

## **Sense and Censorship: Authors and the Agents of Change**

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When does editing become censorship? This article focuses on the editing practices for the English productions of Václav Havel's plays, arguing that these practices transformed the plays into political emblems of the Cold War period. Once politicized, the plays became commercially viable; the article questions if such editing was a form of market censorship. In addition, the elision and derision of the female translator, Vera Blackwell, raises questions about gender censorship during the Cold War period.

Keywords: censorship, editing, theatre translation, Václav Havel, women translators

Quand la révision devient-elle de la censure? Cet article examine les révisions effectuées sur les pièces de Vaclav Havel en vue de leur représentation en anglais et soutient que ces pratiques de révision ont transformé les pièces en emblèmes politiques de la période de la Guerre froide. Une fois politisées, les pièces sont devenues commercialement viables. Cet article examine la possibilité que la révision constituait une forme de censure exercée par le marché. En outre, la façon dont la traductrice Vera Blackwell, a été occultée et dénigrée, soulève des questions quant à la censure visant les femmes pendant la période de la Guerre froide.

Mots clés : censure, révision, traduction théâtrale, Václav Havel, traductrices

In the mid-1980s, just out of prison, Václav Havel wrote a note to the English and American directors of his new play, *Largo Desolato*, specifically asking for two things: that they not contextualize the play as a dissident, Czech political play; and that they not edit any of the language of the play. Both happened. Havel's plays were almost consistently edited for the Anglo-American stage, despite protests from him and his first translator, Vera Blackwell: they were regarded to be too prolix and repetitive, and considered to be either too locally political or not political enough. While much emphasis was placed on the censorship of Havel's plays in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s and their outright ban from 1970 to 1989 – indeed this was a selling-point on the Anglo-American

stage because of their news-worthiness and worthiness in the Cold War narrative – the editing of the plays during and after the translation process in America and the UK suggest more tacit and less visible constraints were being placed on the texts in order to fit that narrative. As a result, Havel was seen and reviewed almost entirely as a political playwright, writing in an obvious allegorical style that would become redundant following the fall of Communism in 1989, thanks to a bloodless revolution led by Havel himself.

Theatre practitioners tend to argue that domestication is necessary for a theatre-text to be alive and workable for a domestic audience, placing emphasis on the “speakability” or “performability” of the play-text.<sup>1</sup> The “playable translation is a dramaturgical remoulding [...] translation for the stage is about giving form to a potential for performance. It is about writing for actors.”<sup>2</sup> In an interview with David Johnston, the director Declan Donellan argued that “[Y]ou have to re-conceive the whole thing in an *English way*” not only in form but also in content, as some foreign playwrights are too “intellectual and cerebral,” and you “need much more concrete Anglo-Saxon images in order for people to understand speech.”<sup>3</sup> While “it is usually taken for granted that the pragmatics of the theatre should outweigh the constraints of the source text,” Sirku Aaltonen argues that this can serve to attenuate the foreignness of the text: “the Foreign is not of primary interest” but it is “one’s own culture, one’s own society and one’s own theatre” that prevails.<sup>4</sup> For Aaltonen, the vagueness “of concepts such as speakability and performability” can conceal deliberate rewriting of plays.<sup>5</sup> This rewriting has little to do with making the language simpler, but can be related to ethnocentric assumptions about the plays and egocentric translation practices on the part of the target culture.<sup>6</sup>

Havel's plays tended to be prolix and abstract, centred on the idea that language was a character in the plays, even a "Villain." His first plays were an investigation of "language as a barrier to knowing and realizing anything at all."<sup>7</sup> Rather than being obvious allegorical pictures of the regime, Havel was interested in how people engineered their fluid identities and their place in the world via language and how it could become a trap – a baroque, and thus funny, prison of delusion, repression and personal censorship. Havel was not bluntly attacking the regime; he was investigating his and the audience's collusion with the metaphysics of censorship. In his 1985 note for *Largo Desolato*, smuggled out by hand from Czechoslovakia, he argued against editing or domestication of the language of the play because its form was so central to the meaning of the play:

Everything there has its own purpose – from the viewpoint of structure, rhythm, atmospheric variety, timing, intricacies and gradations of meaning [...] I always try to put together a play as a coherent time-space entity (in the manner of a musical composition) and it is my experience that any disturbance in this composition however well-intended (provoked, for example, by a desire to shorten or speed up a boring passage), will effectively turn against the musical ebb and flow of the whole.<sup>8</sup>

Havel realized that the baroque repetitions and passages were deemed to be boring and irrelevant to the plays abroad, because the central theme was perceived to be political rather than metaphysical. Producers wanted to get to the heart of what they considered to be political, dissident plays.

In part, this had to do with why Havel's plays made the Anglo-American stage at all. They were produced primarily around 1968 in the US – during the Prague Spring and after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia – and around 1977 in the UK – after Havel made world-wide news as one of the co-founders of the Charter 77 movement and was imprisoned. There was a genuine motive in supporting Havel as a politically oppressed playwright, but the interest and financial support was also connected to his sudden

newsworthiness. The question is whether Havel, regarded as “the epitome of the dissident” and a champion of free speech in the West, was effectively censored there, via editing practices and production expectations and responses, in order to uphold that political iconicity.<sup>9</sup>

Sue Curry Jansen argues that during the Cold War, the commercialization of East European dissidents as products served to uphold the tenets of “political capitalism” in the domestic sphere, a sphere subject to “market censorship.”<sup>10</sup> For Jansen, the assumed post-Enlightenment curtailment of state censorship masks the beginning of actual control of ideas by elites via the market: “[M]arket censors decide what ideas will gain entry into “the marketplace of ideas” and what ideas will not [...] *they decide what cultural products are likely to ensure a healthy profit margin.*”<sup>11</sup> The “oligopoly” of multinational corporations and what she dubs the “Consciousness Industry – press, advertising, public relations, mass entertainment, and organized leisure” – serve as gatekeepers for knowledge, which is not free but a commodity to be sold.<sup>12</sup>

Twenty years ago, André Lefevere argued similarly that societies – democratic, totalitarian, or otherwise – support “control factors” on literature, the first being the literary professionals (“critics, reviewers, teachers, translators”), and the second the system of patronage, “the powers (persons, institutions) that can further or hinder the reading, writing, and rewriting of literature.”<sup>13</sup> According to Lefevere, a network of literary professionals “will much more frequently rewrite works of literature until they are deemed acceptable to the poetics and the ideology of a certain time and place [...]”<sup>14</sup> Recent translation studies criticism has suggested that these “control factors” amount to censorship. Influenced by Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of structural censorship, critics such

as Francesca Billiani and Denise Merkle have argued that there is a “covert censorship” in editorial and publishing practices. “[C]ensorship is not limited to oppressive autocracies” Merkle writes, “[it is] not the exclusive purview of explicitly autocratic regimes [...] the covert censorship at work in the free democracies of late modernity characterized by expanding globalization, though at time more difficult to detect, is nonetheless, at times insidiously, pervasive.”<sup>15</sup>

Instead of a “normative and abstract top-down formula” for translation and the static “notions of norms,” Francesca Billiani argues that a network of agents can effect a performative and fluid form of “polymorphous” censorship practices, that may differ from culture to culture and era to era, in dictatorships and also in “seemingly ‘neutral’ scenarios.”<sup>16</sup> Institutional and individual censorship can coexist and often serve to determine or uphold a national narrative or national tastes. “Censorship of foreign texts,” she writes, “cannot help but act according to the wide national patterns of taste, or in other words to what is perceived as the sought after national textuality.”<sup>17</sup>

Havel, who from the beginning was adamant that his plays were not political, did not write allegorical, political plays, because he regarded such writing as didactic and essentially a mode of “second-order writing,” as J.M. Coetzee argues, with the censor in mind.<sup>18</sup> That the English-speaking world desired, *pace* Coetzee, writing that would easily “open itself to interpretation,” i.e. as a playwright critiquing the evils of Communism, shows a misreading and repackaging of Havel’s world that reveals some epistemological kinship with the censors back in Prague.

Rather than writing coded satires of communist Czechoslovakia, Havel was intrigued by the metaphysics of the regime, the mode by which it gained and kept power, i.e. via

language. At the heart of this was the human propensity to use language and to be misused by language, in other words, how *we* censor *our own* experiences and those of others via language, and how we become imprisoned by rhetoric, how it gains a life of its own. As a result, Havel's plays can be incredibly prolix, characters get carried away by language, and idioms and sentences are repeated, sometimes *ad nauseum*, in order to viscerally provoke the audience.

Havel and his director, Jan Grossman, advocated what they called "appellative theatre" in which "the audience should be considered not just as a production requirement, but as co-creator."<sup>19</sup> Havel argued against the "thesis-ridden" play, "infected ... with didacticism or ideology."<sup>20</sup> "On the contrary," he wrote:

I like it when a work can be interpreted in different ways, when it something of an enigma and when its meaning, though it may transcend the work itself, does so by radiating in all directions [...] the purpose of the play is not to have the viewer leave with this, or any other, exclusive conceptually clarified awareness of its "meaning"; if we can explain and name anything too well, we come to terms with it too quickly, our interpretation soothes us, the work ceases to tantalize and irritate us and we quickly forget it ... I would rather the play disturbed them in some indeterminable way.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, Havel's project was to provoke his audience into becoming interpreters and into thinking about the act of interpretation; rather than providing them with a political message, i.e. about the absurdity of a particular political regime, Havel wanted his audience to look into themselves, to think about how their passivity and their own acts of censorship might be indicative of why such regimes exist.

### **Early Productions of Havel's Plays in New York**

The first English-language production of a Havel play was in 1968 in New York. *The Memorandum* was performed in Joe Papp's brand new off-Broadway theatre, The Public Theater (Hair was performed there in the same season). After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia the same year, there was heightened interest, with Broadway producers

tempted to produce his new play, *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, and Havel's agents certain that the play was now commercial because of Havel's newsworthiness. *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* was finally produced by the Lincoln Center's experimental space in December 1969, with a strong emphasis – disregarding the protests of Havel's translator, Vera Blackwell – on Havel as a persecuted dissident.

Some of the reviews were reductively negative. The fashion magazine, *Women's Wear Daily*, registered its boredom with such obvious political messages by comparing Havel's plays to an infestation of cockroaches:

For a couple of years, the New York Shakespeare Festival's Public Theatre harangued its audiences with post-Kafka satires of bureaucracy in the totalitarian state. Joseph Papp's theatre finally rid itself of these naïve, middle European anti-conformity plays (which, ironically, conformed remarkably to each other) and went on to more original projects. But like cockroaches, which move into the bedroom when you spray the kitchen, these plays just turned around and marched uptown to Lincoln Center. Now there's no reason to suspect that Václav Havel's "*Increased Difficulty of Concentration*" is the first of a series of such plays at the Forum Theatre, but it may be wisest to head the roaches off at the pass.<sup>22</sup>

The shocking language of infestation not only shows the cultural arrogance of the reviewer, with awful echoes of Nazi propagandistic portrayals of Jews as vermin (especially with reference to Eastern Europe, a site of large Jewish emigration to the US), but also the fear of infestation, that somehow the American theatre might be overcome by the foreign. The insistence that these plays conform "remarkably to each other" carries overtones of racism of the "they all look like each other" variety, without any self-awareness that perhaps it is the viewer / reader who is unable to see / read or, more appropriately, refusing to. That Kafka is mentioned as a precursor suggests that the roach metaphor is not only frightening – the idea of the metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa (maybe us!) into these Eastern European cockroaches – but unconsciously awakens the image of his brutal family whose reaction to him condemns him. The discomfort with the non-domesticated is transformed into a sense of over-facile interpretation: these "naïve"

plays are of course about Communist “bureaucracy.” The reviewer, here, perhaps betrays what is going on at large, that the only way these plays make the stage are because they are read and presented as such. The reviewer does admit that some elements of the show were good, the “occasional comic moments” and “its reasonable interest, just as a story” but these are only attributable to the Americans in the production: “This isn’t to the play’s credit as much as it is to the director’s [...]. Unfortunately, they [the actresses] were much more delightful than the play.” “Now to spray the bedroom,” the reviewer concludes, and you can hear the rattle of the aerosol can.<sup>23</sup>

There wasn’t another American production of a Havel play for fourteen years.

### **Havel’s Plays in the United Kingdom**

Despite attempts from 1964 onwards, the first professional stage production of a Havel in the United Kingdom was not until 1977, the year in which Havel became world-famous as a dissident and co-author of the human rights declaration, Charter 77. Suddenly, there were not only a number of stage productions but also primetime British Broadcasting Corporation television productions with one of the comic stars of the day, Michael Crawford. Part of the reason for the new-found success was that Havel had written three one-act plays that were not only short but also seemed much more focused politically. It seemed, to British producers, easier to reconcile content and form. The three one-acts, *Protest*, *Audience* and *Private View*, all contained the same protagonist, Ferdinand Vaněk, viewed as a semi-autobiographical dissident figure, who engages in dialogues with characters who have all capitulated and collaborated with the regime.

Written in 1978, *Protest* portrays a meeting between Vaněk and an old friend, Staněk. Vaněk is a “dissident” whom Staněk has avoided for a while, being a writer, now

working in television, who decided to collaborate with the regime in order to retain his life and income. Staněk has lived in the country and is passionate about “cultivating his garden” (echoing Voltaires’s advice in *Candide* about the good life), but his daughter has become pregnant by a singer, Javůrek, who has been arrested for making a joke during a concert. Staněk, having studiously avoided putting his head over the parapet, phones Vaněk, who is just out of prison, to ask him how to go about mounting a petition for Javůrek, but only comes to his real reason for the reunion with Vaněk after a lot of shilly-shallying . Vaněk, on hearing the request, pulls a petition out his briefcase that he has already begun and Staněk, relieved, begins wondering aloud what effect signing such a petition would have on his life and career in a four-page monologue. He finishes: “Should I be guided by ruthless objective considerations, or by subjective inner feelings?” The exchange goes as follows:

VANEK: Seems perfectly clear to me –  
STANEK: And to me –  
VANEK: So that you’re going to –  
STANEK: Unfortunately –  
VANEK: Unfortunately?  
STANEK: You thought I was –  
VANEK: Forgive me, perhaps I didn’t quite understand –  
STANEK: I’m sorry if I’ve –  
VANEK: Never mind –  
STANEK: But really I believe –  
VANEK: I know –  
(*Both drink ...*)<sup>24</sup>

Each character interprets the speech differently: Vaněk believes Staněk has convinced himself to sign while Staněk has convinced himself *not* to sign. Thinking that Vaněk will judge him, Staněk goes on the attack, but then receives a phone call telling him that Javůrek has been released. Vaněk is overjoyed the petition was not needed and Staněk ends the play reminding him that these petitions can do more harm than good, and leads him to the garden.

Written a year after the Charter 77 petition and the same year of Havel's seminal essay on personal responsibility and non-violent resistance, *The Power of the Powerless*, Vaněk can be, and has been, read as a "moral" figure who "pursues the highest form of responsible behavior" but who "does not arrogantly condemn those caught in the web of an evil situation."<sup>25</sup> Imprisoned for writing petitions and being a dissident, Vaněk was read as a doppelgänger for Havel (when the play was first performed in London (1980) and New York (1983), Havel was serving four and half years in prison for his Charter 77 participation and political resistance to the regime), and a moral compass in the "post-totalitarian society" in which he lives. But, as Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz points out, Havel denied it was a "self-portrait. Rather he is a dramatic principle which causes his environment to react and reveal itself."<sup>26</sup>

The notion that Vaněk is a "dramatic principle" is important. Rather than using him as a grandstanding avatar, Havel makes him an almost silent anti-hero, one "who does not wield the word," who "hardly acts, a suspect model because he knows better what *not* to do than what to do."<sup>27</sup> Vaněk's silence is his "chief defence against the falseness of language," a silence that becomes "a more eloquent tool of communication than the thousands of words used by the others."<sup>28</sup> So, *Protest* is not a simple black and white story of the brave and "good" dissident versus the craven, "bad" collaborator and the corrupted morals of the post-totalitarian society, but is an analysis of how language shapes our reality, how it betrays us into false realities.

Central to this rumination on language is the way it is used in the play. Vaněk's ineloquence makes him a 'dubious hero' – regarded to be intelligent and a writer by the others – but we don't see it as an audience. His lines are full of hesitation, echoes, and

dashes where his short bursts of speech break off. The rhythm of the play moves between Staněk's longer passages that reveal him justifying his changing positions to short bursts of dialogue where the linguistic castle in the sky breaks apart and Staněk can no longer sustain the unreality of his position against Vaněk's silence. So, Staněk's lengthy monologue where he considers the consequences of signing the position breaks down into the brief dialogue above where what is being understood is being understood in silence.

### ***Protest***

*Protest* opened at the English National Theatre in January 1980, directed by Michael Kustow. In early January, Kustow wrote to Havel's translator Blackwell, "to tell you that we have made a few changes in your text (which anyway is the radio adaptation) in the interest of greater colloquialism and suitability for the actors concerned."<sup>29</sup> These changes arose during the rehearsal period and Kustow pointedly added that alterations to translations were normal practice: "I'm sure you'll appreciate that this happens [...] I just wanted you to be forewarned in case – as I hope you do – you are in London when it's playing."<sup>30</sup> Kustow's version was used for the radio broadcast and for a "Havel Afternoon" alongside a reading of Havel's open letter to Gustav Husák (read by Harold Pinter) and a dramatized version of Havel's Charter 77 trial sponsored by the Writer's Guild of Great Britain, an act of solidarity and publicity for the imprisoned Havel.

Blackwell wrote a detailed attack on Kustow's "few changes" to the script, arguing that however small the individual changes were, they misread the play and focused on a political message rather than on the rhythms and language of *Protest*. "I consider Kustow's version a parody of Havel's PROTEST," Blackwell wrote, "Hence my protest."<sup>31</sup> She contested the claim that there hadn't been many changes. It wasn't just

“routine alterations of a few lines here and there so they would ‘speak better.’” In fact, the changes “actually affect some 80% of the original” and their “total impact constitutes total misrepresentation of Havel’s PROTEST.”<sup>32</sup>

As with Havel’s earlier plays, English-language theatres balked at the verbosity of certain sections, and the very lengthy monologue read literally appears full of superfluous content. However, the point of the verbosity is to reflect the state of the character’s mind and soul, as Blackwell argued:

his skillfully and strategically deployed clauses and subclauses, concepts and words which not only mirror each other, but in fact shift (sometimes slightly, sometimes radically) the previously reflected picture in such a way that what might at first have appeared as a true reflection of a man now becomes a caricature image, a parody of a man. The way Havel handles this speech by Staněk (and indeed all of Staněk’s speeches) can be likened to the tragic wandering of a man through a “laughing gallery”, lined with misshapen mirrors; he hits a real mirror from time to time, only to flee from it deeper into the corridor where the grotesque reflections are supposed to make him laugh and where his greatest tragedy consists in his actually managing a laugh – when he closes his eyes, All this has been rubbed out, flattened both by the massive cuts and by the pedestrian alterations in the remaining lines given to Staněk by Kustow. The complex picture of the dissidents’ situation becomes a dull, straightforward statement. Staněk becomes just a mildly amusing bastard.<sup>33</sup>

Another issue was punctuation. Havel uses dashes throughout the three Vaněk plays to underline the character’s hesitation and silences. These dashes are important indicators that Vaněk can no longer trust language as a means to communicate his sense of truth. Silence and the words of others reveal the truth of their fragmented, muddled and untruthful realities. The question of talking and not talking comes up when Staněk probes Vaněk about his prison experience, in the following passage:

STANĚK: Ale nějak zlomit se vás jistě snažili –

VANĚK: No tak –

STANĚK: Jestli o tom nechcete mluvit, tak nemusíte –

VANĚK: V jistém ohledu to je vlastně účel vyšetřovací vazby – srazit člověku hřebínek –

STANĚK: A přimět ho, aby vypovídal –

VANĚK: Hm –

STANĚK: Kdyby mě někdy pozvali na výslech, což mě dříve nebo později nemine, víte co chci udělat?

VANĚK: Co?

STANĚK: Prostě nevypovídat! Vůbec se s nimi nebudu bavit! Je to totiž nejlepší: člověk má aspon jistotu, že jim neřekne něco, co nemá –

VANĚK: Hm – <sup>34</sup>

Blackwell is careful in indicating the dashes in her translation:

STANEK : But surely they tried to break you down somehow! –

VANEK: Well –

STANEK : If you'd rather not talk about it, it's all right with me –

VANEK: Well, in a way that's the whole point of pre-trial interrogations, isn't it? To take one down a peg or two –

STANEK : And to make one talk!

VANEK: Mmn –

STANEK : If they should haul me in for questioning – which sooner or later is bound to happen – you know what I'm going to do?

VANEK: What?

STANEK : Simply not answer any of their questions! Refuse to talk to them at all! That's by far the best way. Least one can be quite sure one didn't say anything one ought not to have said!

VANEK: Mmn – <sup>35</sup>

This short extract is tragic and funny. Staněk who is thinking about a petition for Javůrek is trying to find out from Vaněk what prison and interrogations are like – his selfishness barely tinged by empathy and containing a certain titillating curiosity. Staněk, here, is also us, thinking about what we might do in such a position, thus he is not necessarily represented as a villain. In the Czech version, the use of dashes shows him moving from curiosity and fear (“But surely they tried to break you down somehow –”) to a slightly faked compassion (“If you'd rather not talk about it, it's all right with me –”), to real fear when he hears something concrete from Vaněk (“And to make one talk –”), all of which he is unsure about. The dashes underline his tentativeness and the mix of emotions. Vaněk's lack of language (apart from one longer line) allows those emotions to keep changing so that he moves then into bravura and more forceful punctuation – the commas, question marks and finally exclamation marks (“Simply not answer any of their questions! Refuse to talk to them at all!”).

At the end of the extract, Staněk double-checks his bravura (“At least one can be quite sure one didn't say anything one ought not to have said –”), waiting to get Vaněk's approval. Here we have Staněk wondering how he will react to interrogation and

asserting that he will refuse to speak, not through any courage or resistance, but so that he cannot incriminate himself. But of course the joke, apart from his cravenness, is clear: he can't *stop* talking in the face of Vaněk's silence. What makes him not just a caricature or a joke of a character is the portrayal of the wavering human emotions threaded through the extract, ones with which we can identify: he feels for Vaněk, he's curious, he knows he's not brave, he fantasizes about a courageous self.

In comparison to the Czech original and the Blackwell translation above, Kustow cut and changed the dialogue:

V. Look, in a way, that's the whole point of pretrial interrogations, isn't it? To take you down a peg or two –  
S. And to make you talk!  
V. Yes!  
S. When they haul me in for questioning ... you know what I'm going to do?  
S. I just won't answer any of their questions! ... That's the best thing to do, at least you're sure you haven't said anything you shouldn't!<sup>36</sup>

Blackwell protested that by changing Vaněk's answer "Mmn –" to "Yes!" Kustow showed a basic miscomprehension of the character. "It is simply unthinkable that this Vaněk would actually respond to Staněk's innuendo by endorsing it!" she wrote:

In all the Vaněk plays, including *PROTEST*, one can hardly find a fullstop, let alone an exclamation mark, after any of the vague, evasive, meek responses with which Vaněk punctuates the "monologues" of the other characters. Vaněk's very function is to look at the other characters, say as little as possible, grunt from time to time when absolutely necessary (thus signalling to all and sundry he is actually following what's being said) and watch as – little by little – the others reveal themselves. The crust of their outward hypocrisy is shattered precisely because it keeps colliding with the immovable wall of Vaněk's silence. Any definite statement from Vaněk (even a slight indication of his sympathy with his interlocutors' predicament) would make them assume again the mask of the false persona they keep tearing to shreds under Vaněk's silent gaze [...]. The condition of Havel's compassion is Vaněk's vague, non-descript response, and above all his silence.<sup>37</sup>

Literally making Vaněk more speakable opens up important questions about the notions of speakability and performability of translated text: to what extent is the domestication, through editing, of a theatre text infringing on the aesthetic aims of that text in order to make it fit preconceived domestic societal or ideological norms? And if Havel's plays are

focused on the issue of censorship – censorship that arises from us rather than an outside authority – the editing on the Anglo-American stage tended to subsume the idea under its own expectations that the plays were straightforward allegorical and political critiques of one particular (and communist) regime. As a result, as Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz argued:

most critics and scholars, eager to point out Havel's incontestable political relevance have tended to shortchange the wider implications of his plays and pay insufficient attention to his artistic qualities [...] they have spent their energies on the political (though Havel might call it antipolitical) aspects of his writings [...] none has really tried to formulate the relevance of Havel's work for a Western democracy.<sup>38</sup>

In other words, the editing of the plays – albeit perhaps done unconsciously and in pursuit of a more obviously political dissident play – neutralized the critique the plays were making about self-censorship and censorship practices in the West.

### **“The Translator in the Attic”**

Finally, also, another person got written out: Vera Blackwell, Havel's theatre translator for twenty years, who, following this protest and her active involvement in a (very successful) production of the three one-act plays, including *Protest*, in New York, was essentially blacklisted by London and New York theatres. Reprimanded by Havel's agent, Klaus Juncker, for being too involved and too strident about Havel's texts and editing changes to her translations, Blackwell was strongly reminded that she was “nur eine Übersetzerin.”<sup>39</sup> The undervaluation in the Anglo-American theatre world of the so-called literal translator, who should be “heard, but not seen,” effectively discourages the participation of a figure who not only has a direct knowledge of the language and culture in which the play was written, but often, like Blackwell, has a literary and theatre background.<sup>40</sup> On the Anglo-American stage, in order to sell translations, theatres and directors have lent towards star translators – famous writers or playwrights in the

domestic culture who are often monolingual. These writers can produce wonderful new interpretations and adaptations of foreign-language work, but these often speak to their own aesthetic interests and goals. Blackwell's attempts to work with producers and directors and her vociferousness in trying to preserve the aesthetic integrity of Havel's plays were seen as meddling; a translator – and a woman – who did not know her place, i.e., a space of silence.

Fortunately, Blackwell's archive of correspondence and material from those twenty years is now at Columbia University in New York, and provides a fascinating narrative of the incredibly tough existence in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s of a female translator who was consistently challenged by an overwhelming male and resistant domestic scene. Sirku Aaltonen dubbed the literal theatre translator, the “translator in the attic,” referring to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal feminist work, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, because of their feminized and subaltern status in the theatre hierarchy.<sup>41</sup> But little has been written about the constituency, despite the now fairly lengthy academic tradition of thinking about the invisible translator. Whether there is, or has been, a form of gender censorship at work in the Anglo-American theatre, especially among so-called literal stage translators, should be addressed.

Havel's case shows the tightrope walked by theatre practitioners. There is a need to make source-language plays speakable and relevant to a domestic audience, but there also has to be a respect, in editing practices, for the knowledge of the source language and culture, an expertise often found in the literal translator. The impact of domestic desires and ideological reasoning on the translation process should be considered when constructing the fluid theatre text. In doing so, we may recognize when reductive and uninformed

interpretations potentially damage, neuter and censor the heart of a translated play, something especially important with Havel's plays which challenge the censor at the heart of all of us.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Eva Espasa, "Performability in Translation: Speakability? Playability? Or just Saleability?" in *Moving Target. Theatre Translation and Cultural Relocation*, eds. Terry Hale and Carole-Anne Upton (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2000), p.49.

<sup>2</sup> David Johnston, "Theatre Pragmatics," in *Stages of Translation: Translators on Translating for the Stage*, ed. David Johnston (Bath: Absolute Classics, 1996), p.58.

<sup>3</sup> Declan Donellan, "The Translatable and the Untranslatable: In Conversation with David Johnston," in *Stages of Translation: Translators on Translating for the Stage*, ed. David Johnston (Bath: Absolute Classics, 1996), p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> Sirkku Aaltonen, *Time Sharing on Stage. Drama Translation in Theatre and Society* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2000), p. 75.

<sup>5</sup> Sirkku Aaltonen, *Time Sharing on Stage*, p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> Sirkku Aaltonen, *Time Sharing on Stage*, p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz, *The Silenced Theatre: Czech Playwrights Without a Stage* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1979), p. 48.

<sup>8</sup> Václav Havel, "Author's Comments about the play *Largo Desolato*," unpublished (given to the author by Havel's translator, Marie Winn), 1986.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Garton-Ash, "He was a lead actor in a play that changed history: Václav Havel, velvet revolutionary, dies at 75," *The Guardian*, 18 December 2011, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Sue Curry Jansen, *Censorship. The Knot that Binds Power and Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).pp. 153-4.

<sup>11</sup> Sue Curry Jansen, *Censorship*, p. 16, Jansen's italics.

<sup>12</sup> Sue Curry Jansen, *Censorship*, pp. 164 and 136.

<sup>13</sup> André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 14-15.

<sup>14</sup> André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> Denise Merkle, "Presentation," *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction* 15, no. 2 (2002): 9-10.

<sup>16</sup> Francesca Billiani, "Accessing Boundaries – Censorship and Translation. An Introduction," in *Modes of Censorship and Translation: National Contexts and Diverse Media*, ed. Francesca Billiani (Manchester: St. Jerome. 2007), pp. 9, 8 and 3.

<sup>17</sup> Francesca Billiani, "Accessing Boundaries," p. 15.

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- <sup>18</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Giving Offense. Essays on Censorship* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 160.
- <sup>19</sup> Jan Grossman, "A Preface to Havel," *The Tulane Drama Review* 11, no. 3 (1967), p. 118.
- <sup>20</sup> Václav Havel, *Letters to Olga. June 1979-September 1982*, translated by Paul Wilson (New York: Knopf, 1988), p. 285.
- <sup>21</sup> Václav Havel, *Letters to Olga*, pp. 170-1.
- <sup>22</sup> Unattributed, "The Increased Difficulty of Concentration," *Women's Wear Daily*, December 5, 1969, Vera Blackwell archive, Bakhmeteff Collection, Columbia University, New York, folder 9:3.
- <sup>23</sup> Unattributed, "The Increased Difficulty of Concentration."
- <sup>24</sup> Václav Havel, *Protest*, in *The Garden Party and Other Plays*, translated by Vera Blackwell (New York: Grove, 1993), p. 264.
- <sup>25</sup> James F. Pontuso, *Václav Havel. Civic Responsibility in the Postmodern Age* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), pp. 90 and 92.
- <sup>26</sup> Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz, "Introduction," in *The Vaněk Plays. Four Authors, One Character*, ed. Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), p. xxvii.
- <sup>27</sup> Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz, "Introduction," pp. xxvii-xxviii.
- <sup>28</sup> Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz, "Introduction," p. xxi.
- <sup>29</sup> Letter from Michael Kustow to Vera Blackwell, dated January 7, 1980. Vera Blackwell archive, folder 7:1.
- <sup>30</sup> Letter from Michael Kustow to Vera Blackwell, dated January 7, 1980.
- <sup>31</sup> Letter from Vera Blackwell to Michael Kustow, dated May 1980, Vera Blackwell archive, folder 7:1.
- <sup>32</sup> Letter from Vera Blackwell to Michael Kustow, dated May 1980.
- <sup>33</sup> Letter from Vera Blackwell to Michael Kustow, dated May 1980.
- <sup>34</sup> Václav Havel, *Hry, Spisy 2* (Prague: Torst, 1999), pp. 650-1.
- <sup>35</sup> Václav Havel, *The Garden Party and Other Plays*, p. 246.
- <sup>36</sup> Quoted in Letter from Vera Blackwell to Michael Kustow dated May 1980.
- <sup>37</sup> Letter from Vera Blackwell to Michael Kustow dated May 1980.
- <sup>38</sup> Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz, *The Silenced Theatre*, p.39.
- <sup>39</sup> Letter from Klaus Juncker to Vera Blackwell dated 31 October 1978, Vera Blackwell archive, folder 3.
- <sup>40</sup> Joseph Farrell, "Servant of Many Masters," in *Stages of Translation: Translators on Translating for the Stage*, ed. David Johnston (Bath: Absolute Classics, 1996), p. 46.
- <sup>41</sup> Sirkku Aaltonen, *Time Sharing on Stage*, p. 98.

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