

particularly exciting recently, but statements like Zvěřina's that the "majority (seen from the standpoint of quality) of our artists and thinkers are living in exile, the best of the minority here have been silenced" (p. 112) or Y. Z.'s that "not one of the 30 most prominent Czech writers has been abroad in the last 15 years" (p. 121) constitute, at best, unsubtle obfuscation.

The sloppy thinking which characterises much of *A Besieged Culture* is epitomized by Kohout's sentence, "Even though Czechoslovakia is one of the oldest and most highly developed of European countries, linked with the rest of Europe by history, civilization and culture, only a very short time was needed forcibly to sever these ties" (p. 180). Kundera manifests either ignorance or hysteria when he says: "I am weighing my words carefully: in its duration, extent and consistency [*sic*], the massacre of Czech culture [*sic*] following 1968 has had no analogue in the country's history since the Thirty Years' War" (p. 128). That reflects the uncritical acceptance of myths invented mainly during the 19th century, though some 17th-century exiles like Rosacius or Hartman did help Revivalists and neo-Revivalists to create those myths. Serious Czech historians and literary scholars have been trying to demolish those myths for nearly a hundred years now. It is an eloquent testimony to the editors' isolation that they leave this passage in their Kundera excerpt. They clearly have not read, say, Father Jan Kučera and Jiří Rak's study of Balbín, Pešina and the Czech Baroque, which was published in Prague in 1983. Kučera and Rak's book is more important for scholars and ordinary Czechs than anything in *A Besieged Culture*.

*A Besieged Culture* has so many printing errors that it is frequently difficult to read. It also has a few schoolboyish spelling mistakes like "seasure" for "seizure" (p. 103) or "publically" for "publicly" (p. 140). Sometimes errors are, no doubt, mere slips, as when VLK is called an "auditioning" instead of "auditing" organisation (p. 147). Some errors constitute sloppy mistranslation, like "loges" for "boxes" (p. 171), but some are simply the result of understandable ignorance. A *dům kultury/osvěty* is a village hall or assembly hall; a *filosofická fakulta* is an arts faculty, and *kultura* itself may only rarely be translated as "culture"; usually it is either "the arts" or "entertainment". It would not have been difficult for the editors to have found an English native speaker to go through their anthology. That would have curbed the impression of *Schlamperei*.

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Robert Pynsent

*Havel, Václav: O lidskou identitu [Towards a Human Identity]. Edited by V. Prečan and A. Tomský.*

Rozmluvy, London 1984, 397 pp.

This volume of essays, feuilletons, interviews and polemics written (or uttered) by Havel between 1969 and 1982 contains mostly pieces which have already appeared in the Czech émigré press or in foreign languages. Only eight pieces have never appeared in print before. Nevertheless it is useful to have all these

statements in one volume, and it is worth re-reading some of Havel's essays, especially if one compares his assertions and analyses with those of writers publishing in Czechoslovakia.

Whatever one's views on Havel as a *littérateur* (and his prose lacks *élan* — and humour, unlike his drama), no one will doubt that he is a man of great courage. In this review, however, I shall not be interested in Havel the man nor in Havel the politician, but in Havel the social critic. It is a pity that he has declaredly refrained from reading authors publishing in Czechoslovakia — with the obvious exceptions of Hrabal and Páral. Since, however, many Czech intellectuals of the so-called 'oasis culture' do not read even Páral, one might see some individual stance in this. Nevertheless his reading of almost exclusively *samizdat* literature has deprived him of the knowledge that most of what he criticizes in Czechoslovak society is openly criticized in what is thoroughly misleadingly called 'official literature'. To be sure, Havel's criticism was published in the West often before other writers' similar criticism was published in Czechoslovakia. I doubt, but I am in no position to deny outright, that Havel's writings influenced or inspired those 'official' writers.

Perhaps the strongest *motif* in *O lidskou identitu* consists in the distinctions Havel variously draws between living in truth and living in a lie, what he calls 'existential schizophrenia' (p. 12). The searching for truth in a society which is permeated by lies has become something of a *cliché* in modern Czech literature. It constitutes the main theme of Radek John's *Džínový svět* (1980), but John's novel ends optimistically (cf. also his second novel, written with Ivo Pelant, *Začátek letopočtu* (1984), a work which contains far more detailed social criticism, but which is fundamentally *Trivialliteratur*). The searching for truth in a world of lies is also the theme of Frais's *Den, kdy slunečnice hořely* (1982), which ends optimistically like John's novels, but which introduces the idea that man needs some sort of religion (cf. Havel, p. 238); Frais takes that further in *Strom na konci cesty* (1985). Hlinka's *Už není návratu* (1981; 2nd ed. 1985) has the same theme, also introduces the need for some faith, but this novel ends pessimistically. Hlinka's drunken young heroine dies under the wheels of a bus. The artistically most sophisticated depiction of this search for truth comes in Ludvík Němec's *Hra na slepo* (1982), where Němec, incidentally, uses chess as an emblem of manipulation like Havel in *Zabradní slavnost* (1963), though Němec's use is more complex than Havel's. What Havel calls Czech society's 'existential schizophrenia' is exemplified by the party game called the Truth Game which was popular in Prague student and *Lumpenbourgeoisie* circles in the late 1970s and early 1980s (this game appears in Němec's novel, in John's *Džínový svět*, Dušek's *Lovec štěstí* (1980) and in collections of verse by Mikulášek and Pohanová).

Němec's novel also describes that fear which engenders apparent compliance with sociopolitical norms or government demands, the fear Havel speaks about in his open letter to Gustáv Husák of 1975. Němec had satirized such compliance in his previous novel, *nejhlasitější srdce ve městě* (1978). Existential anxiety is not a rare theme in modern Czech literature, particularly verse; one thinks of Schild-

berger, Gärtnerová, Mikulášek and Skácel. Červenková's *Semestr života* (1981), a novel which is strong in social criticism but weak in style, shows all authority, even ecclesiastical authority, as ruled ultimately by either fear or stupidity. Červenková's heroine, who had wanted to live in truth, at the end goes off to have a child, someone to trust, but, on the way, she is raped. That ending reminds one of the ending of Dušek's *Lovec štěstí*, a thriller which, on its appearance, the critics declared as showing that crime does not pay; Czech readers, however, interpreted it as a bitter statement on the fact that being an outsider does not pay. In the Husák letter Havel sees this fear combining with consumerism and indifference. In some way or another most Czech writers of any seriousness at all have attacked consumerism, particularly amongst technocrats and officials, writers from the top ranks of the Establishment, like Kozák, as well as writers who are at the moment still on the fringe, like Křivánek. The human indifference of those same careerists is particularly strongly criticized in Hlinka, John and the dully Establishment Hercíková. Havel suggests that the State encourages such consumerism (p. 26), and I cannot but think of Mrs. Thatcher. Havel claims that the State-inspired consumerism has brought about a cult of banality in legally published literature (p. 33). That is at the very least an ungracious claim, whatever one might consider the literary value of such writers of the early 1970s as Kudela and Skarlant. By the end of the 1970s it had become a lie, but, perhaps, that is irrelevant. Later, however, he is still capable of stating that 'the only literature worthy of attention' is typescript literature (p. 243).

In the 1982 essay, 'Krise identity', Havel expresses his intense distress at the way consumerism has alienated man from the world around him. That alienation, and the role television plays in it, has long been a theme of Páral's novels. Alienation is the main theme of Němec's novels, of Hlinka's *Už není návratu*, even of the not very comic comicwriter, Miroslav Skála.

One might say that ever since the beginning of the 1960s Václav Havel has been concerned more with general human problems than with specifically Czech problems — but that really does depend on how one interprets especially his three 1960s plays. One certainly can say, however, that since the mid 1970s he has become ever more concerned with general human problems. He does not see Western democracy as any answer (cf., e.g., p. 128); like István Bibó he is seeking some third path. The intention of this review is at least to adumbrate the fact that in his ever greater concern with universal problems (at least as his thought is presented in *O lidskou identitu*) Havel's development comports with the development of 'official literature'. Where Kundera's writing, whatever its philosophical curlicues, remains firmly rooted in the pretty parochial historicism (and sex-boundness) of the 1960s. Havel has not remained 'sixtiesish' — not that he ever was as 'sixtiesish' as Kundera. Furthermore, none of Havel's sociopolitical statements in *O lidskou identitu* is as strong as Hlinka's general assessment in *Už není návratu*, perhaps even as Červenková's in *Semestr života*.