

January 29th, 1989

Statement on Vaclav Havel to 'Lidove Noviny'

By Arthur Miller

Vaclav Havel is imprisoned again! I feel a particular sorrow at this news, a feeling that goes beyond Havel's torment. But I am not hopeless. I am old enough to remember the impression, which no one used to question, that Czechs were our contemporaries, with very similar concepts of the future and modernity, of progress and morality.

Now I cannot recognize this Czechoslovakia. What kind of government repeatedly imprisons one of its most talented and honest sons? My mind halts at the doorway of this kind of justice, and I think the same is true for 99% of the people who contemplate this new travesty.

I happen to have been visiting Prague very soon after Jan Palach's self-immolation, and extremely complex act of affirmation and despair. I recall Czechs asking me whether I thought he had done a useful thing, or whether it was only one more futile gesture, perhaps even an explosion of egotism doomed to be washed down the memory hole of our age. In view of Palach's suffering it was impossible at the time to deny its sublimity, but as the years have passed, the political utility of his action has ceased to be the point, at least for me. What became far more important was the manifest authenticity of his human identity as expressed in his sacrifice. What other creature on earth could have imagined for himself the beauty of a future of freedom and justice to the point of self-immolation in its cause? IN the puff of smoke that for a short moment drifted over his lovely city was a monument far more solid than stone or steel, immeasurably more enduring, for man was born to freedom. It is his right at birth, in life and death.

The new arrest of Vaclav Havel and the continuing harassment of other people dedicated to a free Czechoslovakia is simply an attempt to call back the smoke that Palach sent billowing into the sky. It cannot be done. The atoms of that swiftly passing shadow are mixed in the air we all breathe, the lie in the snows of the mountains and they cannot be called back anymore.

And so my despair transcends that of Vaclav Havel's anguish; it rises from the mindless waste that this vain act entails, from the barren repetitiousness of its ultimate futility. His jailers are catching at smoke, throwing a net over a cloud. The world knows now that the future is in Havel's cell and the past is outside.

*from telephone transcript  
by Friedel Kugelner  
Nov. 1. 1989*