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Václav Havel. *Prosím stručně: rozhovor s Karlem Hvizďalou, poznámky, dokumenty.* Gallery, 2006.

Václav Havel. *To the Castle and Back.* Trans. Paul Wilson. New York: Knopf, 2007.



In the preface to Paul Wilson's English translation of *Prosím stručně* (hereafter *PS*, an abbreviation which cannot be a mere coincidence), Havel characterizes it as a "strange little book" that is not a "full-blown memoir" but rather an "account" of his presidency that he chose to present as "a special kind of collage". The collage has been fashioned from three kinds of fragments:

(1) Answers to questions submitted by the journalist Karel Hvižďala, which thereby bookends Havel's presidency given the publication of Hvižďala's pre-1989 interview with Havel, *Dálkový výslech* (translated into English as *Disturbing the Peace*). Indeed, Havel himself highlights the biographical bookending (as well as the post-scriptum) by quoting some of his responses to Hvižďala in the pre-1989 interview in the last section of *PS*. This explicit bookending suggests that the pre-1989 Havel and the post-1989 Havel form a natural continuum — that the politician did not represent a radical break from the “dissident” intellectual or, more generally, that an intellectual and a politician can successfully coexist in the same individual, which is a key theme in Havel's speeches as president and which also seems to be one of Havel's central concerns in *PS*. The Hvižďala fragments form the cornerstone of the book, and the Havelian voice in them is the confident voice of the essayist and cultural critic.

(2) Notes (or diary entries) that Havel wrote mostly during a two-month post-presidential stay as a guest of the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. They are lyrical in tone, laying bare Havel's personal insecurities, his uncertainties and petty preoccupations, his humility, and his basic humanity (he isn't so different from any of us). For American readers, much of Havel's commentary on American society and especially the American political scene (he has more than one description of his attendance at a high-powered party at Madeleine Albright's Georgetown home) comes across as rather naïve (with the exception of certain moments such as his discussion the televising of Pope John Paul II's funeral), but this impression is not inconsistent with the overall tone of the fragments. They represent a wistful, melancholy, and at times seemingly exhausted Havel, but a Havel who has not lost his appreciation for the absurd and his sense of playfulness.

(3) Documentary material (memoranda) from Havel's presidency that is drawn from Havel's daily correspondence with his presidential staff. These are scenes and details, captured in the moment, from life in Prague Castle as Havel and his staff struggle with the mountain of work that confronts them post-1989. The memos are at first arranged chronologically, but some of the more absurd ones transform into playful motifs as the book progresses.

Putting aside the question of the significance of collage as an art form for an overall consideration of

Havel's work (one of his early intellectual mentors was Jiří Kolář and collage as a concept runs throughout Havel's writing both thematically and formally), we can note that Havel himself suggests that he makes use of collage because it offers “jedna z cest, jak se dotknout oné skryté tkáně života” in that it combines phenomena that seem superficially or externally unrelated. The interweaving of three different voices brings the work close to the form of a play, and a creative tension — whose meaning is potential and ultimately definable only by the individual reader — emerges from the juxtaposition of the three elements. In the words of a Czech reviewer, the collage format exerts a certain “poetické kouzlo” on the reader (V. Šlajchrt, 2006, “Sám sobě Havlem”, *Respekt* 19: 22).

In another context, Paul Wilson has noted that *PS* is structurally unlike anything that a former head of state has ever written (fall 2006, “Notes from the Underground”, 12-15, *Columbia: The Magazine of Columbia University*, 15). It could be added that this is precisely Havel's point: by redefining the genre of political memoir, Havel is effectively reframing our understanding of politics and politicians — exactly what he attempted to do while serving as president and also why the significance of his presidency (it was designed to change the conventional frame) has yet to be understood. This is not to say that Havel avoids all of the conventions of political memoir since he does amply address specific criticisms leveled at him during his years in office and does attempt to settle a number of scores with political opponents: one reviewer noted that Havel's book would be read with “značná nelibost” by the current occupant of Prague Castle (J. Chuchma, May 6, 2006, “Havel na hranici možného”, *MF dnes*, A8).

Why the American publisher chose the blandest title imaginable to translate the playfully ironic *Proším stručně* — a transformative political vision hardly lends itself to brevity — is beyond me. I imagine that *Please be brief* (but perhaps not *PS*?) would have sold fewer copies than a book whose title has the word *castle* — in all capitals and wide-spaced in a much larger font-size than any other word on the cover — has, and I suppose that this is also an ironic commentary in its own special way. Otherwise, it is a pleasure to read, as it always is, Paul Wilson's translation of Havel's original.

It might be said that this book is not for everyone. Parts of it require, as Havel himself is aware, some or even considerable knowledge of the Czech political scene to adequately follow Havel's argument, although the translation does provide a set of explanatory notes for uninitiated readers. On the other hand, in the years that I have taught a literature-in-translation course on Havel, I have had

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more than one student who came to Havel (and to the course) because of a random encounter with *Summer meditations*, a compilation that is considerably more Czech(oslovak)-bound than *PS*. Havel's larger message — his attempt to reframe how we think about politics and politicians in the modern world — transcends the specific socio-historical context that he references, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that this is characteristic of everything that he has written.

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