



Václav Havel. *A Political Tragedy in Six Acts* by John Keane

Review by: R. B. Pynsent

The Slavonic and East European Review, Vol. 79, No. 1 (Jan., 2001), pp. 178-181

Published by: the [Modern Humanities Research Association](#) and [University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4213178>

Accessed: 20/12/2011 21:59

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Modern Humanities Research Association and University College London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Slavonic and East European Review*.

Keane, John. *Václav Havel. A Political Tragedy in Six Acts*. Bloomsbury, London, 1999.vii + 532 pp. Notes. Plates. Index. £25.00.

PROFESSOR KEANE describes his ruminative biography of Václav Havel from his birth to early 1999 as ‘a serious work of scholarship’ (p. 508) and as ‘factional’ (p. 8). By ‘faction’ he means a work that is ‘selective’, though paying ‘meticulous attention to all of the important details’ and a work subject to ‘value-laden “interpretations”’ (p. 8). In its normal, now obsolescent, usage ‘faction’ means the record of a series of factual events narrated in the manner of fiction, and normally containing extensive fictional elements. Keane certainly uses imagery that belongs more to fiction than to scholarship (the most ingenious example, ‘like a bull at a gate baying for blood’ (p. 44), but the reader assumes that this is part of his political scientist game — like the whole notion of scholarship as faction. The reader will have trouble ascertaining the rules of the game. One clue no doubt lies in the keyword of Keane’s subtitle, ‘Tragedy’. Havel does have some of the conventional features of the tragic hero: he is admirable in his courage (an element down-played by Keane except in his account of Havel’s behaviour in hospital), in the noble-mindedness of his essays, especially those of the 1970s and 1980s, in the consistence of his thinking from the late 1950s onwards. His life, however, does not inspire terror, is not cathartic, and it would seem hypocritical to label his ambitious nature or his arrogance hubris. Havel certainly vied with the gods embodied in the Communist regime but these gods did not crush him. Keane’s imaginary picture of Havel’s state funeral, introduced to persuade the reader that the subtitle has meaning, manifests little more than bad taste, and certainly a lack of knowledge about T. G. Masaryk’s state funeral; Keane claims that Havel’s funeral will be ‘a global media event — on a scale much bigger than the state funeral of Masaryk’ (p. 504). It is difficult to imagine hundreds of Czech poets and poetasters marking Havel’s death, as they did Masaryk’s.

Towards the end of his study, he plays with the notion of Havel as king (not an uncommon notion in the Czech press — and a notion recently exploited to comic effect by the Slovak novelist, Peter Pišťanek). It is a pity that Keane does not know that Czechoslovak presidents have from the start been treated

more or less as royalty. He does note that Czechs spoke of Havel's 'abdication', not resignation (p. 496), but appears unaware that this regal term was used also of Masaryk and Edvard Beneš. I have never seen the term used for the ousting of Antonín Novotný or Gustáv Husák.

Though I learned many little details about Havel's life from Keane, I learned nothing about Havel, the man or the writer. This book was not written for historians or for students of Czech culture. Keane does call his work 'political' (p. 12) and no doubt he thus informs us he is writing for political scientists. Throughout Keane conceives of all relationships, between individual human beings, between individuals and institutions, and between institutions as relationships of power. Disquisitions on the nature of power interlard this biography. Unfortunately, for a student of culture rather than politics, these disquisitions offer little new. Statements like 'in the era of mass communications, one of the prizes and privileges of power is the freedom to define reality for others' (p. 369) sound hackneyed; furthermore, 'mass communication' is vague and potentially misleading: think of the power of the nineteenth-century novelist to define reality. Though power is the theme of Keane's book, he also gives us disquisitions on democracy (for example p. 14), death (p. 494), friendship (p. 183), hubris (pp. 283–84), and nationalism (p. 450). On the last, Keane speaks only of ultra-nationalism, excludes national mythologies and so forth and thus avoids writing about nationalist features in Havel's writing since 1989. Keane also appears to trace the notion of the Czechs' special geographical and political position back to Karel Čapek (p. 464), a notion that goes back at the very least to the Romantic historian, František Palacký.

Keane has made use of a great number of interviews, some of them with prominent actors in Czech politics, has read a lot and presumably had a lot read for him, since he writes of his knowing only 'random Czech' (p. 328). One is, however, surprised how few academic studies on Havel or with substantial sections devoted to Havel he refers to; one might have expected at least a reference to Josette Baer's *Politik als praktizierte Sittlichkeit* (Sinzheim, 1998) or to Paul Trensky's *Czech Drama since World War II* (White Plains, 1978). One is also surprised to see no footnote to R. B. Pynsent and S. I. Kanikova (eds), *The Everyman Companion to East European Literature* (London, 1993), given the more or less verbatim quotations from it on pp. 109–10. All this may, however, support the sense the reader gains that Keane is a frustrated arts academic, that he would rather be writing a novel (hence fiction?) or at the very least considering Havel as an author. On the other hand, statements like [Havel's] 'plays in fact contain no heroes because they desist from all forms of moralising and political propaganda' (p. 149) imply that Keane has an entirely political model for drama in his head, a model few literary critics would countenance. Furthermore, Havel's plays may not be 'moralising', but they do contain political and moral messages. Normally, they are also very funny, but Keane is not concerned with Havel's humour. That humour may have seemed to die, at least in public, with his presidency, though he did manifest profound humour in the New Year's address he broadcast after having a malignant tumour removed from a lung. Keane does admit that *Zahradní slavnost* (The Garden Party, 1963, published 1964) is funny, but his statement that it 'has been

described [. . .] as an “unperformable” play in no small measure because the story it tells lacks a story’ (p.159) bemuses one. I would be so bold as to state that for over twenty years previously no Czech play had been so eminently performable. In addition, the story it tells was highly topical, and may be said to demonstrate some of the social phenomena Havel later takes up in the late 1970s essay ‘Moc bezmocných’ (‘The power of the powerless’), an essay which Keane rightly admires (for example, p. 268) and which might well have led him to consider Havel primarily in terms of power relationships.

The immediate Czech reactions to Keane’s book usually suggested that Keane was levelling an attack on Havel. That is not true. Keane clearly shares most people’s respect for the man. On the other hand, he wants to be mischievously innovative, and exhibits a certain arrogance in this mischief. For example, he writes ‘my book publicly scrutinizes his life in great detail, without apologies, without illusions [. . .] There may be comments recorded and tales told in this book that he finds unsettling. Some incidents may cause him discomfort [. . .] even because he considers them potentially ruinous of his political reputation. [. . .] it is the duty of political writing [. . .] to say things that shake the world and stop it from falling asleep’ (p.12). Keane also declares of Havel’s opponents that ‘before they make their best moves, or draw their conclusions, they should read this book’ (p. 4). Havel’s own works, indeed, reveal him to be coolly ambitious and sometimes arrogant from the beginning of his public career, but Keane’s own arrogance (if this arrogance is intended as a joke, I admit my insensitivity, but maintain it is a bad joke) makes all his comments on Havel’s desire, even ‘lust’, for power appear carping (for example, pp. 281, 331, 350, 391, 392, 393, 402) When he reproaches Havel for his attitude to his sickness and possible death, Keane appears emotionally niggardly and contemptuous of Havel’s resoluteness, and suffering: ‘The more laden with illness he became during the course of the year 1998, the more he appeared officially to presume death to be a distant, quite unlikely event. Perhaps conceit always works strongest in the weakest bodies. Perhaps he was simply unused to not getting his own way. Or perhaps his life had become such a habit that he no longer knew or cared what death was, or even that he had become unsuited for death’ (p. 497).

Given such views, the reader might find Keane’s labelling Havel a ‘man of the people’ (p. 357), and a ‘wise political animal’ (p. 346) incongruous, and similarly, labelling him ‘clean living’ sits ill with Keane’s sometimes apparently prurient interest in Havel’s sexuality. The reader will see no reason whatsoever for writing of Havel’s pubertal masturbation (p. 87) or for quipping; ‘before the long spell in prison Havel had known his share of temptations, from cigarettes and booze to sexual infidelities’ (p. 318). While justly generous to Havel’s first wife Olga, a woman as courageous as, perhaps more courageous than her husband, and while quick to defend his unpopular second wife, Dagmar Veškrnová, Keane is too keen to tell the reader about his subject’s mistresses. He tells us nothing new and little old about one of them, Anna Kohoutová (Andulka), and what he informs us of concerning Havel’s long-lasting serious alliance with Jitka Vodňanská seems to be based almost entirely on an interview with Vodňanská herself (pp. 310–11); that, however wonderful she may be, is likely to produce rather too one-sided a version. Certainly

readers will have compassion for Olga on account of Havel's affairs, but they will also have compassion for Havel, when a 'serious work of scholarship' plays at *The News of the World* — while still discussing the erotic in terms of power relationships.

The Vodňanská story was new to me but it contributes nothing to my understanding of Havel. Indeed, nothing in this work contributes to that understanding. The Stalinist propaganda term 'radiant tomorrows' is attributed to Havel, (p. 329); Keane's assertion that under the Habsburgs, the Czechs had become a minority in Bohemia or the Bohemian Lords (p. 34) and other misrepresentations are no more than irritants. What irks the reader most perhaps is Keane's setting himself up as judge and prophet. To be sure, when Keane was writing, Havel's popularity was diminishing. By the time he had finished writing, however, it was more or less restored. Now (March 2000), Havel is a well-respected president of whom the majority of Czechs is proud. They do not like his forays into the constitution or his occasional impatience with elected politicians, regard him as sometimes high-handed, but cannot deny that he has done a good job. Political Czechs are concerned about the choice of his successor. It is no more a 'tragedy' that Havel is approaching the end of his final term than that the president of any other country is coming to the end of hers or his. Keane's book is an experiment in mixing genres. Experiments often fail.

School of Slavonic and East European Studies
University College London

R. B. PYNSENT