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Perspectives on Psychobiography with Reference to John Keane's "Vaclav Havel: A Political Tragedy in Six Acts"

Editor

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Abstract. This article describes some salient features of psychobiography and relates them to a recently released biography of Vaclav Havel.

In that biographies are created to at least partially help us explain, understand, and empathize with a life and an individual who lives or has lived it, all biographies are psychological instruments and can be considered psychobiographies. Some analysts might object to this conclusion and state that psychobiographies are only those biographies developed largely through psychological theories--e.g., psychoanalysis, Eriksonian developmentalism--and methods--e.g., psychodynamic dream interpretation, quantitative analyses of cognitive complexity. However, all biographies are based on psychological theories and methods, be they of the professional or layperson, be they explicit or implicit. And often enough the lay person may use the theories of the professional, the professional those of the lay person, and almost always the theories and methods of the two are conflated. Thus, to constrain the psychobiography construct to the activities of the professional psychologist becomes a choice bearing less on psychobiographical integrity than on the sociology of knowledge and the concerns of mammon.

Psychobiographies often are critiqued in a number of ways beyond the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological underpinnings of their own essence. First, they always may be said to not include enough information about the individual or others affecting that individual. Yet the end state of providing all information about an individual is not possible. And both too little and too much information may hinder psychobiography's basic purposes.

Second, they always may be said to possess inaccuracies. But this is a slippery slope, indeed. Eyewitness testimony about the individual, even that individual's own testimony about purported self-observation, can be notoriously unreliable or purposely inaccurate. Even accuracies are socially and psychologically transformed through time into inaccuracies and, then again, accuracies and inaccuracies. And factual inaccuracy or accuracy--viz., the conflation of historical and behavioral fact--may have little to do with psychological truth, while the search for factual accuracy necessarily affects psychological truth.

Third, they always may be said to have failed if they do not bear a coherent and continuous narrative synchronous with progressive time. However, the problem with narrative is that it depicts a continuous story line that may bear little resemblance to the phenomenology of the individual at any or at least many points in time. This is especially the case in that narratives are continuously renegotiated in at least some their aspects by individuals. Moreover, psychobiographical alternatives such as a collection of vignettes that appear disjunctive and temporally disordered may well provide more of the psychological essence of the individual than the narrative.

Fourth, they always may be said to have failed if they are less than completely explicit--i.e., clearly delineating themes, context, and variables that help make the individual being described. Yet the same may be the case if psychobiographies are less than completely implicit--i.e., making a compelling case for themes, context, and variables that will inductively arise without having to note them. Proponents of

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the explicit approach are attacked as ideologues and as injecting themselves into another's reality. Proponents of the implicit approach are attacked as descriptivists as opposed to inferentialists--as if one can convey information without inferences about what to include and not to include and without interpretation.

Keane's recent psychobiography on Vaclav Havel has been critiqued as incomplete, inaccurate, non-narrative, and explicit. But these critiques do not demonstrate how these putative failings specifically hinder this psychobiography's purposes of explanation, understanding, and empathy. Instead, critiquers only develop the argument that Keane tosses out or ignores facts, plays loose and fast with the truth, even apes a playwright's structure of tragedy to best capture a playwright, and has developed a procrustean theory of political tragedy through which Havel must be understood. But how is this not living in truth? (See Goldwert, M. (1991). Contributions to psychohistory: XVII. Bridging the great divide: Psychology and history. *Psychological Reports*, 68, 719-722; Hoekstra, S.J. (1998). Docudrama as psychobiography: A case study of HBO's "Stalin." *Psychohistory Review*, 26, 258-264; Howe, M.J.A. (1997). Beyond psychobiography: Towards more effective syntheses of psychology and biography. *British Journal of Psychology*, 88, 235-248; Keane, J. (2000). *Vaclav Havel: A political tragedy in six acts*. Basic Books; Marvick, E.W. (1992). New lives: Differential receptions of psychobiographical writing by twentieth-century historians. *Psychohistory Review*, 21, 3-26; Secor, L. (July 30, 2000.) The velvet president. *The New York Times Book Review*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Theodore, M.E. (1998). Vaclav Havel: One man disturbing the peace. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 26, 233-254.) (Keywords: Havel, Psychobiography.)