Pynsent, Robert B.: Questions of Identity. Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality.

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Professor Robert Pynsent's new book brings together four discernibly discrete essays with the shared theme of Czech and Slovak conceptions of national identity. The introductory chapter deals with the drama, essays and speeches of Václav Havel; the second explores the historical and political origins of the myth of Slavness in the thought of the nineteenth-century antiquarian Pavel Josef Šafařík and the poet Jan Kollár. The third chapter turns to the problem of the self in the Decadent period when, under the primary influence of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, Czech identity underwent a com-

plex transformation from a monistic to a pluralistic ideal. Finally, Pynsent examines what T. G. Masaryk considered to be an unhealthy Czech preoccupation with martyrdom by focusing on six individual examples from the early fifteenth-century religious reformer Jan Hus to the student Jan Palach who committed suicide in protest against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

In all these essays Pynsent displays the erudition we have come to expect from his previous writings on Czech and Slovak culture. He is particularly good at demystifying the received orthodoxies which harden around so many facets of Czech and Slovak thought from Havel's drama to the Czech martyr complex. That the essays are quite separate from each other is less of a problem than one might expect when one surveys the study in its entirety. Actually, it makes sense to start with Havel as the best-known Czech personality in the West.

I have a greater problem with how Pynsent defines "identity", the key word in his pre-title. Although his decision to focus on the modern period (the National Revival and after) is perfectly justifiable, he does not provide a sufficiently detailed rationale as to why identity was not an issue before the modern period. His disclaimer in the Preface is all-too-brief:

I find it extremely difficult, indeed impossible, to imagine a medieval Czech historian or theologian or literary artist asking "What is a Czech?", or "What is a German?", or "What am I?"

Pynsent reasserts this point-of-view at the beginning of chapter three. In the Middle Ages, he contends, "one was what one did" (p. 101). There is, of course, a real distinction between the identity that begs the question "What is a Czech?" and the question that asks "What am I?" Although I agree with Pynsent that the second question is not applicable to the pre-modern period, I do not agree that the first one was a total irrelevance. One only has to think of the so-called *Dalimil Chronicle* (c. 1308–11) to realize that ethnic and class identity was very much an issue for medieval authors. In the Middle Ages, people conceived of identity in the religious and/or collective sense of the word. The "discovery of the self", which some historians have located in the twelfth-century Renaissance, was not the unveiling of a unique self – as it was for the Decadents or for Havel – but the discovery within oneself of human nature made in the image of God. The medieval concept of *seipsum* or *homo interior* was the development of self toward God, the realization of the *imago Dei* within one's being.

In secular medieval texts, the understanding of identity was similarly collective. The author of *The Dalimil Chronicle* may not have asked himself the specific question "What is a Czech?", but he did attempt to define an ethnic identity based on a common language which sets the members of the favoured community apart from undesirable outsiders (Germans, Jews, Italians and so forth). In this work, and also in the Old Czech *Unguentarius*, identity is never a given but is *constructed*, not only in relation to a positive majority but also in relation to the Other. Here we find an opposition between an authentic "us" and a denigrated, disqualified "them". This is precisely the opposition that is formulated in the prologue of *The Dalimil Chronicle* where the author's own "truthful" account of Czech history is contrasted with the rhetorically convoluted mendacity of the Latin sources. That this opposition is itself a rhetorical ruse intended to valorize a Czech-speaking population regardless of differences in

class (a myth fostered throughout the work) is made clear in the epilogue when the author admonishes the new Czech king (John of Luxembourg) to adhere to the counsel of his nobles or leave the realm. The pretence of inclusion evaporates in the face of hardheaded political reality: the native nobility is presented as the key factor in the affairs of the kingdom.

The point, therefore, is not that identity is a modern phenomenon, as Pynsent argues, but that it is subject to historical change, inflected by class, ethnic and generic factors. Broadly speaking, Czech notions of identity before the nineteenth century were collective, while in the modern period the self has been defined as a purely private, asocial phenomenon. As for the private self, I see it evolving much later in Czech literature than Pynsent, who glimpses it in the fifteenth-century dispute *Tkadleček*. I see this text less as a treatment of philosophical or theological "crisis" than as a scholastic a *priori* affirmation of truth or the fulfilment of being. I would trace the first manifestation of a private self in Czech literature to the agonistic Romantic poetry of Karel Hynek Mácha.

Subsequent Czech writers, poets and artists found themselves torn between the traditionally Czech collective understanding of identity (as in the medieval an early modern periods) and the solipsism and philosophical speculation engendered by the German Romantics, above all, Fichte, Schelling and Novalis. A good example of the clash between individualism and collectivism is the fiction of Božena Němcová. In her story *Divá Bára (Wild Bára,* 1856), there is a conflict of interest between the claims of the individualistic heroine, forged in the mould of Sandian feminism, and the collectivist-nationalist ideal of the forest whither Bára and her deliverer (the woodman) vanish at the close of the story. In the Decadent period, the private self increasingly displaces collective identity until Czech literature begins to display the pluralism of fragmented modernity. For me, this process is the end result of a long gestation rather than a totally new development in Czech thought.

Although Professor Pynsent's erudite study provides many new insights into the question of Czech and Slovak identity, it would have profited from the realization that identity is not a philosophical or political *donnée* but an historical construct which changes over time. He might have begun his study with the Middle Ages – perhaps with *The Dalimil Chronicle* – and traced a line of development from a religious and political collectivism to a modernist focus on the private self.

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