

## The Legacy of Václav Havel – Reflections on Society, Culture, and Art

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In 1982, while Václav Havel was serving a four and a half year sentence in Czechoslovakian prisons for so-called “subversive activities,” the 36<sup>th</sup> International Theatre Festival at Avignon included a six-hour “Night for Václav Havel,” during which works in his honor were performed. The International Association for the Defense of Artists had invited various playwrights to contribute to the event, among them Samuel Beckett—and surprisingly, Beckett wrote in Havel’s honor a very short three-person play, titled *Catastrophe*. Beckett, who was dismayed by oppression and injustice of any kind, of course abhorred the persecution of artists.

*Catastrophe* consists of a brief act in which a stage Director and his Assistant put the finishing touches on a figure they are preparing for performance: the performance consisting solely of the display of a Protagonist who stands mutely on a pedestal, barefoot and black-gowned, degraded and dehumanized. With luxurious condescension the Director makes decisions about posture, lighting, and so on, as his brisk Assistant takes notes. When everything looks right to him, the Director exclaims: “Good. There’s our catastrophe. In the bag.” He calls for a run-through, where the general lights fade, and then the lights on the body fade, leaving only the head of the Protagonist lit. “Terrific!” the Director says. “He’ll have them on their feet. I can hear it from here.” A storm of applause is heard . . . but then the Protagonist slowly raises his head, and fixes the audience with his stare. The sound of applause falters and dies out. End of play.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Catastrophe*, in Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 295-301.

Beckett's biographer James Knowlson describes Beckett telling him of some critic who had described the play's ending as "ambiguous." "There's no ambiguity there at all," [Beckett] said angrily. "He's saying: You bastards, you haven't finished me yet!"

Havel, who didn't have any difficulty understanding concrete dramatic meaning, wrote a letter to Beckett not long after his release. In it he wrote:

During the dark fifties when I was 16 or 18 years of age, in a country where there were virtually no cultural or other contacts with the outside world, luckily I had the opportunity to read *Waiting for Godot* ... I have been immensely influenced by you as a human being, and in a way as a writer too. . . I mention all this to make clearer to you the shock I experienced during my time in prison when, on the occasion of one of her one-hour visits allowed four times a year, my wife told me in the presence of an obtuse warder that at Avignon there had taken place a night of solidarity with me, and that you had taken the opportunity to write . . . your play *Catastrophe*. For a long time afterwards there accompanied me in prison a great joy and emotion which helped me to live on amidst the dirt and baseness.<sup>2</sup>

Beckett was deeply touched by the letter; and again, later, by the brief play Havel wrote for him in return, titled *Mistake*, which shows a group of prisoners ganging up on a silent newcomer—another portrayal of an individual's dehumanization and the power of social tyranny.<sup>3</sup>

Why relate these anecdotes? Because Havel and Beckett shared something more than being playwrights. Their mutual respect had a deeper ground in their shared understanding of both the role of art within culture and the role of culture within the political life of a society. One legacy of Havel is the brilliant articulation in his writings—as pertinent today as ever—of the crucial importance of culture, *with art leading culture*, as the agent of social self-awareness, social health, and social growth.

Social life under all conditions—especially under totalitarian rule, but also in so-called "free" polities guided by the ideals of liberal democracy and principles of free-market capitalist

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<sup>2</sup> James Knowlson, *Damned To Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 597, 598.

<sup>3</sup> Václav Havel, *Mistake*, in Havel, *The Garden Party and Other Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 267-73 [trans. George Theiner].

consumerism—tends of its nature toward *stasis*: that is, toward the entrenchment of established, familiar, existentially unchallenging and unchallenged schemes of recurring actions in institutional, social, and personal life. Social life, once it has become a functioning order that systematically fulfills a sufficient range of practical, economic, and communicative needs and desires, is of its nature inertial, in that it tends toward a routine of readymade living that protects persons within a carapace of known or easily updateable structures and activities, offering a circumambient feeling of security that allays anxiety.

But this uniformity and inertia, which involves a continual propping up of the status quo of familiar ways of acting and feeling and imagining, runs counter to the pull of what is essentially human in persons. The basic, normative thrust of the human intellect and spirit heads not toward mere repetition, however productive and comforting achieved routines might be, but toward what Havel described accurately as “variety, the restlessness of transcendence, the adventure of novelty and rebellion against the status quo.”<sup>4</sup>

Another way to put this is that human consciousness is by nature oriented toward the discovery of new insights, toward greater differentiation in imagining, understanding, evaluating, and acting, and as such toward the ever more complete self-realization of human freedom. Freedom is stultified to the degree that social life is a matter of always safe, always already-known routines of imaging, thinking, and doing. Thus such life requires being *challenged*—because, as Havel writes, “life, in its essence, moves toward plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution, and self-organization, in short, toward the fulfillment of its own freedom . . .”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Václav Havel, “Dear Dr. Husák,” in Havel, *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990*, ed. Paul Wilson (New York: Random House, Vintage Edition, 1992), 71 [trans. of letter unknown].

<sup>5</sup> Václav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” in Havel, *Open Letters*, 135 [trans. Paul Wilson].

It is only when persons are able to experience movement toward differentiated and novel discoveries and self-organization that they are—in Havel’s words—“living within the truth.”<sup>6</sup> As Havel describes it, “living within the truth,” living *authentically*, entails among its essential components these three: 1) experiencing continually “the pressure created by free thought, alternative values and alternative behavior, and by independent self-realization”; 2) having always as a starting-point “concern for others,” since the true self-love that promotes genuine growth for oneself is impossible without recognizing and caring about that need for genuine growth in others; and 3) an openness to what Havel calls “the sense of transcendence over the world of existence,” a sense that is a precondition for sustaining existential openness for the unfolding of what are, in principle, endlessly fresh possibilities of being.<sup>7</sup>

Now, the yeast that enables a society to ferment by making differentiating and transformative growth continually possible for persons is culture. It is culture—not politics, not economy, not technology—by which, in Havel’s words, “society is inwardly enlarged, enriched, and cultivated,” which allows society to thereby come to know itself “in ever greater depth, range, and subtlety.”<sup>8</sup> And the most important and effective tool of culture in effecting this self-knowledge is art—art in the combined power of its many media. Why art? Because art is the *exploration of possibilities* of seeing, feeling, thinking, and acting, expressed in symbols and images that *concretely show* those possibilities to the concrete individuals that persons in society are. As Havel writes: “[Real art] reveals something unknown, expresses something unsaid, or provides new, spontaneous, and effective evidence of things hitherto only guessed at.” Strong works of art, unconstrained by didacticism or the duties of mere entertainment, can be experienced within a society, Havel says, “like a flash of lightning illuminating a dark landscape,”

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 195, 198.

<sup>7</sup> Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” 145, 195, 198; “Dear Dr. Husák,” 62.

<sup>8</sup> Havel, “Dear Dr. Husák,” 63.

allowing us to recognize routine for what it is and new possibilities for what they offer. Powerful art, he says, can have the effect of “a spark of knowledge [that seems], as it were, specially adapted for the social organism’s self-awareness, [in that it] may suddenly light up the road for the whole of society, without society ever realizing, perhaps, how it came to see the road.”<sup>9</sup>

Samuel Beckett’s work—like Ibsen’s, or Picasso’s, or Stravinsky’s, or Whitman’s, or Shakespeare’s, or Sophocles’s, or Homer’s—have changed and expanded the way human beings understand themselves in Western societies. These are grossly obvious examples. But innumerable artists and artworks have continually revealed, enriched, and made literally more free human lives ever since humans were humans. As Albert Camus writes: “[F]or thousands of years, every day, at every second, [art] has assuaged the servitude of millions of men and, occasionally, liberated some of them once and for all.”<sup>10</sup> Beckett and Havel understood this with perfect clarity.

One aspect of Havel’s legacy, then, is the clear expression in his writings of the importance of art in shaping a vibrant, uncensored, lively culture, and society’s need for a culture that challenges its habitual schemes of activities and viewpoints, providing the new and timely images and symbols that invite the personal growth that is our deepest need and birthright. We depend on a vital and visionary art-infused culture to give us, in Havel’s words, “a new view of the world [that] gives us a new view of our own human potential, of what we are and might be . . . [so that], [a]bruptly jerked out of our ‘routine humanness,’ we stand once more face to face with the most important question of all: How do we settle accounts with ourselves?”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Havel, “Dear Dr. Husák,” 65, 69; Václav Havel, “Letter to Alexander Dubcek,” in Havel, *Open Letters*, 49 [trans. A. G. Brain].

<sup>10</sup> Albert Camus, “Create Dangerously,” in Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), 267.

<sup>11</sup> Václav Havel, “The Trial,” in Havel, *Open Letters*, 107 [trans. Paul Wilson, adapted from unknown translator].