

‘Václav Havel, 1936-2011’

The spectre haunting those who write in response to the death of Václav Havel is banality: what might one write about someone whose accomplishments are so obvious, so widely recognized, and so sincerely admirable? The papers have been full of platitudes. Most of them true.

In recent days commentators have, quite rightly, focused on praise; but there have been other times when criticism of Havel has seemed to come far too easily. For many, the shortcomings of his presidency are clear, the naïveté of various positions demonstrated. Indeed Havel has himself often been accused of banality and oversimplification. Early in his presidency Havel returned to an idea dating from his dissident days: the ‘third way’, which would involve a complete rejection of the Communist past, to be sure, yet something less, or more, than uncritical acceptance of trans-Atlantic capitalist society. Few ideas earned him more derision during his transition to the rigours of ‘regular’ politics.

If the ‘third way’ (and the related notion of ‘non-political politics’) opened President Havel up to charges of vagueness and naïveté, Dissident Havel had had his critics as well. One of the most important and impressive of them, from the 1980s onwards, was the philosopher Petr Rezek, who objected that the vagueness of many of Havel’s claims gave rise to a ‘philosophy and politics of kitsch’. Rezek identified this philosophical attitude with kitsch because it passed feelings and emotion off for objectivity. Rezek invoked Milan Kundera’s image of the ‘two tears’, from the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: the first tear that we shed upon seeing a touching scene responds to the scene itself, but the second tear expresses emotion at the sheer fact that we feel such emotion. The second tear thus moves away from the realm of felt emotion and towards that of self-satisfied gesture; it takes sanctimonious pleasure in its own (erroneous) sense of purity. For that reason it is dishonest, and thus kitsch.

Yet one cannot help feeling that both the political critique of President Havel and the philosophical critique of Dissident Havel miss something crucial. One of Havel’s bravest impulses was to articulate what should be obvious, yet is widely ignored. Havel was clearly aware of how thin a line separates such pronouncements from banality. His unexpected emergence from a swimming pool, in the recently released film version he directed of his play *Leaving*, to pronounce sardonically his famous slogan—‘love and truth will prevail over hate and lies’—shows his own awareness of the affinity between clarity and absurdity, and of the gravitational force that banality exerts on any obvious truth. But to say such necessary things anyway, to find words that give the obvious its due, is a step beyond kitsch and naïveté.

How does one respond to a life so obviously admirable, in a way that avoids both the kitsch of sentiment and the icy eye of scepticism? The ‘third way’ is probably not Havel’s most important legacy. But the third tear may well be.

*Peter Zusi, 21 December 2011*