unnerved by the ominous warning message in the London Underground, that could well be inscribed under Sebald's literary crest: "Mind the gap."

The visual element is a hallmark of his novels, but the sound of Sebald is just as distinctive, finely rendered by the translator, Michael Hulse. To read Sebald is to feel you are inside a place with unusual acoustic effects: now like a seashell, now an antiechoic chamber. In this resonant silence, Sebald himself is like a radio, a crystal set, picking up voices from the past that soon fade into the static. Yet it would be wrong to imply that Sebald is only a medium. Whoever W. G. Sebald may be, he is above all a master of storytelling, an art that requires a degree of charlatanism, the talent of keeping a straight face, and finally, a growing belief in one's own tales until one might even swear by their truth. If Sebald tells us he is obsessed with coincidences, convergences, and echoes, and with "drawing connections between events that lay far apart but which seemed to me to be of the same order," it is because he is constantly honing his alibi. If he experiences vertigo, it may be because he no longer knows where he, W. G. Sebald, ends and his doppelgänger, W. G. Sebald, begins.

So who is W. G. Sebald, this peculiar writer who resurrects figures from the past only to follow them like an undertaker to their deaths; this connoisseur of eccentrics and madmen, of the detritus of history; this poet and swindler who, according to all accounts, doubles as a professor of languages somewhere in the east of England? Whoever he may be, all we can say for sure is that he is restless, and we can only wait until he briefly appears to us again, like one of those phantom creatures rarely sighted, mythical, and easily frightened away.

Nicole Krauss

The Wager of Václav Havel

VÁCLAV HAVEL: A POLITICAL TRAGEDY IN SIX ACTS. By John Keane. Basic Books, $27.50.

BACK IN THE 1970S AND 1980S, three East European intellectuals played essential roles in the launching of international debate on Central Europe's destiny and identity, anti-politics, and especially the contribution of civil society initiatives to dismantling terminally sick Leninist regimes. They were Adam Michnik, George Konrád, and Václav Havel

(though this is not to deny the contributions of then-exiled authors like Leszek Kolakowski, Agnes Heller, or Ferenc Fehér). What makes the Czech president/philosopher/playwright an extraordinary case is the truly unusual intensity of his theoretical reflections, and the fact that, despite many political and personal obstacles, he entered and has remained directly involved in the political game. Havel's refusal to bid farewell to politics is the apparent source of Keane's view of Havel's career as a political "tragedy." Obviously, Havel's commitment is the result of both the local political and cultural environment, as well as the personal calling of a democratic intellectual.

The perception of the political realm as inherently demeaning for the true intellectual is the opposite of Havel's way of grasping and participating in politics. For him, as for Hannah Arendt, the domain of freedom is in danger whenever action and thought part ways. Precisely for this reason, although often contested and fiercely criticized by some among his former dissident colleagues, not to speak of insidiously attacked by those who did little or nothing to bring communism down, Havel has persisted as a moral magistrate of his nation. There is a dose of hubris in the way he plays this part, but can anyone successfully act as the Prince in the absence of such a belief in his or her own mission? Compare Havel to another East European president, Romania's Emil Constantinescu, a critical intellectual of whom many of his fellow countrymen had high expectations. Constantinescu decided not to run again in the 2000 election because he was disgusted with corruption, bickering, and mudslinging. This has not been Havel's choice and, whatever his mistakes, including an inordinate concern with his own family's property rights, he has not given up the main options heralded in his pathbreaking, dissident political writings. Indeed, Havel's position rests on the assumption that politics deprived of critical reflexivity is a futile, preposterous exercise. Speaking about his rival Václav Klaus's allegedly "pragmatic" position, Havel indicated the risks of a politics stripped of moral nerve: "He sees things solely in terms of responsible individuals, the blind laws of the market and a centralized state: everything else he regards as nonsense. It is a very shortsighted political attitude—if not actually suicidal."

John Keane's biography of Havel is an ambitious, idiosyncratic, and often disturbing book. On the one hand, I admire Keane's refusal to engage in hero-worshipping because, as he proudly asserts, his book is an unauthorized, critical biography. On the other hand, the purpose of the whole endeavor is mystifying. Is Keane documenting the tragic predicament of intellectuals involved in turbulent politics? Or is his book an expression of personal frustration with Havel's decision to persevere

in politics after the rise of unsavory political forces and ideologies in the Czech Republic (market fetishism, national bigotry, various forms of collectivistic tribalism, and xenophobia)? Even the subtitle is problematic: where is the tragedy in a political life in which the main goals of the hero basically have been attained despite handicaps and pitfalls? It is sufficient to reread Havel's essays to realize that in terms of his ultimate political goals, including the reintegration of his country into an undivided European civilization and the dispelling of the Nessus-like ideological shirt, he has succeeded better than any other post-communist politician. If authenticity is the value Havel has advocated, or in the dissident parlance, "living in truth," there is hardly a tragedy in this story. Moreover, to write Havel's obituary in the guise of a biography, as Keane does, is not only premature but also silly.

A political philosopher teaching at the University of Westminster, Keane is the author of a number of seminal works on democracy, civil society, and violence, as well as a remarkable biography of Tom Paine. In the mid-1980s he was the editor of *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in East-Central Europe*, a collection of essays by Havel and other famous Charter 77 activists. In other words, there may be no one better suited than Keane to write a critical, uninhibited biography of the figure most prominently associated with Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution.

The first part of the book is moderate in tone, though too digressive. There are many passages in which Keane expresses appreciation for Havel's accomplishments as a writer, political intellectual, and moral philosopher. But his tone changes as soon as he deals with the post-1989 period. It is as if he had expected Havel to withdraw from the political maelstrom and stay away from the fatally Machiavellian games of party and parliament. While Keane does not write an attack on Havel, there are moments when he expresses personal disappointment in the Czech president's failure to transcend the temptations of power. Nothing seems to bother Keane more than the fact that his hero, the fragile playwright of the absurd, the masterful ironist and self-mocking rebel, has ensconced himself in the Prague presidential castle. But Havel made his existential choice decades before: he chose to be an advocate of certain values, among which the spiritualization of politics, the insertion of meaning and truth into political affairs, and the rehabilitation of trust and tolerance are the most significant. Not to run for reelection only because postcommunist politics is plagued with hatred, envy, and resentment would have been inconsistent with Havel's life-long wager. Albert Camus, not Franz Kafka, offers keys for understanding Havel's decision to remain alive when activity can be a source of despair and terrible disappointment.

The best and most informative parts of Keane's book deal with Havel's youth, family background, and his relations with the protodissident circles in Antonin Novotny's Stalinist Czechoslovakia. Keane writes vividly about the great expectations of the Prague Spring, the bitter disillusionment following the Warsaw Pact invasion in August 1968, and Havel's role in the emergence of the *samizdat* culture of the resistance to Husak's regime of "normalization." Absorbing, too, are the pages dedicated to the formation of Charter 77, the ordeals with the secret police, Havel's long years of imprisonment, isolation, discomfiture, and even despondency. Keane documents Havel's crucial role in the articulation of the dissident concept of freedom, including the dynamite notion of the power of the powerless. He explores Havel's dispute with Western pacifists, his insistence on the peculiar nature of Soviet imperialism, his critique of modern instrumental rationality and technological manipulations (not only in Soviet-style regimes).

Much less persuasive are the chapters focused on Havel's postrevolutionary tribulations: in these pages Keane accuses Havel of Machiavellianism, in the pejorative sense, over and over again. The hero of the Velvet Revolution, Keane suggests, has become a victim of his long-concealed attraction to power, the result of psychological features that many of Havel's former friends conveniently recall for his latter-day biographer, and the consequence of political involvement *per se*. In other words, Keane affirms that the Actonian vision of an irresistibly corruptive virus of politics fully applies to Havel's post-1989 career. To remain clean, he should have abandoned the political arena. But Havel has often emphasized that it is precisely because politics can be (and more often than not is) sordid, even tenebrous, that it is important for those who have a vision inspired by trust, transparency, and morality to remain involved. Thus, Keane treats his subject unfairly: there are moments when he writes Havel's name, but in reality must have in mind Václav Klaus or Lech Walesa. In enumerating with bizarre satisfaction Havel's relatively minor peccadilloes, Keane misses the bigger picture, which should have included the Czech thinker's commitment to the preservation of an ethos of civic liberalism, and his unmitigated rejection of the politics of vindictiveness and ethnic discrimination. Where, for example, is a thorough analysis of Havel's role in lambasting the ugly features of the "postcommunist nightmare"? Keane tells little about the conflict between Havel and Klaus, beyond their personal incompatibilities: he overlooks the more important clash of their visions of the role of civil society in the shaping of democratic polities. Indeed, the Havel-Klaus controversy on the nature of an open society is one of

the most interesting intellectual developments of post–Cold War Europe. Keane also fails to provide a deep analysis of Havel's relentless championship of Euro-Atlantic values in the face of the lack of enthusiasm for this approach among many of his fellow politicians and even former dissidents. For Havel postcommunism remains a cultural and philosophical battlefield plagued with agonizing choices. His commitment to the defense of Reason against waves of collectivistic or individualistic fundamentalisms is exemplary and should not be sardonically dismissed as metaphysical utopianism. The tragedy in Havel's existence, if there is one, bears upon his understanding of the immense threats to genuine human freedom and the decision to oppose them. But isn't the test of the true political man this assumption of responsibility in times of often maddening choices and uncertain outcomes? No matter how one judges some of Havel's more controversial actions, he has been the most successful postcommunist leader. To accuse him of a presidentialist propensity, as Keane does, is a misreading of both his style and belief system.

The most disappointing, indeed irritating, chapter of Keane's book is the last one. Gloomily prophetic, it claims to be a kind of ultimate judgment of Havel's human and political defeat. The events related to the disease he has suffered in recent years, Havel's struggle with the angel of death, are described as symptomatic of alleged narcissistic, neurotic, and arrogant behavior. Hollow and platitudinous phrases abound in what turns out to be a distasteful imagining of Havel's imminent funeral ceremony. For Keane this solemn event, broadcast by global TV networks and attended by the potentates of the day, would be the climax of Havel's search for the establishment of a "crowned republic." Once again, the author indulges in the criticism of what he sees as Havel's main sin: the decision to remain involved in politics. Ironically, Keane criticizes Eda Kriseova's sympathetic biography of Havel, invoking, among other faults, her many factual errors and unmitigated idealization of the president. But Keane, too, exaggerates, approximates, and bases too much of what he relates on gossip, which jeopardizes the accuracy and reliability of his work.

Meant to be a portrayal of a uniquely fascinating political and spiritual destiny in the twentieth century, Keane's book fails to recognize precisely the most important lesson derived from Havel's wager: that irrespective of daunting setbacks and excruciating dilemmas, or perhaps because of them, there is a vital need to fight for the moral rebirth of politics. This is the central meaning of Havel's political action. In spite of his iconoclastic zeal, Keane himself has to acknowledge that his fallible hero has refused to acquiesce to the supremacy of cynicism and the preeminence of greed.

Subverting many of his own scathing judgments and admitting what he consistently seems to reject, Keane concludes this uneven, gripping, but often exasperating book with a final accolade: "Václav Havel was a man who had the misfortune of being born in the twentieth century, a man who achieved fame as the political figure who taught the world more about power, the powerful and the powerless than most of his twentieth-century rivals." Past tense aside, this is the truest sentence in Keane's book. Regretfully, Havel's political biography remains to be written.

Vladimir Tismaneanu