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LECTURE

at the Occasion of the Dagmar and Václav Havel Foundation VIZE 97 Prize

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In the April 1992 issue of *Yale Review*, Richard Rorty remembered Hegel's melancholy confession that philosophy is, at utmost, 'its time held in thought'. We may add: this is at any rate what philosophy tried hard to do: to hold time, to contain its restless and capricious jolts in a riverbed carved in rock with the sharp chisel of logic firmly held in the hilt of reason. 'With Hegel', Rorty suggested, 'the intellectuals began to switch over from fantasies of contacting eternity to fantasy of constructing a better future'. We may add: they hoped first to learn where the riverbed led the time it held and they called it 'discovery of the laws of history'. Disappointed and impatient with the slowness of current and the twists and turns of the river, they resolved later to take decision into their own hands: to straighten up the course of the river, to encase the riverbanks in concrete to prevent spilling, to select the estuary and lay out the trajectory which the river of time should follow. They called it 'designing and building of perfect society'. Even when pretending humility, philosophers could hardly hide their self-confidence. From Plato to Marx, Rorty suggests, they believed that 'there just *must* be large theoretical ways of finding out how to end injustice, as opposed to small experimental ways'.

We believe this no longer, and few of us would be prepared to swear that they still do, though many seek desperately how to cover up the humiliating discovery that we, the intellectuals, may after all be no better at holding our time in thought than our fellow citizens... The discovery that time stubbornly refuses to stay obediently in the riverbed carved by reason, that it would surely tear to pieces any thought container in which it was supposed to be held, that no map has been charted nor is likely to be charted

showing its direction, and that there is no lake called ‘perfect society’ at the far end of its flow – if, that is, there is an end to that flow...

Rorty, for once, rejoices in that loss of the intellectuals’ self-assurance and welcomes the new modesty that is bound to follow. He would wish the intellectuals to admit – to others and to themselves – that there is ‘nothing in particular that we know that everybody else doesn’t know’. He wants them ‘to rid themselves of the idea that they know, or ought to know, something about deep, underlying, forces – forces that determine the fates of human communities’. And he wants them to recall Kenneth Burke’s remark that ‘the future is really disclosed by finding out what people can sing about’ - but to remember also Vaclav Havel’s sober, salutary warning, that in any given year one will probably not be able to guess which songs will be on people’s lips in the year to come.

Yes, recall and remember the words of Vaclav Havel. We all think of Vaclav Havel as epitomizing the great watershed in Europe’s political history. Rorty implies that there is yet more to Vaclav Havel: his work, and the worldview that enlightened it, may well be thought of as the paradigm for the ‘collective imaginary’ of intellectuals on which new sense of philosophy’s mission in our post-confidence era, may slowly (yes, slowly, there are no short-cuts here) be built.

The foundation stone of that mission, as the records of Havel’s work would suggest, is hope; and *hope*, as Havel insists, is not *prognostication*. Hope is anything but certainty. Hope, I would say, does not bind the future. But it makes future possible and prevents pre-empting yet more future from coming. It gives future a chance that may or may be not taken. Speaking of the Prague Spring and its aftermath, Havel said:

Who would have believed – at a time when Novotny regime was corroding away because the entire nation was behaving like Schweiks that half a year later that same society would display a genuine civic-mindedness...and would stand with such courage and intelligence to a foreign power! And who would have suspected that after scarcely a year had gone by, the same society would, as swiftly as the wind blows, lapse back into a state of demoralization far deeper than the original one! After all these experiences, one must be very careful about coming to any conclusions about the way we are, or what can be expected from us.

Speaking of ‘us’, Rorty comments, Havel meant Czechs and Slovaks – but what he said works as well if we take it to mean “us human beings”. And how right he is. No one can say with any degree of certainty what are we capable of doing and how swiftly (and unexpectedly – for others and for ourselves) we may span the distance between saintliness and iniquity, heroism and cowardice, heights of solidarity and trough of selfishness. But we may hope.

Hope is one thing of which we can be sure that it needs to be stubbornly pursued, as it is one human stance that has no valid and worthy alternative. Hoping may – just may – help us to steer clear from iniquity, cowardice and egotistic self-enclosure; and it will give the strength we need to resist the siren songs of absolute truth, the whole truth, the only and invincible truth... My friend Steven Lukes told me of a seminar to which Vaclav Havel, in late 1970’s, invited him and some others to Prague. Havel had just enough time to open the seminar before plain-clothed police entered and took him back to prison. Who would believe then, Lukes wondered, in a vision of a Prague not much more than ten years away, in which police would no longer be interested in what people gathered around tables talk about? Well, I suppose that without that seminar, and quite a few other similar traces left on the world by Havel’s stubborn hope, it would be yet more difficult to embrace such a belief and for such a vision to become flesh.

As another great Czech, Franz Kafka, memorably put it – as a warning, encouragement, and premonition of Havel’s *oeuvre*:

If you find nothing in the corridors open the doors, if you find nothing behind these doors there are more floors, and if you find nothing up there, don’t worry, just leap up another flight of stairs. As long as you don’t stop climbing, the stairs won’t end, under your climbing feet they will go on growing upwards.

This is why the distinction accorded by Vize 97, Havel’s brainchild and another lasting trace of Havel’s undying hope, is unlike any other distinction of which people like me, hoping against hope to catch our bizarre times in thought, could dream. I am immensely grateful because of all the wondrous ideas and urgent tasks for which that distinction, together with Vize 97, stands. I would only dream of being able to rise to the

standards they, and their spiritual Father, set for the intellectuals of our 'world out of joint' and 'times let loose'...