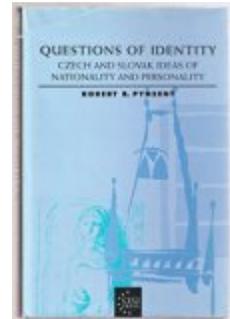


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Robert B. Pynsent. *Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. ix + 244 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85866-005-9.

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Who Are the Czechs? Who Are the Slovaks?

Perhaps the aspect of Central European life that has become most visible to the West is the emergence (or reemergence) of nationalities. Differences between Czechs and Slovaks, while not as extreme as those in other parts of Central Europe, were significant and, in the end, irreconcilable. A comprehensive examination of the Czech and Slovak nations, their characteristics, why they separated and, perhaps, how Czechoslovakia managed to contain them for so long would be welcome.

Although Robert B. Pynsent's *Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality* provides some insights into the background of these issues, it does not describe or analyze them in depth. What the book does offer is a collection of four essays organized as chapters, three of which explore concepts of individual and national identity as articulated by Czechs or Slovaks. One chapter concentrates on Decadent writers and the idea of the Decadent Self rather than directly on Czech or Slovak literature or aspects of identity.

The first chapter, "Introduction: Questions of Identity and Responsibility in Vaclav Havel," centers on Havel's concern with individual identity and responsibility. Although Havel's emphasis in his plays and essays is on the individual, it is on the individual living in a twentieth-century totalitarian state, an environment not peculiar to Czechoslovakia but nonetheless a very Czech experience. Havel's primary interest is in the individual in a moral and spiritual sense, and not as a member of a specific nationality. Pynsent notes that Havel considers being a Czech to be only a layer of his total identity and that

nationalism was not a significant issue with him until he was confronted by Slovak nationalism in 1990 (pp. 2-3).

Chapter 2, "The Myth of Slavness: Pavel Josef Safarik and Jan Kollar," describes the efforts and assesses the significance of these two early-nineteenth-century Slovak intellectuals who together, in Pynsent's words, "created a complex new myth of Slav nationalist deliverance" and went on to define a more specifically Slovak identity. Safarik (1795-1861) was primarily an editor and university teacher who spent most of his career in Prague; Kollar (1793-1852) was less of a formal scholar and more of a writer of poems and other works. Pynsent describes their definition of Slavic Reciprocity, a concept of Slavic identity and nationalism based on character traits, language, and geography, though it was in no sense to be a political union. He explains their work in the context of contemporary intellectuals such as Herder who were also defining nationalism.

Chapter 3, "The Decadent Self," examines the Decadents, their view of the world, and their work. Most of this chapter is based on the origination and development of the idea of the Decadent Self in central Europe through an assessment of the work of two mid-nineteenth-century individuals: the German philosopher Max Stirner and the Swiss diarist Henri-Frederic Amiel. This chapter is not directly relevant to any consideration of Czech and Slovak nationalism, but does describe the influence of the Decadents on Central European (and thus part of Czech and Slovak) literature in the early part of this century.

Chapter 4, “Czech Self-Definition through Martyrs,” is really two separate discussions. The first compares Czech and Slovak concepts of nationality using Anthony Smith’s four-stage model for the creation of nations (p. 156): tribal coalescence, ethnic consolidation, division/decline, becoming a modern nation. This comparison and discussion, which contains substantially more material on the Czechs, is the strongest and most rewarding portion of the book. Pynsent covers familiar ground in his summary descriptions of Czech and Slovak history. What is most valuable is his discussion of how significant personalities and events were interpreted and evaluated by the nineteenth-century Czech historians Frantisek Palacky and Josef Pekar and the twentieth-century Czech philosopher, Jan Patočka. Pynsent is particularly good at showing how an idea originates and evolves.

The last third of the chapter addresses the question of Czech martyrs. It begins with a comment made by Tamas Masaryk, first president of Czechoslovakia, in his 1895 work *Ceska Otazka (The Czech Question)* drawing attention to the Czech “predisposition to martyrdom and to the veneration of martyrs” (p. 190). Pynsent performs his analysis by briefly discussing several Czech martyrs (both real and perceived), identifying them, describing what they were best known for, and assessing their influence and how they have been viewed at various periods.

The martyrs he has chosen are drawn from various eras of Czech history up to recent years. First is St. Wenceslas, subject of the famous statue at the top of Wenceslas Square in Prague, a Bohemian king of the early tenth century, murdered by his brother Boleslav. Pynsent includes the Bohemian reformer Jan Hus, burned at the stake for heresy in 1415; and St. Jan Nepomuk, allegedly executed in 1393 for refusing to reveal the secrets of the confessional but more likely as the result of a dispute between King Wenceslas IV and the Church.

Twentieth-century martyr figures include Colonel Josef Svec of the Czechoslovak Legion that fought with the pre-Revolutionary Russian Army against Austria-Hungary. Svec committed suicide in 1918 when it became obvious that the Allies had lost interest in his unit and his men refused to obey his orders. Julius Fucik, a Communist journalist executed by the Nazis in 1943, and author of *Report from the Gallows*, was a martyr figure around whom the Communists established a cult. Finally, Pynsent discusses Jan Palach, who set himself afire in January 1969 in Wenceslas Square to protest the Soviet occupation and subsequently died of his injuries.

The main value of *Questions of Identity* lies in its highly focused discussions of separate topics of individual and national identity and how they have been constructed in the Czech and Slovak contexts. The “non-expert” will not find it useful in an attempt to understand Central European nationalism in general or Czech and Slovak nationalism in particular. The expert will find it helpful where his or her interests intersect with the topics covered in the essays.

At various times Pynsent brings up ideas or facts that could have been a launching point for discussion of the relationship between two national identities functioning in one political unit. For example, in Chapter 4 he notes that Slovaks are more vociferous in their nationalism than Czechs and reminds us that Slovak nationalism is longstanding. During the interwar years, many Slovaks felt that they had lost their Hungarian masters only to have them replaced by Czechs. He further notes that “After the War, the Slovaks, unlike the Czechs, did not vote for the Communists, and so again the Slovaks had a government imposed on them” (p. 151). He does not discuss the Czech perceptions of Slovakia’s role in the war or the Czech reaction to any Slovak viewpoints. Events and consequent perceptions on both sides would have been a fruitful ground for exposition had the author stressed comparison and results of interaction between the two parties over a period of time. It is as though we are given detailed descriptions of two characters in a play but never see or hear them interact.

A large part of the question ought to consider not just how a national identity is formed but: where does it lead from there? How do interactions with the *other* strengthen or mitigate the sense of identity? Since interaction and resulting perceptions are part of the overall dynamics of nationalities and ethnic groups in Central Europe, pursuing that line of investigation would have been rewarding and valuable for both scholars and general readers.

Further, was there a Czechoslovak sense of identity, based upon the political union that came into being after the First World War, and how strong was it? If Pynsent believes that there was no such thing as a Czechoslovak sense of identity, the issue ought to have been identified, evaluated, and then dismissed. Surely, after seventy-five years of existence, some such sense of identity must have been created, affecting and, in turn, affected by the individual national identities.

However, I hasten to repeat that these ideas are from the book I would have liked to have seen, which was not

the book that the author had in mind. In part, this criticism may be unfair as the author is Professor of Czech and Slovak Literature at the University of London. (He is an editor of and contributor to *The Everyman Companion to East European Literature*, published in the United States as the *Reader's Encyclopedia of Eastern European Literature*.)[1] His interest would presumably be the study of literature rather than historical, social, or political issues.

Finally, I do not think that any constructive purpose is served by sarcastic criticism. Describing Flora Rheta Schreiber[2] as one "who writes with the elegance of a three-legged dromedary chasing a mosquito" (p. 138) or Eda Kriseova's recent biography of Havel[3] as "generally infantile" (p. 212) reflects poorly on the author. The book would have been better had these comments been deleted, since the works are only briefly cited and are not

key to the discussion.

Notes

[1]. Robert B. Pynsent, ed., *Reader's Encyclopedia of Eastern European Literature* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

[2]. Author of *Sybil: The True Story of a Woman Possessed by Sixteen Separate Personalities* (New York: Warner Books, 1973).

[3]. Eda Kriseova, *Vaclav Havel* (Brno: Zitopis, 1991).

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