responsibility that man has to and for the world”) is a crisis in human identity and human integrity. To assume “full responsibility” is not to lapse into dour moralism, nor to universalise a kind of giddy and boundaryless compassion, but to take up the very specific and concrete burdens of one's time and place.²⁸

For Havel the everyday must continue, it would just be better if people were more existentially honest about their behaviour. Havel believes in an authentic existence which is outside and apart from ideology. For Havel, this identity is expressed politically. Havel writes,

...living within the truth has more than a mere existential dimension (returning humanity to its inherent nature), or a noetic dimension (revealing reality as it is), or a moral dimension (setting an example for others). It also has an unambiguous political dimension. If the main pillar of the system is living a lie, then it is not surprising that the fundamental threat to it is living the truth. (PP, 40)

²⁸ Jean Bethke Elshtain “A Man for this Season,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 92, vol 21, iss 4, (1992): 208.

Havel is stressing the particular political importance of dissent. Living in truth is not only being existentially honest but a means of upsetting the ideology — of shaking it.

In “The Power of the Powerless” Havel laments the way in which people deliberately live a lie in order to avoid discomfort at the hands of the ideology. The “aims of life”, which for Havel is the search for authentic being, are ignored in favour of coerced behaviour and identity through the fearful intimidations of the ideology. Havel has obviously been influenced by Patočka in developing this thought, I am not saying anything new there. However, in spelling out how Havel has employed Patočka and moved beyond him in many regards in concerning himself with ideological manipulations of language in the public sphere and by focusing the shaken on the current concrete political moment, I have spelled out the important and unique contribution of Havel. Havel’s legacy lies not only in his being a moral character who attempted to live within the truth; but also in his thinking on how an individual or group can confront ideology.

This confrontation, the kernel of Havel’s political philosophy, lies in being existentially honest with oneself. When citizens are existentially honest about their behaviour, after exposing their actions and thoughts to inquiry to see if ideological apparatus structure or coerce that action or thought, then the power of an ideology is shaken. For havel, ideology is only sustained by the behaviour of those who chose comfort rather than risk for honesty. Living in truth, which is living so that one does not become subsumed by the rituals and clichés that mark life in a lie, is a powerful political tool for encouraging, in Havel’s mind, an authentic and free political situation. The existential honesty of living in truth is different in scope from Patočka shaken who are more orientated towards Patočka’s philosophy of history; however, as

I have demonstrated this is a credit to Havel for offering a political philosophy that is better able to capture the concrete moment, to show and then upset any ideological power at play in that moment's appearance.