



Cult of Death and Rebirth in the Czech National Culture

Marek Nekula, *Smrt a zmrtvýchvstání národa: sen o Slavíně v české literatuře a kultuře*
[Death and Resurrection of the Nation. The Dream of Slavín in Czech Literature and Culture], Prague: Karolinum 2017, 593 p.

The author has been studying the historical structures of cultural and national identities in Central Europe for a great many years. In so doing he focuses on the question of the complicated relations between Czechs and Germans in modern times, which is still a contentious issue for scholarly interpretation. This is also the case if we consider some of these identities to be “natural” and others to be “artificial,” or even “undesirable.” Among these interpretative pitfalls, Nekula’s extensive and impressive monograph, in terms of its thematic breadth, reads with alternating success. From its interpretation it is evident that it was created thanks to an extraordinary scholarly erudition of a leading expert on the chosen topic possessing an imposing philological and literary qualification. In places, its author expresses his views with an obvious tendency towards irony or even sarcasm, which leads me as a reviewer to devote to his book more focused critical attention.

Already, from the first page of the text by Marek Nekula, it is clear that his conception of the semiotics prefers the notion that the symbolic dimension of the language has to respect the plurality of the non-linguistic reality to which it relates. This occurs at the expense of the idea that, if more general terms are employed in the language, they tend to translate the ambiguousness into an unambiguousness and hence cement the community of those who share in it, since, by virtue of this circumstance, they are better able to understand one another. On a more sophisticated level of this approach to the semiotics, there are differentiated methods of generalization, which are, for certain reasons, perceived as being more legitimate than other methods. For these and other reasons, I consider it is very important to resolve the question why this ambiguity is “translated” into a form of unambiguity which is collectively shared, and what social functions are fulfilled by this, whereas Marek Nekula focuses on critical analysis of the ways in which this happens.

He considers that the Czech historical memory, based on Czech provincial patriotism, is, thanks to its sincerely felt or merely declarative respect for the pluralism, a more natural expression of the relationship to the past, whereas Czech historical memory, which is based on Modern Czech nationalism by dint of the “simplifying” character of its semiotic nature of language, it is an unnatural, artificial and even culturally misleading social phenomenon. He expressed his opinion succinctly in a formulation in which the efforts to create a modern Czech pantheon — Slavín — are problematic in the sense that it was a conceptual neologism that did not have a “true mythological past” (p. 189). However, this wording is debatable given that every mythological past, including the ancient one, only became, as I believe, a social reality after its construction in the language has been shared by a certain circle of people as their “own” because they had to do so for “some” reasons. Thus, even an ancient pantheon was first of all a linguistic fact, thanks to which it could become

a social reality, for example in the form of a sacral building. By this I want to say, at the same time, that not all symbolic constructs that enter the language are shared by people to the same extent. The more it happens, the more they become “real”.

Due to the author’s conception of the semiotics, it is also problematic for me to see his arbitrary handling of Hobsbawm’s polysemantic term “invention of traditions”, which varies widely in both English and in Czech between “discovery” and “invention” of traditions. Nekula, however, tends to be inclined to the somewhat pejorative notion of “invention” and thus diverges from the much more positive notion of “discovery”. In this context, I am particularly interested in why he wanted to scientifically distinguish the myths that have a “real” mythological past from those which only have an “invented one”, because I believe that in all these cases there are narrative constructs that become “facts” only after they have first acquired the form of Foucault’s *Dispositif*¹ and then a more or less binding semantic code. However, this happens only in those cases where they are collectively accepted and, where necessary, institutionalized. However, it is not possible to talk about which myth is “more real”, but only about that which is “older” from a temporal point of view and that which is “younger”. It follows from the logic of things that it is not only that the elder can influence the younger, but on the contrary, the younger can influence the understanding of the elder. Historical thinking can be done equally well with the march of time and against it.

I do not deny that as a scholar of social history I prefer a conception respecting the methodological basis in which each symbolic language includes both a power dimension and a distinctive function that enhances the consciousness of the fellowship of those who share it while allowing them to express themselves on language semantics, whose symbolic expression emphasizes a different type of distinction. At the same time, together with David L. Cooper, I do not believe that in some national communities their language is characterised by an “unacceptable” level of borrowing or usurpation of “alien” symbolic meanings, while in others it is used “correctly”, “authentically”, or even in an “exemplary” fashion.² In terms of cultural superiority, for various reasons, however, it is possible to construct the domination of the symbolism of one language over another as “legitimate.” However, even in these cases, the reasons for doing so can be reliably deconstructed, whatever they may draw their legitimacy from.

In Nekula’s interpretation, it is primarily an analysis of the concepts that he considers to be typical of the Czech patriotic and later the nationally Czech — in his somewhat ironic terminology “true Bohemian” — a culture of commemoration of the past and thus the memory of the revival of those which it considers to be particularly representative within its value framework. In the interpretation of this issue he uses discursive analysis, in which he emphasizes the constituent role of texts or artefacts which express and also acculturates a certain type of commemoration symbolism towards its current or only potential clientele. From the perspective of social history,

1 Cf. Paul Veyne, *Foucault: jeho myšlení, jeho osobnost*, Prague 2015, p. 117ff.

2 Cf. Jiří Štaif, *Český národovotvorný proces jako komparace*, *Časopis Matice moravské* 133, 2014, No. 2, pp. 307–312.



one problem with this approach is that it puts much more emphasis on the symbolism of the language it considers decisive than on “non-discursive” practices, to which it attaches merely complementary importance. With regard to this, it is noted that the concept of interaction would enable Marek Nekula to create a more dynamic interpretation paradigm, in which not only does the semiotic nature of language constitute a non-discursive practice, but also that social practice is capable of exerting effective pressure on repertoire and symbolic transformations of language, which has the ambition to “rule” society, as it were.

The reviewed book comprises carefully selected visual documentation as well as a representative list of used sources and specialized literature. It is concluded with a name index. The long 19th century can be regarded as its reference framework, with numerous overlaps to the following century. Its own interpretation is divided into eight chapters: 1. Death and resurrection of the nation (pp. 15–95). 2. European Pantheons (pp. 96–153). 3. The name Slavín (pp. 154–190). 4. Fragments of Czech pantheons: uncertainty and hybridity (pp. 191–245). 5. The Resurrection pilgrimage (pp. 246–308). 6. The association Svatobor and the national public (pp. 309–378). 7. “True Bohemian” pantheons: “A stairway that leads nowhere” (pp. 379–462). 8. Historiography of literature as the construction of Slavín (pp. 463–527). To this should be added the author’s introduction and his summary of the previous interpretation with an outline of topics suitable for further research (pp. 7–14, 528–534). By way of explanation, the fourth chapter deals with the pre-March period and part of the title of the seventh chapter is a quote from an apparently caustic comment made by the influential Czech literary critic F.X. Šalda on the Czech Slavín at Prague’s Vyšehrad, which Marek Nekula considers authoritative.

In his monograph, he most appreciates the interpretation of the “invented” traditions of national funerals of leading figures in the Czech national society in the 19th century, which, thanks to abundant public participation, became a constituent part of the Czech ethno-national identity. He explains the “idea” of this tradition by saying that it was derived from the Christian funeral rite. However, instead of the notion of “idea” we could use without problem “inspiration” or “imitation”, which are, as a prominent form of cultural translations, a common part of the interacting cultural practices in situations in which their players are in contact with each other. Just as these cultures have the need to “translate” one from the other, they also have a need to selectively choose what they consider “translation worthy” from the other. In this way and other ways, they try to distinguish themselves from what they intend to ignore in favour of their own creativity. After all, according to Johan Huizinga, culture is primarily based on the playfulness of man.³

Nekula first puts into this gallery the last public farewell to the creator of the Czech national Revival concept, Josef Jungmann (1847), and reads it through the symbolism of “Moses” (pp. 258–266). Then follows Karel Havlíček Borovský (1856), the founder of modern Czech journalism, associated in the Czech national consciousness, as a “victim” of Bach’s post-revolutionary absolutism, with the symbolism of the “crown of thorns” (pp. 266–273). Special attention is paid in this file to the controversial revival

3 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: About the origin of culture in the game*. Prague 1971.

writer and scholar Václav Hanka (1861), who is accompanied by the ironic symbolism of “Holy Scripture” due to his involvement with the forged manuscripts of Zelená hora and Dvůr Králové. His funeral, for that matter, is understood by the author as the creation of his own paradigm of the Czech ethno-national burial (pp. 273–286). This is followed by a “Laudatio Funerbris” of the only woman in this gallery, which is represented by the remarkable Czech writer Božena Němcová (1862), who is here marked as “Máří” or Marie Magdalena; This is obviously due to the affliction of her life’s journey and the courage not to let her love feelings be bound by her failed marriage (pp. 286–291).

After her, Marek Nekula devoted his attention to the monumental funeral of František Palacký (1876), whom he described, from a symbolic point of view, not very originally as “Ascension”, although an ascension to the Czech national pantheon — the symbolic Slavín — was involved in all previous and subsequent cases. (pp. 291–302). However, Palacký was not buried in the Vyšehrad cemetery in Prague, which the Czech Slavín became a part of in the 1860s. He wished, as a Lutheran, to be buried beside his Catholic wife in the family vault at Lobkovice, where it is still preserved. Undoubtedly, as the symbolic father of the Czech nation, he preferred the posthumous family reverence before the place of his last rest became “national” property. Surprisingly, Nekula did not include in his gallery of the “Resurrected” the funeral of Palacký’s son-in-law, the Czech political leader František Ladislav Rieger (1903), which was indeed a demonstration march in the Czech national society before the First World War. Perhaps he did this because he constructed this set as a representation of literati, without taking into account the fact that during the Czech national movement other professions were acquiring prestige.⁴

4 Cf. Pavel Máša, “Kus české historie jen ukončen...” Pohřební rituály při úmrtí zakladatelů české politiky. Diploma thesis. Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University in Brno 2015, pp. 39–54 + image attachments on pp. 154–160. The most comprehensive Czech national pantheon of deceased and still-living personalities is represented for the 19th century by *Národní album. Sbírka podobizen a životopisů českých lidí prací snahami vynikajících a zasloužilých*, which was published in Prague 1899 by the publisher J.R. Vilímek. It is very well documented that, at the end of this age, the writers in the Czech National Society were not exclusive representatives of prestigious occupations. It is therefore surprising that Marek Nekula dedicated this representative publication much less attention than, for example, Václav Hanka, who is in this album. Moreover, it is listed on page 197, while Palacký on the first page (see M. Nekula, *Death and resurrection...*, pp. 267 and 380–381). It is only for the framework orientation that this set of Czech national admirers and Excellents contains photographic portraits and biographical medallions of a total of 1,326 people. Men between them are 93.1% (1,234 people) and women are only 6.9% (92 people). Professional groups of teachers and educational staff (32.9%), literary and artistic (mainly acting) professions (24.8%), entrepreneurial bourgeois (11.5%) are the most represented in the album, from a purely professional standpoint. and liberal professions (8.5%). To do this Cf. at least: Jan Havránek, *Zdroje historického povědomí širokých vrstev českého národa v 19. století*. In: *Povědomí tradice v novodobé české kultuře*. (Doba Bedřicha Smetany), Prague 1988, pp. 39–54 and Jiří Štaif, *Symbolické znaky české národní elity v dlouhém 19. století*. In: *19. století v nás: Modely, instituce a reprezentace, které přetrvávaly*, Prague 2008, pp. 168–192.



He closed his selection with a funeral of Karel Sabina (1877), radical democratic writer and publicist, who was publicly revealed late in life as a paid agent of the Austrian secret police. From a symbolic point of view, he marked him as “Judas?”. He probably used the question mark on this occasion because he thought that Sabina’s funeral was a manifestation of the recognition of his literary merits, although it was only attended by delegates of workers’ associations, who were joined by several students and journalistic colleagues. Nekula’s argument here sounds much more like a moral judgment of the hypocrisy of the Czech national society than as a deconstruction of the reasons why it occurred. After all, Sabina’s funeral was so little “worth-while” that he devoted less than four pages of his text to it (pp. 302–306).

In the creation of the cult of the “resurrected” within the framework of the Czech national movement, he emphasizes as a particularly important association Svatobor, which was founded in 1862 by František Palacký “to support the Czech writers and to observe their remembrance”. However, Nekula devoted a relatively small attention to the social function of Svatobor (pp. 333–336). He emphasized mainly the commemoration practices of this association whose prototype he considers to be the construction of Prague monuments of Josef Jungmann (1878) and the romantic poet Karel Hynek Mácha (1912), who was “re-buried” at the Vyšehrad Slavín in 1939 after his original grave in Litoměřice found itself to be in the territory of Hitler’s German Empire after the Munich Agreement. Indeed, it was too much dependent on voluntary financial donations and collections, and the foundations that were created were too dispersed for its specific purposes to allow for a more generous cultural policy. The construction of the monumental monument of František Palacký on the Vltava riverbank in Prague (1898–1912) was, in the end, so costly that most of it had to be paid by the Prague municipality, whose self-government was in 1860 “in Czech hands” (p. 365 ann.).

The special merits of Nekula’s book are his analyses of the commemoration functions of the pantheon of today’s National Museum in Prague and his thesis that the city was becoming after the 1860s an urbanistic whole, which can be described (with a little hyperbole) as “model” Czech Slavín. In Prague people began to discover other places of Czech historical memory competing with Vyšehrad Slavín, which was architecturally built up from the years 1889–1893. It was not only the pantheon of the National Museum, but also Prague Vítkov, to which I would still add in terms of reminding the past “more prominent” Olšany cemeteries, not to mention other statues, busts and commemorative plaques of Czech national Society, “men and women”. A special chapter in this context consists of the names of Prague streets and squares.⁵ For comparison, however, it would be useful to look at the rewriting of the symbolism of public space in the Moravian metropolis of Brno, where the municipal authority in the Austrian constitutional era was “in German” hands. As a big plus of Nekula’s approach to the matter, I appreciate his efforts after the transnational comparison, which in his text goes to the forefront especially in the chapter on the pantheons in Rome, Paris and Germany. It is a pity that he did not take into account, for example, Hungarian pantheons and the cult of the Resurrection of national heroes, which

⁵ Cf. Marek Laštovka (ed.), *Pražský uličník: encyklopedie názvů pražských veřejných prostranství I–III*, Prague 1997–2012.

seemed to be of greater importance in the Hungarian nation-building process than it was in the Czech case.⁶

It is possible to agree with Nekula's main conclusion that in his book "he showed in detail how the historiography of the Czech national literature creates a great story of language and literature "from the beginnings to our days" (p. 528), and how this motif in the submissions of Josef Dobrovský and Josef Jungmann and other authors gradually develops in the narrative of "birth", "flowering", "bankruptcy" and "restoration" of the language, literature and the nation, and how it takes concrete shape in the funeral ceremony, the symbolics of "death" and "resurrection" in the case of the Czech national protagonists. However, as a scholar of social history, I would rather use the term "actors" instead of "witnesses" to designate them collectively. At the same time, I would recall the concept of Rieger's son-in-law, the founder of the Czech National Economic School, Albín Bráf, who distinguished the linguistic, political and economic stage in the Czech nation's revival, but this is completely disregarded by Marek Nekula.⁷

The constructivist method, whose use he lauds at the end of his monograph as his merit (p. 306), had been employed in relation to the Czech national revival fifty years earlier by Miroslav Hroch, although he came to a somewhat different conclusion than he did.⁸ Hroch understood nation-forming processes within the framework of a secular perspectivism. In contrast to the fact that he focuses on the cult of immortality in his book, he does not question why the Czech nation-building process has become such a dynamic social phenomenon in modern times. In the Czech case, there would be an explanation that this could have been because it sought to change the cultural and social status quo, whereas the provincial Bohemian patriotism was rather inclined to preserve it. In summary, the contribution of Nekula's monograph is not only seen in a number of useful, novel and imaginative messages, but, to a lesser extent, in that it offers a number of truly welcome incentives to the so-needed methodological discussions on how the chosen approach to the research topic influences the results achieved by it.

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6 Cf. at least Catherine Horel, *Le rôle de la sépulture politique dans la conscience collective hongroise*. In: Antoine Marès (ed.), *Lieux de mémoire en Europe centrale*, ed.: Paris 2009, pp. 123–130.

7 Cf. at least Antonie Doležalová (ed.), *Albín Bráf: politik, národohospodář a jeho doba*, *Studie Národohospodářského ústavu Josefa Hlávky* 8/2013.

8 Cf. Miroslav Hroch, *Vlastenci bez národa*. In: František Graus (ed.), *Naše živá a mrtvá minulost*, Prague 1968, pp. 107–135.