

Lenka Jungmannová: *The Power of the Powerless* and the 'Vaněk' plays

In the political essay *The Power of the Powerless* completed in 1978, Havel took it as his duty to explain the position of the dissidents and outline the value that they held for Czechoslovakia at that time.

Although the term “dissident” was at that time a novelty within the domestic political sphere, this condemnation of the regime was far from Havel’s first thoughts of this type- he had already criticised the manipulative system together with its mechanisation of the individual in typograms, plays and essays in the 1960s. The feeling of moral decay of the years after 1968 was so strong for Havel that it naturally started to influence the course of his own aesthetics (it is evident in an example from his *Letter to Gustav Husak* written on the 8th of April 1975, in which he describes the deep demoralisation of the populace), and in a similar way his personal experience of the repression of the regime began to be projected into his dramatic works.

The central metaphor of *The Power of the Powerless* is the activity of a manager of a vegetable shop, who was obliged to place in the shop window the slogan “Proletariat of all nations unite!” , regardless of what the notice says. In the society of that time Havel had already begun to qualify this vague slogan as a an ideal alibi for the employee in question and even for prevailing dictatorship, which needed to give people the illusion that they are “in harmony with human order and with the order of the universe”. Havel used this example of the grocer in order to show that those who approach in the desired camouflage, legitimise, anonymise and keep the totalitarian power on its course. Such a state of subordination of citizens then marks a crisis of identity, which exists not “merely” as a succumbing to the mechanisms of bringing the populace into line, as were depicted in his works of the 1960s, but also as a conscious acclimatisation to this society-wide violence.

In 1978, Havel had recently created the three hypertextually connected so-called ‘Vaněk’ plays and one experimental drama (*Mountain Hotel* 1976). In view of the above, in essence all of his plays written after 1968 align in genre with a wider trend of dissident playwrights, who reflected, systematically through their own personal experiences, the socio-political reality of the 70s and

80s from the point of view of the opposition. The protagonists of the one-act plays *Audience*, *Unveiling* (both 1975) and *Protest* (1978) follow this model: they are partly authorial, partly autobiographical and partly a fabricated alter ego. In *Audience* and *Protest* it is the banned playwright Ferdinand Vaněk (and respectively Bedřich in *Unveiling*) who demonstrates this resistance to the regime.

Havel created *The Audience* on the basis on several months' experience in Trutnov brewery and was originally intended only for the amusement of friends (he held the first reading of it with friends in June 1975 in Hrádeček). Since it is a play built on the idea that outcomes are somehow preordained, it is an intentionally simple dramatic situation: a 'nomen omen', a 'brewery brewer', bringing about the subordination of the former writer Vaněk. And in a long-winded drunken conclusion he offers himself to collaborate with the state security services, on the basis that he should write a statement denouncing himself too. If in *The Power of the Powerless* the dissident confronts the greengrocer, in the *Audience* the dissident stands, or more precisely speaking sits, opposite himself: a fearless intellectual who finds himself at the bottom of the social ladder because he keeps his moral principles. He is a hypocritical plebeian in function, because he sees through the regime's camouflage, but in exchange for power and material benefits he ends up further strengthening it.

However, the brewer exceeds the greengrocer in the fact that he plays on both sides, believing that it is more profitable for him. He in turn flatters and humiliates his guest. The biggest disagreement between the participants in the interview arises in the seemingly innocent moments, when the brewer is unable to decipher the purpose of the playwright's obedient phrases and interprets them as an abomination because he desires nothing more than for Vaněk to become someone like himself- a "mentally incompetent" servant to totalitarianism. The brewer in turn both apologises for and defends his spinelessness, but in that he partly demonstrates that the dissident casts the same bad light onto himself as he does onto authority. The question whether or not Vaněk is actually crooked or if the collaboration is merely practical in nature is intentionally left open. Eventually, however, it is the brewer who decides to choose the place of livelihood, to which the state security services attract him, for only Vaněk can provide him with a visit with Bohdalová the popular actress.

However, the play is constructed as a loop, ending with the brewer falling asleep and Vaněk leaving, but he is soon knocking on the door again thus the plot starts again from the beginning. Symbolically this denotes a loss of the sense of time. Havel stresses this in a letter to Husák: according to Havel, within this “consolidated society” it is as if these different phases of time are merging into timelessness.

The second ‘Vaněk’ play *Unveiling* is set in Vera and Michal’s apartment, who are showing off to their “best friend” Bedřich their new furniture in the modern metropolitan style- and in this case clashes with the dissident vs greengrocer example. Just like advert in the grocery store in *The Power of the Powerless*, the couple in this play demonstrate that on the premise of attaining various benefits for both of them such as good job positions and the opportunity to travel abroad, they resign their own identity in order to accumulate products and benefits – through consumerism. Just like the grocer placing the empty slogan in the window, and Vera and Michal showing off their belongings, life according to some form of manual indicates nothing other than the disintegration of their own personalities through their culpable obedience to the regime.

Yet in contrast to them the bewildered writer Bedřich appears, who does not seem to lead an exemplary or exclusive life, moreover he is disadvantaged by his own dissident attitude towards a reality in which the former middle-classes can fall to the level of a brewery worker the couple refuse to believe in this reality, and finally so does his own wife who no longer visits them.

However in comparison to *Audience*, *Unveiling* contains a greater level of acrimoniousness, because it is more of a satire. Before the couple are not only unashamed of their support for totalitarianism, but they also offer him various moral lessons, advocating the fact that things have been assigned some intrinsic meaning (as if there are some intended conditions for society), but for them these become insignificant, albeit they still declare that bringing up a child today should involve instilling in them a greater responsibility towards the world around us. This great paradox brings forth the main thesis of the play: that Vera and Michal in reality do not respect Bedřich, but only require him for their own appreciation of themselves. Actually they themselves in all honesty do not believe in their own game and thus long for an “unbiased audience” that could affirm the meaning of their lives. Therefore in

the conclusion the guest, in deciding to leave, returns everything as if it was back to the beginning of the visit.

While the greengrocer in function must declare his support for the regime, for which he will receive certain advantages but also certain scars on his identity, the protagonist of *Protest*, the successful writer Staněk, doesn't belong amongst such people. He will have some problems with the presentation of some of his works, but it does seem that he does not have to stress the necessary material for the promotion of the regime. At the same time he is no dissident, although he does have friends who are along those lines such as the off-limits colleague Vaněk who comes to him with a petition on behalf of the incarcerated singer Javůrek. Yet we find out eventually that it is Stanek who invited his colleague to start the petition in the first place. Only at this moment is the theme of the play revealed: the decision for Stanek is not whether or not to sign the petition but rather whether or not to join the dissidents for he can see nothing good coming from irritating the regime. Stanek's climatic monologue, which is another example of an Eristic Dialectic which has already been shown by Hugo in *The Garden Party* (1963), Gross in *Memorandum* (1965) and especially by MacHeath in *The Beggar's Opera* (1972), however this revealed to be hand in hand with the grocer: in his compromise with the regime, based on mutual tolerance, he has no intention to exchange material benefits for a clean conscience.

As we have indicated, it is possible to understand Havel's post Prague spring essays, along with his post '68 plays (with the possible exception *Tomorrow*, 1988) as more or less pretexts to a "Manifesto", or perhaps in turn they could be read as assertions and explanations of his own artistic means. The 'Vaněk' plays are irreplaceable works for illustrating the opinions that Havel presented in *The Power of Powerless*.