
The monograph “A Slavonic Goethe in Hungary. Ján Kollár and National Emblematis of Central European Slavs” by Hungarian literary scholar and university professor Róbert Kiss Szemán, is devoted to the literary heritage and the impact of Ján Kollár on the cultural and literary life of the Slavs in Central Europe. It is divided into five main chapters.

In the first chapter, “The anamnesis of Kollár as spiritual shepherd (pastor), scientist, artist” Szemán describes the background of Ján Kollár’s life in Hungarian Pest as an evangelical pastor and depicts a complicated network of mutual contacts among Slavic, Hungarian and German people who lived side-by-side in Pest during the first half of the 19th century. Szemán focuses not only on the negative aspects of the coexistence of Slovak and German believers within the evangelical congregation in Pest – their mutual misunderstandings and efforts to gain the upper hand and impact in the field of language – but also writes about the mutual cooperation between the Slovak part of the evangelical community and the Hungarian community in the 1820s. These aspects were later neglected and even glossed over due to changes in the political, cultural and religious situation during other stages of the Hungarian and Slovak National Revival. Szemán characterizes in detail the stimuli that Kollár received from the Hungarian environment, not only from the authors of Hungarian periodicals such as “Tudományos Gyűjtemény” (which, as Szemán mentions, has been deeply explored previously by the Slovak scholar Peter Macho) but mainly focuses on the impact of the Hungarian scholar István Horvát who, according to Szemán, influenced Kollár as much as Herder or Šafárik, at least to the same extent. His influence, however, has never been thoroughly explored. Szemán analyzes the mutual relationships between the Hungarian researcher and Kollár, and even refers to Kollár as a “Slovak István Horvát”. In a detailed analysis of Kollár’s oeuvre, he highlights the impulses, thinking and cultural heritage that the Slovak pastor inherited from István Horvát. Szemán’s research points out the numerous parallels between the lives of Kollár and Horvát and which can be identified in other contexts that unknown or overlooked were in by previous scholars. In this chapter Szemán also draws out and characterizes parallels with the literary work of Goethe and outlines the main features of their spiritual kinship.

In the next chapter, entitled “Daughter of Slavia”, Szemán provides a definition of national emblematism and applies it to the most famous and most significant literary work of Ján Kollár. According to the Hungarian scholar, national emblematism is a general term embracing the scholarly fields of history, linguistics, geography and others. The particular pieces of knowledge from these areas are considered in terms of the nation. Against the background of the development and growth of Kollár’s most famous composition “Daughter of Slavia”, Szemán shows how the particular components of national emblematism can be established, and he
analyzes and reinterprets in detail Kol-
lár’s literary masterpiece. He finds new
meanings which have hitherto gone un-
noticed in interpretations – particularly
components in which Kollár enriched
the Slavic national emblematism with a
new perspective of Slavic Heaven and
Hell, thereby creating a new dimension
of spiritual poems.

In the fourth chapter of the mono-
graph, entitled “Slavic / Slovak Hell”,
Szemán continues his analysis of Kol-
lár’s poems from the perspective of
national emblematism in the context
of guilt, sin, punishment and hell, ad-
ducing several examples from Kollár’s
writing.

In the subsequent fifth chapter, “The
Pilgrimage stop of Slavic national exo-
dus” the scholar returns again to the
figure of Ján Kollár itself and his life,
which is here examined through one of
the central themes of Kollár’s literary
heritage in general – trips, travel, exo-
dus, wandering, departure and return.

The monograph concludes with
chapter six, the “Vienna epilogue –
Postlude and the erosion of Kollár’s
work”, devoted to the final stage of his
life when his philosophical and literary
legacy began to erode. Erosion, how-
ever, does not mean extinction, decline
and disappearance. On the contrary –
the symbols, images and philosophical
content of Kollár’s oeuvre are not dead
and useless, for they still attract younger
generations and, in slightly modified
form, fit into the cultural heritage as
indestructible elements.

Szemán’s monograph provides an
overview of the research on Kollár’s
literary work, but it is also something
more than a typical well-done scholar-
ly work. The Hungarian scholar points
out that it is still necessary to return
again and again to seemingly resolved
issues, because, as the case of Kollár’s
philosophical and artistic legacy shows,
important, significant moments in the
history of Central European nations
need to be constantly reanalyzed, due
to changing political, cultural and social
conditions. Thanks to Szemán’s book
we can find answers to many questions
regarding the current situation and the
complex relations between the Central
European nations. Thus, in a broader
perspective, this book is a proof of how
the humanities can contribute to the
understanding of complicated political
and economic relations today.

Among the undeniable benefits of
Szemán’s work is that it maps the Hun-
garian context of Kollár’s activities in
Pest, analyzes the impact of the sur-
rounding Hungarian environment on
the form and content of Kollár’s work,
and demonstrates that Kollár’s national
attitudes, shaped by Hungarian impuls-
es, differed from the national attitudes
of those artists who lived and worked
only in a Slavic environment. Of course,
there are many professional works,
studies and articles on Kollár’s literary
legacy by Czech and Slovak scholars;
however, Szemán offers a new and fresh
look at things that seem obvious and
familiar. This is due to the fact that the
Hungarian scholar perfectly controls the
complicated Hungarian-German-Slavic
cultural relations of Kollár’s times, and,
like writers and scholars in the first half
of the 19th century, seamlessly finds the
right path in the labyrinth of cultures,
nationalities and ideas. As scholars from
the Czech Republic and Slovakia well
know, in works of this type mutual rela-
tions between nations are full of subtle
images and symbols hidden beneath the
surface of words, and they cannot be
discovered without a deep knowledge
of Hungarian, German and Latin.
Szemán’s book demonstrates that the cultures of particular Central European nations do not exist in a cultural vacuum and cannot be examined separately. They behave like communicating vessels, and the perspective of other nations – Slovak, Czech, German, and in this case Hungarian – allows you to see their new, veiled face. Furthermore Szemán, as we can see from the bibliography, works with archival materials and sources in Latin. He also mentions the work of other Slavic scholars in Czech, Slovak, and Polish. Thus, thanks to the knowledge of languages and cultural contexts – Slavic, Hungarian, and German – Szemán is well equipped with the necessary tools to research such complicated figures as Ján Kollár, who belong to the entirety of Central European literature and cultural heritage.

Finally, it is worth pointing out Szemán’s scientific objectivity, which may not be so obvious when we consider sensitive issues of nationality, national sentiment and the complex history of Central European nations. Nowadays, during times of political and cultural struggles, this work represents a rare example of impartiality and openness, diligence in examining the sources, and honesty and fairness to all these things that previous generations have left us. Although the literary legacy of Ján Kollár has frequently become a political weapon in national struggles, Szemán rises above political controversy and appropriately highlights the great artistic potential of Kollár’s literary heritage.

Szemán has achieved something rare and unique. He has demonstrated how religion, politics, national consciousness and interpersonal relationships can be significantly shaped and formed through literature and that literature itself still holds a powerful influence on our thinking about the world and humanity itself.

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Zadawano sobie ongiś pytanie, czy w przypadku słowiańskich literatur narodowych można mówić o „słowiańskich modernizmach”, czy też o „słowiańskim modernizmie” jako uogólnieniu modernistycznych zjawisk tematycznych i stylowych w dziełach powstałych w językach słowiańskich. W chwili obecnej twierdzenie o jedności czy o jakiejś specjalnej bliskości literatur powstałych w różnych językach słowiańskich – tylko z tego tytułu, że języki należą do jednej grupy – nie ma realnych podstaw. W poszczególnych etnikach o słowiańskim rodowodzie respektuje się istnienie literatur narodowych, które uformowały się oddzielnie, choć kształtowały się w podobieństwach czy powiązaniach z innymi literaturami narodowymi, przy czym kryterium wyróżnienia tych podobieństw czy powiązań nie tkwi w podobieństwie językowym, lecz wynika z historii, z położenia geograficznego, z szeroko rozumianej kultury tych etników.

Z podobnego założenia wyszła Alenka Jensterle Doležal, która w książce