A HUMAN FACE IN PRAGUE*

A Conversation with Václav Havel

* An interview conducted by Erica Blair in Prague, November 1986. Interpreted and translated by A.G.Brain.

EB The word "totalitarianism" still creates a lot of unease or disagreement in the west. Many people consider it either an emotive and politically loaded term, or greatly exaggerated, as fictional as Orwell's Nineteen Eighty Four. You nevertheless use this term to describe Czechoslovakia and other Soviet-style regimes. What exactly do you mean when you say that conditions in your country are totalitarian?

VH I'd like to emphasize at the outset that I'm no political scientist, but a writer who observes and gathers impressions of the world around me. I trust that all I say from hereon will be viewed in that light. My impression is that there is an evident difference between dictatorships in the classical sense - what some describe as "authoritarian rule" - and totalitarianism. In the various dictatorships of the Third World, for instance, a small ruling group violently dominates and tyrannises society. Compared with those dictatorships, our totalitarian system is less openly or directly based on violence, even though it certainly rules society by means of an enormous police force, army and bureaucracy. Totalitarianism is unique in yet another sense. It is a system which absorbs the whole of society. It enters every vein and artery of the social organism, usurping and controlling all aspects of human life. Nazism is often cited as an example of totalitarianism, and I understand that the term was first used in connection with fascism in general. Yet fascism strikes me as a half-way stage between dictatorship and totalitarianism as we experience it here. In order to distinguish our system from its "pre-historic" forms, I once employed the term "post-totalitarianism". I tried to underline the fact that, although the Nazi and fascist states of the past were much more violent and brutal, they did not penetrate every area of life as thoroughly as our system does. Under fascist regimes, there were important spheres, such as people's private lives, in which people were able to do what they liked

to a considerable degree, and which were seemingly untouched by the regime. In the system we live in, you won't normally encounter either street battles between citizens and the police or direct violence, brutality or terrorism from the regime. What one does encounter, however, is something that Orwell saw, and that is more dangerous in certain respects. Totalitarian regimes get under society's skin. Their complex forms of manipulation penetrate every sphere of life. I'm not exaggerating when I tell you that, from morning to night, every ordinary citizen in this country is faced with a situation in which everything they do is in some way interfered with by the system. The regime leaves its mark on everything, from the way housing estates are built to the patterns of televsion programming. You can even see this manipulation in apparently trivial things, such as the opening and closing times of restaurants, which are conceived with a view to discouraging people from sitting around too long, and encouraging them to get off home to their television screens to watch the messages broadcast by the centralised media.

EB You say that totalitarian regimes are considerably less violent than military dictatorships. Many people in the west sense this difference, and consider it important. They might be inclined to say : "But compared with harsh and bloodthirsty dictatorships such as Pinochet's Chile, or governments of the South African kind, the type of regime you are describing is more civilised. At least it has some respect for human life." What would you say to this kind of remark?

VH The failure to understand the totalitarian system, which such opinions reflect, is something that I personally don't hold against those who think this way. In fact I fully understand such opinions, because I have had every opportunity to appreciate that totalitarianism is something that one has to experience at first hand. It is something

that is invisible at a distance. From a distance, one may see television images of Chilean policemen firing on demonstrators. They are visible and shocking, and anyone watching them can appreciate the brutality of the regime. Since your television does not transmit such images of massacres in Czechoslovakia or any other country of the Soviet bloc, our regimes inevitably appear more civilised. And indeed they are more civilised in this specific sense. Unhappily, there is also a sense in which they are more dangerous. In our system, the violence is spiritual rather than physical, in other words, hidden, covert. Life here seems pretty normal to outsiders. You can see people walking the streets chatting happily, going shopping - superficially nothing seems wrong, and there are no signs of massacres. The violence of our system will never be seen by a tourist or visitor. It is the kind of violence they would see only if they got a job at CKD Engineering Works in Prague and had to travel to work every morning and back home every afternoon. They would then be in a position to understand what it means to earn the usual rate for the job there, and to be dependent on superiors. They would see how those who pursue political careers receive ever higher salaries. They would discover that no matter how well they worked, their pay would remain the same.They would realise just how much they were at the mercy of the all-powerful bureaucracy, so that for every little thing they have to approach some official or other. They would observe the gradual destruction of the human spirit, of basic human dignity. They would be able to observe how, from the nursery to the old people's home, people live their lives in a state of permanent humiliation. These are features of the totalitarian system which can neither be filmed by television cameras nor easily explained to outsiders. In order to be

seen they have to be experienced.

EB You've written a great deal about other aspects of this "invisible violence". For instance, you point to the paradoxical way in which the totalitarian system requires its subjects to be both victims of the system as well as its cyncical and constantly moaning accomplices. You observed in a recent essay that never before has there existed a regime of this kind in which so many people are both supporters of the regime and - potentially at least - its opponents. What exactly do you mean by that?

VH Yes, I think that this paradox is very important, and typical of our type of advanced, latter-day totalitarianism. The fact is that the domination of a large group of powerless people by a small powerful group has long since ceased being its most typical feature. Nowadays, what is typical is the domination of one part of each of ourselves by another part of ourselves. It's as if the regime had an outpost inside every single citizen. Consequently, "the regime" is something that is elusive and hard to locate precisely within a particular institution or social group. In an odd kind of way, the system pervades the whole of society, such that everyone at the same time supports it and helps create it - by mutely acquiescing in its version of reality, by voting in formal elections, and by observing its various rituals and ceremonies. By doing this, not only do people support the regime; they actually help create it. But at the same time everyone finds themselves in opposition...

EB Would you explain this point, perhaps with some examples?

VH I'll give you two specific examples of what I mean. As you can see, I'm in the process of having this flat adapted and reconstructed. The bricklayers and plumbers who come here are always moaning about "them" - the regime. They grumble almost constantly about the way things are. My

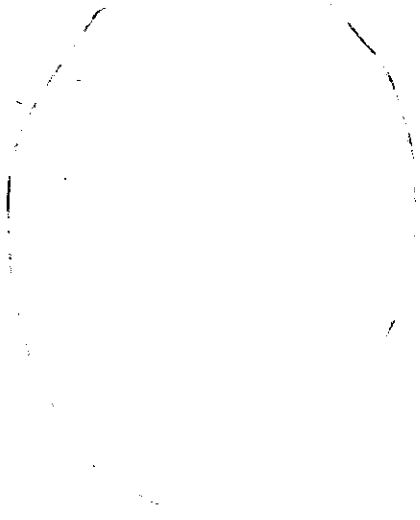
second example is a deputy minister of state, that is, someone who presumably belongs to the ruling group of the state bureaucracy, and who might be regarded as one of "them" that everybody grumbles about. However, talk to this deputy minister in private and he'll say exactly the same thing as the bricklayers and plumbers. You'll find he also moans about the way things are, in fact more so because he is better informed about the situation. He'll complain about "them", yet it won't dawn onhim that for most people he is one of "them". He'll complain that "they" won't let "us" do something or other, because "it's out of the question". He'll say things like "you know how things are". And if he happens to be an official working in the field of foreign trade, he will be very well informed about the enormous gap between productivity levels in the western and eastern economies. He'll set out an irrefutable case against "the system" based on countless facts, yet from early morning to four in the afternoon he sits in his office and performs his official government duties, thereby creating the very system against which he himself verbally rebels. This is something quite normal in this country. Absolutely everybody complains about the way things are. You can hear it in every pub and every household; in fact, you hardly ever meet anybody who would stick up for this regime in so many words. Everyone is fed up in one way or another, but their dissatisfaction finds no other expression and goes no further than this eternal bellyaching. People just go on doing what is required of them from morning to night. They adapt and compromise, thereby laying the foundations of the regime which they spend their time attacking. This is what is most dangerous about totalitarianism, and why it differs from, say, the Chilean dictatorship. Our system invades every pore of society, and hence every citizen

suffers from a type of "schizophrenia". This "schizophrenia" is extremely dangerous in the long term, since it not only destroys society, but also the identity, individuality and spirit of every member of society.

EB In 1941 George Orwell wrote that the really frightening thing about totalitarianism is not that it commits atrocities of various kinds, but that it tries to define and control the past as well as the future by destroying truth. Is the destruction of truth another key aspect of the invisible domination you're describing?

VH I regard that particular observation of Orwell's to be very profound. It hits the nail on the head. On various occasions I have spoken about the importance of living authentically "in the truth", that is, living an authentic and meaningful life and - in the face of various risks - not being afraid of speaking one's mind. Yet when I talk to foreign journalists and other western visitors I'm often asked questions that suggest that this idea is stuffy, moralistic and old-fashioned, as if stressing "truth" smacked of the pulpit. What these visitors fail to understand is that in our system all information has been centrally controlled for years and decades now, with the result that people's minds are manipulated in a certain way. This destruction of the truth is far more obvious in the Soviet Union than in Czechoslovakia. In Russia, for instance, there's no real tradition of democracy and the system has been in existence for much longer than in Czechoslovakia. It seems as if the totalitarian system there has managed to create its own "totalitarian people" - people who have never had an opportunity of comparing two or more different points of view, and who are therefore gradually processed and manipulated to conform or adapt to the government's own official interpretation of reality. This official

interpretation consequently merges with reality. A general and all-embracing Lie begins to predominate; people begin adapting to it, and everyone in some part of their lives compromises with the Lie or coexists with it. Under these conditions, to assert the truth, to behave authentically by breaking through the all-englobing web of lies - in spite of everything, including the risk that one might find oneself up against the whole world - is an act of extraordinary political importance. In our conditions of the all-embracing Lie, "truth" has an explosive potential. It is only to those who lack first hand experience of this inconspicuous Lie that penetrates every pore of our body that the emphasis on truth and being true to oneself must sound like some strange kind of old-fashioned preachiness.



EB Your western readers often express surprise that you refuse to identify uncritically with the image of the West as the bastion of freedom, openness and democracy. You seem to be suspicious of both western democracies and Soviet-type systems. Is this because you believe that these two systems, far from being fundamentally different, share something deeply in common?

VH It is seventeen years since I was last in the West. So in no way am I well qualified to pass critical judgement on Western political systems and ways of life. I really have little personal experience of them. Nonetheless, I can't help concluding from my own impressions and studies that the crisis in today's world is not just a matter of Soviet-style totalitarianism. Its roots go deeper. I don't share the view of certain western politicians that Communism is some kind of painful ulcer in the world's stomach, and that all that is required is a surgical operation to put things right and make us all happy again. I don't think it's quite so simple.

EB Are you saying that totalitarian regimes such as Czechoslovakia are a possible shape of things to come in the West?

VH In my view, Soviet totalitarianism is an extreme manifestation - a strange, cruel and dangerous species - of a deep-seated problem which equally finds expression in advanced western society. These systems have in common something that the Czechoslovak philosopher Václav Bělohradský calls the "eschatology of the impersonal", that is, a trend towards impersonal power and rule by mega-machines or colossi that escape human control. I believe the world is losing its human dimension. Self-propelling mega-machines, juggernauts of impersonal power such as large-scale enterprises and faceless governments, represent the greatest threat to our present-day world. In the final analysis, totalitarianism is no more than an extreme expression of this threat. At least, that is

the impression I get from my observations and necessarily distant impressions of Western society.

EB What would you say are the root causes of this situation? What lies behind the fact that we are slowly losing our grip on the world?

VH This slipping of the world through our fingers and beyond our control has something to do with a situation we are seldom aware of : the fact that we live in the first atheist civilisation in human history. The civilisation that has taken shape since the upsurge of modern science and the enormous evolution of knowledge, science and technology is predominantly anthropocentric. It proudly asserts that Man is capable of knowing everything, describing everything and doing everything. People have ceased to respect any so-called higher metaphysical values - the Absolute, something higher than themselves, something mysterious. I am not talking about a personal God, necessarily. I'm referring to whatever is absolute, transcendental, supra-human or part of the natural or world order - to things that are in some way unattainable, mysterious and not subject to human control. All these fundamental considerations once represented a support, a horizon for people, but now they have been lost. The paradox is that in losing them we are losing our grip on civilisation, which is running out of control. As soon as humanity declared itself to be the supreme ruler of the universe - at that moment, the world began to lose its human dimensions. It looks as if the only way to preserve these human dimensions is for people to respect a principle outside or beyond themselves, something transcendental.

EB On several occasions you have written that the issue of capitalism or socialism is a thing of the past - a dead issue, an obsolete choice

from the nineteenth century. Is this belief connected with your concern about the growth of impersonal, power-hungry organizations?

VH Yes. I believe that a century or so after Marx, the world is a very different place. The issue of whether firms are privately-owned or nationalised or "socially-owned" is no longer the basic question. What is more important is whether their scale is human or not. The way I see it, enormous companies like Shell or IBM are - fundamentally speaking - not very different from so-called socialist enterprises. Of course, these companies are more efficient and profitable and their productivity is higher. But they closely resemble big socialist firms in that both are colossal mega-machines from which the human dimension is increasingly lacking. Marx believed that the socialisation of the means of production would solve everything. I'm afraid I'm more of the view that even if they had been nationalised in a better and more intelligent fashion than in the Communist countries, it still wouldn't solve the main problem which, as I've explained, I feel to be more profound.

EB You have expressed regrets about the often bitter tussles in western Europe and North America to use your name and your plays and essays for Rightist as well as Leftist purposes. Is this because you consider yourself in the centre of the political spectrum? Or are the categories "Left" and "Right" no longer meaningful for you?

VH There are probably two reasons why I resist being assigned to either the Left or the Right. First, I have a sort of fundamental dislike of being categorised. Quite simply, I don't like people laying claims on me and classifying me under some particular banner or other. I have no pretensions of always being correct, but I always try to make a conscientious effort to try to think things out as best I can. In my view, what matters is the truth rather than the particular sect, party

or ideology to which I might be assigned. In a strange and subtle way, the very act of forming a political grouping forces one to start playing the power game, whereas I believe that truth has priority. So I refuse to identify with one particular political current or group because I would feel limited and obliged to correct my perception of the truth in line with group discipline. But there is probably a deeper motive. The fact is that, in light of our experience of totalitarianism, we don't find that the traditional political spectrum, as it still exists in the West, expresses the fundamental issues. Looked at from over here it appearsrather superficial. When I talk to someone on the right, I have the impression of being a left-winger. And when I talk with a left-winger, I feel as though I belong on the right. I really don't know where I belong, or how I can be classified in those terms. Actually, I don'tcare, because those particular categories seem of secondary importance to me. What is important is whether a position corresponds to the truth - and not whether it's left, right or centre.

EB Your dislike of dogmatism and the importance you place on the principle of living as a human being in the truth are reminiscent of some key themes in the life and work of the philosopher, social critic and first president of the Czechoslovak republic, Tomáš Masaryk. To what extent do you see yourself in the democratic tradition of Masaryk - a tradition which seems to have been forgotten in the west?

VH I grew up as a child in an atmosphere charged with Masaryk's humanism. We had all of Masaryk's and Čapek's works on our bookshelves at home. My father knew the authors personally. I read them all at a very early age, and they formed an initial background for my subsequent development. Later in life, I can't say I studied Masaryk systematically, and I therefore can't claim to be an authority on him. However, were I to summarize my feelings about him, I would say that

there are countless points where I agree with him, or where I find his ideas congenial or astonishingly contemporary, despite the fact - as you mentioned - that nowadays he is pretty well unknown or completely forgotten outside of Czechoslovakia. There are certainly quite a few areas where I disagree with him fundamentally, such as his positivist belief in progress. This belief in the continuous development and improvement of the modern world I don't share. Nevertheless, his constant references to transcendence, and his insistence that democracy as a political system and as an expression of social justice must have some sort of transcendental basis or horizon are feelings I profoundly share. But regardless of whether I agree with him or not, I believe that he was one of the greatest figures of modern Czechoslovak history. He was a fascinating man who combined an amazing breadth of philosophical vision with enormous experience and political tact. For me he was a man with a profound and living sense of social questions and of democracy. He truly was the founder of the modern Czechoslovak state. He was both bold and firm while displaying an admirable and subtle capacity for tactical politics. He was a figure of undeniable greatness, and it is a shame that the world has forgotten him.

EB Your overall thinking has also been influenced greatly by Jan Patočka, Czechoslovakia's most important post-war philosopher and, it should be added, the best known victim of police harassment since 1968. Since his writings are virtually untranslated and unknown in the English-speaking world, would you explain why you find them personally significant?

VH I should point out that I am not a Patočka scholar. There are already several generations of philosophers in Czechoslovakia who studied under him, whether at the time he taught at the university or during the periods when his seminars were private affairs, and who know all about

his specific philosophical achievements. I'm afraid I'm not one of those, although I ought to say that as a sixteen-year old I read, in the Charles University Library, a copy of his doctoral thesis on the philosophical problem of the natural sciences. At that time, it was a banned book, and it couldn't even be borrowed from the university library. I managed to wangle myself a copy, finding a pretext to read it there as a young manual worker, and I can say it meant a great deal to me. It opened my eyes to modern philosophy. Nevertheless, Patočka meant more to me than an author of various texts. If you like, he was someone who introduced me to philosophical thinking. I did not regard his greatest strength to be in his writings, but in his process of reasoning. I personally attended many of his private lectures and seminars, and took part in many debates with him. Many a time I conversed with him, and the way he grasped problems and approached questions, the way he explained various themes, put questions and reformulated them, was a fascinating, dramatic experience for me. Quite simply, as soon as words were out of his mouth, he was capable of reflecting on his own thoughts and posing the question as to what might lie behind them, what they might conceal and what objections could be made against them, and whether the truth lay elsewhere. He would then answer that question and pose a similar one. For me he was a teacher of a philosophical way of thinking. And, of course, there was the power of his moral presence. As you know, he was a man not given to overstatement or demonstrativeness. On the contrary, he was quiet, even-tempered, reserved even, while at the same time displaying a rare degree of consistency and resolution. So it is above all as a particularly moral person and as a thinker, rather than as the author of particular books,

that he has gone on living in my thoughts.

EB During your last spell in prison you managed to write Letters to Olga, in which you developed at great length a very complex philosophy of Being which is clearly indebted to Heidegger and Levinas. Would you say briefly why you turned to these authors? Why did you find their writings of special significance? Did they help you keep your bearings?

VH It's very curious, and it's something I've observed not only in myself but also in several friends who served longer sentences, how prison challenges you to think more deeply about basic philosophical questions to do with your existence - questions such as what you are doing here and what's the point of existence at all? Of course, throughout my life I've enjoyed reading philosophy books - particularaly ones close to my own thinking - even though I've never studied philosophy systematically. Because I always had plenty of other things to do, such as writing plays and getting involved in different activities, and because I personally had no serious ambition in that direction, I didn't get involved in philosophising. I didn't feel cut out for it. It wasn't my "genre". And then, all of a sudden, when I became cut off from all the difficulties, joys, duties and tasks which had filled my life prior to imprisonment - in other words, when I found myself deprived of any opportunity of writing or of initiating, of creating or getting involved in anything, as well as obliged to do routine mechanical work and to abide by the stupidities of prison drill - I found, after months and then years of this unnatural atmosphere, that I was intellectually starved and my feelings stunted by the lack of positive experiences and of anything in the external world to be gripped by. I started to look inwards, and I increasingly felt the need to ponder life's basic questions. The philosophers you mentioned helped

satisfy this need. In addition, I had no opportunity of reading any literature, or studying anything. So I started to put together my own ideas. This helped me come to terms with prison life; it lent some meaning to my life. Every week, while engaged in prison work, P.T. drill and various duties, I'd try to sort out my thoughts and feelings, so that when Saturday came I could quickly write them down on the four pages we were permitted for our letter home, bearing in mind the complications of prison censorship. I never had the space or time to say exactly what was on my mind. Everything was written in these drastic circumstances. I lived from one letter to the next. In fact, I lived for the next letter. I constantly thought about it. For me it represented intellectual, spiritual and existential fulfilment, an effort to express my feelings about those matters and to explain them to myself. It was a work of self-preservation. What philosophical value these letters have I can't tell. That's something for the experts to decide. And, actually, that's not what counts for me in the end. What counts for me is the fact that they helped me survive those four years.

EB Throughout your writings you express severe reservations about utopian visions of "radiant tomorrows", as you call them. Are you against utopianism because you feel that it is foreign to central Europe and its sceptical, sober, under-stated, slightly mysterious view of the world? Or are there deeper reasons?

VH For the sake of clarity, I would like to make a distinction between ideals and utopias. Ideals are things we strive for - things we consider good and desirable, and which we use as a measure of what is bad and undesirable. Or they can be things we deduce from our analysis of what is bad. While everyone - besides those who are totally indifferent - has ideals, they don't necessarily believe in utopias. As I understand it, a

utopia is a more or less rationalist attempt to think up an abstract better world, to conceive "on paper" how it should be organised. It is an attempt to produce a blueprint of the best possible system and then to try to put it into practice. In this country we have lived through the failure of one great utopia, and this has given us a very sceptical and critical view of utopianism in general. No doubt, the central European scepticism you mentioned plays a part as well, but it is a secondary factor. Probably more important is that for years people here have experienced, day in and day out, the cruel and harsh reality of the decline and fall of one particular utopia.

EB So you reject utopias because they are instruments of deception - if you like, because they are elaborately constructed rainbows of shining ideas which tempt unhappy people into an even harsher reality?

VH The key point is that utopianism is a typically intellectual phenomenon - let us not forget that the greatest revolutionaries were all intellectuals. Utopianism is an arrogant attempt by human reason to plan life. But it is not possible to force life to conform to some abstract blueprint. Life is something unfathomable, ever-changing, mysterious, and every attempt to confine it within an artificial, abstract structure intended to make it function better somehow inevitably ends up homogenizing, regimenting, standardising and destroying life, as well as curtailing eveything that projects beyond, overflows or falls outside the abstract project. In my view, there is a direct and logical progression from beautiful utopias to concentration camps. What is a concentration camp, after all, but an attempt by utopians to dispose of those elements which don't fit into their utopias? Lately, I believe that our world has seen some very telling

examples of the failure of utopias, such as Pol Pot's Cambodia. What was that but a cruel, extreme, tragic and terrifying example of what happens when intellectuals - Pol Pot studied in Paris - lose all respect for life's richness and heterogeneity, for its immanence, for its own particular laws, when they choose to give arrogant credence to their own reason and their own ideas, which are supposed to be superior, more important and better than life itself, when these ideas are transformed into a doctrine and when, finally, they seek to implement that doctrine by making life conform to it? The outcome in Pol Pot's case was that a third of the nation was murdered for quite irrational motives. Paradoxically, the fanaticism of the abstract theory leads inevitably to irrationality, because in the end the theory divorces itself from life and becomes an ideological "theorem" or abstract principle, in whose name innocent people are massacred. The disgust produced by such utopias is something that people living under totalitarian regimes probably feel more strongly than people living in free societies, precisely because they have personal experience of what it means when someone comes along with a beautiful utopian dream, proceeds to transform it into a detailed blueprint, at which point they lose interest in life and are interested solely in putting their dream into practice, even if this means doing violence to life, or even destroying it.

EB I understand and share this disgust. But my impression is that in practice the dividing line between ideals and utopias is often very thin. I also think that in today's world utopias of a certain kind seem to be as necessary as they are dangerous. For instance, without modestly "utopian" schemes for more political democracy and greater civil liberties and social justice we in the West would be condemned to accepting the status quo. And in totalitarian systems - as your fellow Chartist Milan Šimečka has pointed out - wouldn't a life without utopias be horrible? Wouldn't life be reduced to hopelessness, despair and resignation to the daily corruption and absurdity? Don't you engage in some modest utopian scheming - as in Letters to Olga, where you speak of

the need for an "existential revolution", for the strengthening of human qualities such as love, sympathy, tolerance, understanding, solidarity and friendship?...

VH You're not the first to put this question to me. From time to time I'm asked : "Well, isn't what you are striving for 'utopian'?" My answer is that one must distinguish between, on the one hand, a state of permanent openness towards mysteriously changing and always rather elusive and never quite attainable ideals such as truth and morality and, on the other, an unequivocal identification with a detailed plan for implementing those ideals which in the end becomes self-justifying. This distinction between ideals and utopias is one that I personally feel. I truly believe - and this is somehow missing from Šimečka's article about utopias - that there is a difference between striving for particular ideals, and creating a blueprint for implementing them. You're right, there would seem to be a fine line between the two, an almost imperceptible shift when ideals stop being ideals and turn into utopias. But this shift nevertheless occurs when we stop being aware of an ideal as such and when we give that ideal concrete form and substance, and we suddenly find that instead of believing in a particular ideal, we end up only believing in the utopia, in other words, in the concrete plan for implementing that ideal. This subtle, but crucial and dangerous shift occurs when the head takes over from the heart, when spiritual motivations are suddenly supplanted by an "object" or "thing". A utopia is really a "thing" - the materialisation of an ideal - and it is obviously easier and more convenient to deal with this "thing" than with something so intangible and mysterious as ideals. At the same time, it is more dangerous, because the moment that we put all

our faith and trust in a specific project for implementing them, we lose touch with the ideals themselves. The ideals are replaced by our specific blueprint, our doctrine, our ideology - and therein lie the roots of disaster. The Pol Pot regime is a perfect example of the catastrophic loss of contact with ideals, and their replacement by a doctrine.

EB We've already spoken about the importance of defending truth under totalitarian conditions. So I'd like to ask how you see the relationship between truth and art, broadly understood. You are a staunch defender of the autonomy of art from politics. And yet you have strongly criticized what you call "the sectarian view of parallel culture" : the belief that offficially permitted art is always duplicitous and bankrupt, a contradiction in terms, whereas unofficial art - produced on typewriters and circulated in samizdat, or performed or exhibited in private studios, apartments and country barns - is authentic art. That's quite a surprising thing to say, considering the nonsense that often passes for culture in official circles today in Czechoslovakia. It raises the question : How do you distinguish "genuine" or "truthful" art?

VH The question as to what makes for authentic art or what is authentic in art is tantamount to asking what is the secret of art. That's a question that defies any precise answer. There is no mathematical or scientific way of defining art. Art also defies conceptual language. If art could be defined in conceptual terms, then we wouldn't need it. We could communicate using concepts. Take that painting on the wall. It was done by Mikuláš Medek. We lived in the same city and I was a friend of his for many years. I know he was the first person here to paint pictures like that, and at a time when there was no hope of exhibiting or selling them. I know he felt a compulsion to paint that way, as he did throughout his whole life. I know that he was seriously ill with diabetes, and that he drank himself to death at the beginning of the seventies. For me his painting is authentic. I personally can feel its truth. I feel in it a seriousness, an earnest search for certain

spiritual phenomena that exist somewhere on the frontiers between dream and reality, for certain elusive archetypal forms, a sort of search for truth of form, authenticity of material, and so on. But how can one tell, actually? You could just as easily find it specious. Art is something that is extremely hard to express or convey in conceptual terms. Nonetheless, despite this element of mystery and uncertainty regarding what is art, and what is true in art, we have the duty of making distinctions and judgements, which we do in fact. I personally discover certain qualities that I find valuable and credible in different places, mostly in the so-called "second", independent or parallel culture. But I also discover worthwhile things in the world of permitted art, chiefly on the fringes of official culture - in little thatres, suburban galleries, the occasional concert, or in the odd film situated on the borders between what is permitted and what is banned. What matters to me is whether the art is of merit and not the "zone" in which it occurs. And who, in the final analysis, is to judge whether something is of worth or not? The good Lord?! I can well sense something's worth or value, but someone else might see it quite differently. They're not obliged to find the same merit that I see in it. Therein lies the very secret of art.

EB What you're saying about the elusive qualities of art and truth reminds me of a magnificent sentence of Kafka's : "It is difficult to speak the truth, for although there is only one truth, it is alive and therefore has a live and changing face".

VH Yes, that's something I wholeheatedly agree with. And there's a sense in which it's connected with our earlier debate about utopia. Looked at from another angle, one could describe utopianism as an attempt at asserting one particular face of the truth and lending it fixed shape,

then passing it off as the complete and definitive truth, which necessarily implies liquidating, in its name, all the other living and changing faces of truth. So that, in the end, after having been based on one particular face of the truth, the utopia turns into a lie, because it violates the many and changing faces of the truth in the name of one fixed face.

EB I'm interested to know which Czechoslovak or foreign writers have influenced your thinking most. Which writers do you care most about today, and never grow tired of? Are you attracted primarily to the great circle of central European writers - Kafka, Broch, Musil, Hašek?

VH I would make a distinction between my favourite authors and those who have most influenced me. I have a lot of favourites and they include all the ones you mentioned. In addition, I loved the poetry of Holan and Kolar. Suffice it to say, there are many authors I like. But if I'm to select those who directly influenced the way I write, I would probably have to name Kafka above all, then would come Samuel Beckett and Ionesco.

EB There seems to be a certain genius of Czechoslovakian theatre - its ability to survive and grow despite various forms of political repression. There's a long history of this , stretching from the absolutist Austro-Hungarian Empire, through the period of Nazi occupation, to the Communist period after the coup-de-Prague of 1948. Are there signs today that theatre is again an independent force, either as part of a growing parallel culture or in what Josef Škvorecký has called the "grey zone", that twilight zone of independent culture which belongs neither to the state nor the recognized opposition? Or is theatre firmly in the grip of the so-called "stone theatres" (kamenná divadla) of the official sphere?

VH You're right in saying that our "small theatres" have always played a role in promoting society's self-awareness and emancipation. In this respect, they have fulfilled the true social or spiritual function of the theatre. It was something I experienced personally in the sixties at

the Theatre on the Balustrade [Divadlo na zábradlí], where my plays were performed and I was actually a theatre employee. Something similar even exists nowadays, though it assumes a very different form. Roughly speaking, I'd say that there are three types of theatres. First, there are the official "stone theatres", in which one rarely comes across anything noteworthy. Occasionally, there is an interesting production of a new play on the official circuit, but that is once in a blue moon. Of far greater interest, secondly, are various small theatres. While being professional or semi-professional, they are actually on the fringe of the official culture. Examples include the Theatre on a String [Divadlo na provázku, the Hana Theatre [Hanácké divadlo], The Fringe Theatre [Divadlo na okraji] and the Ypsilonka. Those theatres are definitely of greater interest in my opinion. In a certain sense they represent the dynamic element in today's theatre world. They are theatres that express the atmosphere of the times, or at least partially so. Alongside them, thirdly, there is something akin to the "off Broadway shows" that I used to know in New York. These are amateur companies of still younger people. Whereas those who run the small theatres are in their thirties and forties, those who are in the amateur companies are in their twenties. A lot of these amateur theatres have already come into existence, and they are genuine theatres of the present - a new wave of the eighties. They are without doubt a noteworthy and important phenomenon. What will survive of them and grow into something of more lasting worth is hard to estimate at this point in time. The main point is that scope exists for such ferment, and that this ferment is taking place precisely in the "grey zone" to which you referred....

EB Why is that?

VH Because it is an incredibly difficult matter to put on a show entirely within the "second" or "parallel" culture. Occasionally someone pulls it off, but it is an extremely complicated business. Generally speaking, today's amateur or semi-profesional companies or small professional theatres have some sort of organisers or bureaucrats above them to take decisions for them, as is required in the permitted sphere. Nevertheless, the spirit of these companies is not "official" by any means. They are in fact extremely "anti-official" in tone, and they are certainly not sanctioned or supported officially. They are tolerated, but they have constant problems with the bureaucracy. In my view, they are extremely important, because the absorption of what is happening in society's sub-conscious, in the sphere of the invisible and hidden, into the visible sphere is a crucial process and one which I experienced and observed in the sixties. This process can be observed in the "grey zone", which is why it is so important - and why, recently, the Jazz section has been subject to a vicious attack by the regime. The Jazz Section is virtually a symbol of the "grey zone".

EB Living under a regime which literally views genuine public life as a crime has meant that your public activities - for instance in the Writers' Union in the 1960s, and later in Charter 77 and the Committee to Defend the Unjustly Prosecuted - have had serious consequences for your plays, which are today officially forbidden in Czechoslovakia. As a playwright you cannot be involved directly in the production of your own plays. This fact must be very painful for you, especially considering the strong tradition of "authors theatre" [Autorské divadlo] in Czechoslovakia?

VH I find it very trying. In fact, it is worse than when a novelist or poet is prevented from publishing in their homeland, since theatre is generally far more bound up with the "here and now". I mean, it always emerges out of a particular social and spiritual situation and is

projected back into it. To put it simply, theatre needs a home. When a play remains a mere script, it is only ever half-finished. I have been deprived of thes basic conditions for the past seventeen years, and this has not made it easy for my writing. The way I try to confront it is simply not to accept my situation. I write as if my plays could still be performed at the Theatre on the Balustrade, and as if my contemporaries were there to watch them. In that sense, I try to write for the actors and audiences we have "here and now".

EB The idea of theatre as an incomplete dialogue was a special feature of the Theatre on the Balustrade. Would you say that you share this idea that theatre should not present themes and problems in ways that are intended to thrill or preach to playgoers but, rather, challenge them to a dialogue?

VH The role of the theatre, as I understand and try to practise it, is not to make things easier for people. I don't think it should present them with positive heroes in whom they can boldly place all their hopes. It shouldn't send people home from the theatre with the carefree feeling that those heroes will do something for them. The task of finding essential hope within ourselves is not something that can be delegated. The aim of all my plays is to confront people with themselves, to make audiences think, to shake them into an awareness of their dilemmas and possibilities, into an awareness of the questions and sidestepped issues facing them. My aim is not to give my audience any answers. Everyone must search for their own answers. I don't try to appease my audiences with merciful lies and falsely raise their spirits by offering to solve everything for them. There's no dragging the audience onto the stage, and no magic tricks. None of that is helpful in my view.

EB How then do you conceive the proper relationship between your plays and their audiences?

VH I try to do something different : to fling my audiences in the most drastic fashion into the heart of a problem that they ought not and cannot avoid. In other words, I try to push their noses into their own wretchedness, into my wretchedness, into our common wretchedness. Theatre shoud remind people that the time is getting on, that our situation is bad, and that there's no time to lose. For instance, I think that when people are confronted with concentrated evil, they can most easily realise what is good. In the end, by presenting it to them on the stage, one is giving them an opportunity of drawing that lesson for themselves. In my most recent play, Temptation, Fistula says : "I don't give any specific advice, and I don't fix anything for anyone. The most I do is to stimulate now and again." That line could be my own credo as a playwright.

EB You have been influenced deeply by the Theatre of the Absurd. In one of your best-known plays, The Memorandum, I recall that office workers are expected to learn a new bureaucratic language, Ptydepe, which is officially said to reinforce precision in communication. Yet in fact Ptydepe baffles almost everybody who tries to learn it. Why is absurdity of this kind so special to you?

VH You're right, the Theatre of the Absurd is very important to me. What I've always valued most about it is its ability to grasp and to express things that are "in the air", and without supposing that the playwright is more informed or aware than the audience. I consider the Theatre of the Absurd the most significant development in twentieth century theatre, largely because it shows modern human beings "in crisis". I mean, it shows people who have lost the basic metaphysical certainties and the experience of the Absolute that I spoke about earlier in our

conversation...

EB The absurdist theme of human beings in crisis crops up regularly in your plays. In Largo desolato, for instance, the main character, Professor Kopriva, is in serious trouble with the authorities and under tremendous pressure from civil society to live up to his reputation of integrity. But he fares badly, and is a pathetic figure who seems to be at the point of cracking up. He is paranoid, full of self-doubt, a compulsive neurotic who pops pills, swills rum and confesses that he is driven by the feeling that he does nothing except listen helplessly to the passing of time...

VH Yes, in this sense I am loyal to the tradition of absurdist theatre. In the Theatre of the Absurd, we find human beings who have no solid ground beneath their feet. Their entire world is in disarray. While they realise that they have lost something for good, they don't seem capable of recognising their situation for what it is. So they hide from it. As in Beckett's Waiting for Godot, they wait, unable to realise that they're waiting in vain. They are tormented by the need to communicate something of great importance but, as in Ionesco's Chairs, they've actually nothing to communicate. They search their memories for something firm to cling to, all the time without realising that there's nothing to remember. Clearly, these are something like model situations of people who are "falling", who are sinking ever deeper into an abyss. These absurdist plays are also of interest to me because they are often inspired by the most everyday situations, such as a visit from friends, the tyranny of school, or playing on the beach. However, these are not actual scenes from life. Instead, they are images of the fundamental ways in which human beings stumble and fall. What appeals to me is that nobody in these absurdist plays philosophises, as they do, let's say, in a Sartre play. Instead they utter nothing but drivel and platitudes, or they are silent for long periods. However, the meaning of these

platitudes and silences is always philosophical, despite the fact that they shouldn't be taken literally and don't "illustrate" anything. They are not overstated, they lack pathos and any didactic element. Instead, they display a sort of dejected humour. If you like, you can see absurdist plays as bleak comedies. What they are not - I think this is very important to say - is nihilist. They're just a warning, they shock us, by confronting us with the whole question of meaning, by making us aware of its absence. Absurd theatre offers neither comfort nor hope. All it does is remind us of how we live at present. It emphasizes the complementarity of sense and nonsense. It supposes that the deeper the awareness of absurdity, of the absence of sense and meaning, the more vigorously sense and meaning can be sought. But absurd theatre doesn't think that its job is to explain to its audience the way things "really are". It lacks that sort of arrogance, and leaves the sermonising to Brecht.

EB I understand that as a playwright you've never been interested in a political career. But, against your will, you've been dragged into politics. You participated in the dramatic events of the Prague Spring - on one occasion, I believe that you even "counselled" Alexander Dubček for several hours on how Czechoslovakia ought to be run. More recently, you've described this period of reform communism as a dreadful hotch-potch that neither satisfied the Czechoslovak public nor the Kremlin. Would you elaborate this point?

VH 1968 was not merely a clash between two factions of political leaders and a temporary victory of the more liberal faction. I regard it as the logical outcome of a lengthy process whereby society gradually achieved "self-awareness and self-emancipation". Everyone, including myself, was quite euphoric about what was happening. After all, we started to breathe freely and we were free to meet. Fear dissipated, various taboos fell away, and all sorts of social conflicts and interests could be

voiced out loud. The media were once again able to play their proper role and civic awareness ~~grew apace~~ flowered. Quite simply, the ice started to thaw and the windows began to be opened. However, my joy was also mixed with feelings of uncertainty, which plagued me and many others more and more...

EB What provoked your worries?

VH In my particular case, it was the realisation of just how embarrassing these developments were to the state leadership. All of a sudden, they enjoyed general support and spontaneous sympathy, something they had never known before, since they were accustomed to support organised from above. While they sympathised with the social groundswell, they also feared it. They relied on it without understanding it completely; and they welcomed it while all along trying to hold it in check. In other words, they wanted to ventilate the country but were frightened of fresh air - a factor that I think was generously ignored by the national euphoria I mentioned. As a consequence, the political leadership tended to do no more than trot along in the wake of events, instead of guiding and protecting society. Trapped by their illusions, they kept on telling themselves that they would somehow manage to explain it convincingly to the Soviets in private; that they would manage to keep society on a leash; and that, in the end, the Soviets would have to understand the situation and give their consent. As a result, they concealed their differences with the Soviets, failed to heed the warning signals, and succumbed to the illusion that they would somehow cope with the developments. The hastily produced Action Programme of April 1968 mirrored all these

contradictions. Essentially, it was a hotch-potch of different contradictions capable of satisfying neither Czechoslovak society nor the Kremlin.

EB Why have you publicly expressed doubts about some of your own political activities during this period?

VH If my memory serves me correctly, during this time I published a lengthy article called "On the Subject of Opposition", in which I discussed the possibility of forming a new democratic political party which would be something of a partner of the Communist Party. The article attracted quite a lot of attention because, if I'm not wrong, it was the first time (and perhaps the last) that a demand for an opposition political party was voiced publicly. For a long time now, I've had serious reservations about that article. I've come to be rather sceptical about the very principle of mass political parties. I suspect that involvement in government inevitably leads to parties' bureaucratisation, corruption and loss of democracy. I'm not opposed to the solidarity and cohesion of various interest groups or groups of like-minded people. It's just that I'm against anything that serves to cloud personal responsibility, or rewards anyone with privileges for their devotion to a particular power-oriented group. But something more important worries me about that original article. In those troubled times, I never ceased regarding my role as a writer who was a "witness to the times". As you say, I had no intention of becoming a politician, in the sense of someone who goes about the practical business of putting the world right. In my view, however, proposals to found political parties should come from people who are genuinely disposed to found them - and that wasn't true of me.

EB You say in your writings that you favour a type of "anti-politics" - similar to that pursued by Charter 77 since its inception - as a remedy for impersonal, manipulative power. This term anti-politics sounds strange to Western ears. Would you explain briefly what you mean by it?

VH My impression is that people take this term too seriously, as if it described some ideological category or weighty thesis. When I first used the term it was no more than a handy expression in a particular situation. It was a way of trying to say succinctly that under totalitarian conditions - though not confined to them alone - an action that has no ambitions of political power can have surprisingly political effects, the significance of which are long term and greater than the effects of so-called "political" actions within the realms of power. Since you mentioned Charter 77, I could use it to illustrate what I mean. The Charter is made up of a small number of citizens - few in terms of society as a whole - who have no weapons, no bureaucracy, no mass political party, no power ambitions, no desire to take over the government and who therefore would seem to be insignificant from the point of view of "Realpolitik" or administrative politics. But the fact is that the Charter has an influence far in excess of the number of its signatories or supporters. It manages to influence the entire sphere of social consciousness which, normally speaking, is prey to manipulation by the regime. The Charter has a sort of electrifying effect, which charges its surroundings and in turn becomes a political factor. The enormous campaign unleashed by the regime against the Charter at the time of its creation, and the millions of crowns spent since then on fighting and trying to suppress it, could not possibly be explained without acknowledging the political impact of what was seemingly a "non-political" action. In an essay, "Politics and Conscience", I tried to

examine this idea of anti-politics in a broader context. I tried, if you like, to sketch out an ideal sort of politics whose determining factor is people's conscience, in other words, a type of practical morality governed by certain basic existential and ethical imperatives. That essay grew out of our experience here and I'd hate it to be mistaken for some kind of doctrine. It was nothing of the sort, but rather an attempt to describe a phenomenon which observers from outside sometimes have difficulty in understanding...

EB They do indeed. For instance, many western politicians responsible for directing foreign policy towards eastern Europe seem to regard this small-scale moral activity in the shadows of the state as "unrealistic", as fantastic as the Lilliputians' attempts to tie down Gulliver from below by thousands of small threads. How do you react to such criticism?

VH I sometimes get the feeling that something that appears unrealistic can turn out to be the most realistic in the end. Many people in the West expect the Charter to be an independent peace movement, an ecological movement, a substitute for public opinion, a source of publishing activity, and a partner for social democratic or conservative political parties. The Charter is treated sometimes as though we were some alternative, second Czechoslovakian government. We are burdened with various political roles which in the West are borne by scores or hundreds of different organisations and institutions. A handful of Prague stokers and caretakers, who are members of the Charter, are required in the little spare time they have to assume all these different political roles. How would all the "realist" politicians you mentioned reply to the questions: How is it that these unrealistic idealists, these dreamers who are apparently incapable of influencing real politics, are obliged to spend their time from morning to night in

talks with foreign visitors? Why are they regarded by different diplomatic delegations to Czechoslovakia as the only partner worth speaking to in this country apart from the government? How did they achieve this power, when there are so few of them, and when they are such idealists?

EB You've had a long-running controversy with Milan Kundera about the potential power of the powerless under totalitarian conditions. Kundera doubts the efficacy of the type of independent citizens' initiatives you've been describing. His doubts resurface in The Unbearable Lightness of Being, when someone refuses to sign a petition in support of political prisoners. The reader is told that signing petitions is futile; and that it doesn't help, but possibly may worsen, the prisoners' situation. Kundera's character explains that the real motive of petitioners is to delude themselves into thinking that they still have some influence on history; and that, since everything has been lost, the petitioners are actually parasites on the misfortunes of the oppressed. You objected to similar views expressed by Kundera in a well-known debate in the late 1960s. Do you still find his views unacceptable?

VH I don't wish to be unfair to Kundera. Yet I think his image of a Europe raped by Asia - a Europe which is a spiritual graveyard maintained by governments of forgetting - and his idea of history as an inexhaustible store of cruel jokes are linked with his belief that everything here is just as it was at the beginning of the 1970s, and that petitions like the one he mocks in the novel you mentioned are therefore no more than desperate and tragic gestures by has-beens who've no other more meaningful outlet. Kundera is correct to say that every petition and even every signature is subject to the danger he mocks. For that reason alone, I cannot take umbrage at his derision, especially considering that it is part of a novel. My disagreement with him lies elsewhere. My feeling is that he systematically fails - and almost refuses - to see a less obvious and more hopeful side of the same issue. He can't acknowledge the indirect and long-term significance that

citizens' initiatives can or do have. He seems to be trapped by his own scepticism. This makes him incapable of admitting that there are occasions when it makes sense to display civic courage, even if it makes oneself look ridiculous. I well understand his anxiety at the thought of being laughed at, as well as his fear of the pathos which results from his personal experience of totalitarianism. However, my feeling is that his fear blinds him to the curious diversity of meanings human behaviour has under totalitarian conditions. Psychologically speaking, total scepticism of Kundera's kind is a natural outcome of losing one's enthusiastic illusions. The trouble is that total scepticism can easily turn into the other side of what it opposes. Simply, it can prevent someone from seeing the more hopeful dimension of an issue, or even the fact that it has two sides.

EB Would you explain why you think Kundera's "total cynicism" is reinforced by his tragic view of history?

VH Yes, at the time of my original polemic with Kundera in 1969, what I didn't like was the fact that he and others began to explain the Soviet occupation and our government's capitulation as part of our historical lot or "natural destiny". The outcome of the events was presented as if it were a cause. I've no objection to drawing historical parallels or conjecturing about the meaning of history. And I fully understand and respect the frustration of former Communists about the way things turned out. But I don't like the way they tried to soften the blow of their collision with hard reality by blaming it all on our so-called "natural destiny", and thereby washing their hands of the matter. In Kundera's texts, there is something of that same historical capitulation evident in the fellow who once thought he held history's steering wheel in his

hands. When he sensed that history was proceeding in a direction he didn't intend, he leapt quickly to the conclusion that no one was holding the steering wheel any more. Hence, Kundera's demonisation of history, which appears to have somehow wandered off high above us since time immemorial, pursuing its own independent and totally inscrutable course. Kundera's image of history as a deity which is capable of deceiving and destroying us - or, at best, playing tricks on us - looks to me like an over-extrapolation from his own disappointment. In my view, history isn't elsewhere, it's here with us. We all make history : Kundera in his novels and interviews, the Chartists in their petitions. Our everyday deeds, good or bad, are its building blocks. History is to blame for history. Life doesn't lie outside history, nor does history exist outside of life.

EB During the 1980s, you've contributed actively to the dialogue between Charter 77 and the western peace movement. In your essay, The Anatomy of a Reticence, you try to explain to western peace activists why the issue of "peace" arouses suspicion and hostility among most people in central-eastern Europe. Some people in the peace movement - and many of their critics as well - saw your essay as an attack on the movement, as something like an attempt to pour cold water on its dreams of a trans-European peace movement capable of questioning and challenging the post-war division of Europe. Did you intend your essay to be understood in this way?

VH Charter 77 came into being as a human rights campaign, and not as an independent peace movement. But since in Czechoslovakia the Charter was the best known community of people acting independently and trying to voice the truth, it gradually became the "natural partner" of the western peace movement in its efforts to engage in a dialogue with fellow-citizens in our half of Europe, rather than with the state-run peace committees. We don't have any independent peace movement here, so I think it was only inevitable that this dialogue happened. After all,

since its creation, the Charter has followed a general policy of openness to dialogue with anyone. It offers dialogue with the governing circles of this country, as well as with anyone ready to take part in sincere and serious debate. But dialogue doesn't imply that we abandon our views in favour of simple acceptance by our western partners or as a means of obtaining allies. Such an approach would be a denial of the Charter's very aims. All the Charter seeks to do is to explain truthfully how we view the issues, not in order to be controversial but, on the contrary, always with the desire of meeting our partners half way. If people don't want to talk to us, that is their business. But we will never close the door on anyone and we'll always try, however different our views may be, to explain our position and seek common ground. It was in this spirit that I wrote The Anatomy of a Reticence. It's likely that a lot of what I said doesn't please many western peace activists. But I wrote it as an offering, that is, as if I was explaining my uncomfortable opinions to a friend or colleague in the expectation that they will respond by explaining their views to me. A dialogue should ideally be an ongoing process. I didn't mean to imply that the outcome must be a single European peace movement, or a world peace movement. That would be utopian. It would be unnatural, because it takes all sorts to make a world, and because there is no way that everyone could be united in a single, all-embracing organisation. I think the dialogue we've had has been beneficial to both sides, and I could cite many specific cases where it has had positive results. The western peace movement has undergone a certain evolution in recent years, and this surely has been assisted to an extent by its dialogue not only with Charter 77 but also with other groups in our half of

Europe. It displays a growing awareness of the connection between human rights and peace, which I regard as a positive development.

EB Environmental images are prominent in several of your writings. Two of my favourites are your boyhood memories of walking to school on a country lane in the shadow of a huge factory chimney belching dense smoke and scattering it across the sky; and the disturbing parallel you draw in Letters to Olga between the careless and wasteful consumerism of urban picknickers littering the banks of a country pond with their leftover sausages and mustard, and the junk left behind on the moon by successive Russian and American astronauts. How sympathetic are you to the style and themes of what is known in the West as "green politics"?

VH I am not fully enough informed about the specific policies of the green parties or ecological movements in various countries to be able to analyse or comment on them in any informed or competent fashion. Nor, for the same reason, can I come out in their favour or reject them. Nevertheless, from the little I know, I have the feeling that in so far as they call attention to the underlying problems of present-day civilisation, the green movements seem, here and there, to have brought to the surface issues which have been neglected or downplayed by the major traditional political parties. These issues concern the meaning of life, such as whether there is any sense in the constant drive for increased production when it is to the detriment of future generations. I must say that this entire trend, as well as these movements' proclaimed non-ideological stance and their advocacy of non-violence, are things close to my own heart and way of thinking. I can't judge whether the proclaimed principles of these movements are actually applied. And I am aware that they are young movements, which means that they are often very chaotic, confused and naive, and possibly forced to go through all the usual childish afflictions. Yet I can well imagine them throwing the established political scene in western countries into

disarray.

EB In western Europe, the Chernobyl accident has given some impetus to these movements. It has also increased the level of public uncertainty about governments' deep commitment to nuclear power. Even the nuclear industry itself has seemed less sure in its step. I'm curious about the response to the Chernobyl accident in Czechoslovakia. How did society react?

VH In a country where there exist no public opinion research and no free press, it's only possible to talk about "public opinion" with a degree of poetic licence. But as far as I could judge, there was, on the one hand, quite an angry reaction among people. This anger was unusually powerful, considering that there has not been a tradition of ecological concern here in past decades, at least not officially. However, the anger was not great enough to give rise to public protest or for it to overstep the bounds of private discontent. The other type of reaction took the form of various Chernobyl jokes in the tradition of Czech humour. At the time, many western visitors were horrified that we were capable of making a lot of sick jokes of the "gallows humour" variety, but this is a typical self-preservation mechanism of our society when it is threatened in some way.

EB Western opponents of nuclear power usually view the Chernobyl accident as a particular example of the general dangers of "going nuclear". Rarely do they link the accident with the peculiar features of the Soviet political system. Do you think Chernobyl tells us something about this type of system?

VH The Chernobyl disaster was the outcome of our sort of social system. While there has yet to be a complete explanation in the Soviet Union of the experiment that culminated in the accident, there are good reasons for suspecting that there were military circles involved in carrying out arms experiments at the plant concerning how it would function in the

event of an emergency or loss of energy. That's only speculation, and there are many other possible explanations of the accident. But Chernobyl is a very ominous warning about how this very special kind of lackadaisical, bureaucratic and socialist management of every sector of economic activity, including the production of nuclear energy, can have disastrous results. All that is necessary is the abdication of responsibility - a phenomenon which is endemic to this system. That's one aspect in which Chernobyl highlights the peculiarity of our system. Another aspect concerns the centralising effect of nuclear power. I have to admit that I don't have any clear-cut opinion on whether or not to continue with nuclear power. But one argument against nuclear power that appeals most to me - it's not one that is directly ecological - is that nuclear power has a tendency to encourage centralisation and state control. My friends, including Milan Horáček, who's a Bundestag member of the West German Green Party, drew my attention to this problem. Nuclear power is inevitably an enormously complex business with a lot of subsidiary branches dependent on it. It promotes a centralised administration and, as we know from experience, those who control sources of energy wield tremendous power. As I said earlier, I tend to favour decentralisation and pluralist solutions, not only in political but also in economic matters. What terrifies me about nuclear power stations is their centralising aspect, which is why I am opposed to nuclear power in the hands of irresponsible bureaucrats, as is the case in totalitarian regimes.

EB We've been talking about various aspects of anti-politics, as well as its chances of successfully bringing about changes in state policies. This raises the issue - a very central one in Poland today - of whether totalitarian regimes are capable of peaceful compromise with their domestic opponents and, in particular, whether the strategy of anti-

politics will be helped or hindered by the so-called "Gorbachov course". Gorbachov has impressed many people in the West with his different style of leadership. Sometimes I even have the impression that some people think, or hope, that he will turn out to be something like a Russian Kennedy. How significant is the so-called "Gorbachov course" for Czechoslovakia? Is there a possibility that it may foster important reforms? Or is this course likely to be blocked by hard-line Party forces? Or do you think the "Gorbachov course" is actually nothing new?

VH I have to admit that as far as Mr Gorbachov is concerned, I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist. I quite simply have no opinion either way. I'll just wait and see what his era brings. He's not been in power long enough for us to be able to draw any definite conclusions. In principle, I don't exclude the possibility of a more enlightened man assuming power in the Soviet Union and carrying out reforms and humanising the system gradually. So far there is not enough evidence to indicate that Gorbachov is that man. Concerning his popularity in the West, I am rather shocked to find that the so-called "realist" politicians who mock us for our lack of realism allow themselves to be charmed by a few seductive glances in their direction from a gentleman who - as was evident to me after the first five minutes of watching him on television - was playing to the cameras. The fact that all those worldly-wise, long-serving, "realist" politicians, who mock us naive dreamers fighting for human rights in eastern Europe, are unable to see through it is something I find alarming. I have to admit that I find it more terrifying than the prospect of a few more Pershing rockets aimed in our direction.

EB In one of the most influential underground texts of the last two decades, your 1975 open letter to President Husák, you wrote : "Slowly but surely, we are losing the sense of time. We begin to forget what happened when, what came earlier and what later, and the feeling that it really doesn't matter overwhelms us." Would you still write this today if you were describing conditions in Czechoslovakia?

VH I think there is a difference between my mood in that letter and some of my more recent texts. This difference of mood reflects a certain movement within our society, even if it is not striking or obvious. No major political changes have taken place, the government's policies have not altered, but nonetheless some important things have happened. For example, there has been a growth of independent writing, so that now there are dozens of samizdat journals being produced, whereas not one existed in those days. Independent culture as a whole has mushroomed. There are also many other signs of movement in the consciousness of society. Time, which I described in my letter as "standing still" or as "ceasing to exist" is beginning all of a sudden to become evident again, as if we were rejoining history. These are the smallest of clues, and I don't intend to overestimate their significance. I'm not a naive optimist or a futurologist - the situation could change for the worse, or it could evolve more quickly, or very slowly. All the same, if I compare dispassionately the situation now with what it was eleven years ago, I am forced to conclude that things have changed for the better, and that, in spiritual terms and in its consciousness, our society is better off.

EB You are often asked by western visitors, "What can we do to help your situation?" You have written that although this question is well meaning and indicates an attempt to understand your situation, it nevertheless contains a built-in misunderstanding. What did you mean by that quite surprising answer?

VH I didn't mean my words to be taken quite that literally. I wanted to explain a particular idea of mine. I tried to stress that when our friends in the West help us, it's not just a matter of humanitarian assistance or charitable action - a case of the better off helping

someone in difficulties. Rather, these acts of solidarity should derive from a realisation - as indeed I think is happening more and more - that our destinies are linked and indivisible, and that in helping us, people in the West are also helping themselves. In today's world our destinies are so bound up together that if one of us becomes caught in some sort of misfortune, everyone else is drawn willy nilly into that same misfortune. This is certainly true in Europe. I believe that the problems facing western Europe today cannot be solved unless the problems facing eastern Europe are also solved. That is why the solidarity extended to us by people in western Europe is not for our benefit alone. It is for their benefit as well.