National Tradition as a Code of Poetry in Nineteenth-Century Hungarian Culture

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Abstract

Ferenc Kölcsey, a poet-critic of the early nineteenth century, was convinced that a one-sided, rational approach to the world results in the loss of values as reason in itself is incapable of establishing a point of reference. Poetry, however, by means of sensibility and fantasy, has the faculty of projecting a credible point of orientation and thus making the world meaningful. In his interpretation, the history of the ancient Greeks demonstrates that a nation’s heroic tradition can serve as a code of communication to make poetry accessible to the whole of the national community. The paper focuses on how Kölcsey applies his theory to Hungarian literature.

Keywords

Ferenc Kölcsey – national poetry – Hungarian literature – Mircea Eliade – profanation – resacralisation

By the first decades of the 19th century the importance of ancient national poetry had enormously grown Europe-wide. The introduction of Friedrich Schlegel’s 1812 Vienna Lectures may be quoted as an obvious manifestation of this way of thinking:

If we look back to the history of our species, and observe what circumstances have given to any one nation the greatest advantage over others, we shall not, I think, hesitate to admit that there is nothing so necessary to the whole improvement, or rather to the whole intellectual existence of a nation, as the possession of a plentiful store of those national recollections and associations, which are lost in a great measure during the dark ages of infant society, but which it forms the great object of the poetical art to perpetuate and adorn. Such national recollections, the noblest
inheritance which a people can possess, bestow an advantage which no other riches can supply; for when a people are exalted in their feelings, and ennobled in their own estimation, by the consciousness that they have been illustrious in ages that are gone by—that these recollections have come down to them from a remote and a heroic ancestry—in a word, that they have a national poetry of their own, we are willing to acknowledge that their pride is reasonable, and they are raised in our eyes by the same circumstances which gives them elevation in their own.1

Emphatic significance is given to ancient national poetic traditions not only by the fact that their existence and extent is an important aspect of the survey of ancient and modern literature but, more importantly, by the fact that for Schlegel it seems historically proven that they are the most vital constituent to the development of a nation. The general acceptance of this approach can be considered to be one of the reasons for the wave of literary forgeries by poets and learned philologists such as (among others) the Scottish James Macpherson (1736–1796), the Czech Václav Hanka (1791–1861) or the Hungarian Kálmán Thaly (1839–1909). The “whole intellectual existence of a nation” being at stake, the responses to the sadly perceived deficit vary on a large scale from the search for heroic epic through forgery to accepting the state of affairs and trying to work out a response to it. Ferenc Kölcsey (1790–1838) a prominent poet, the author of the national anthem, and an influential critic and politician was one of those who acknowledged that besides some epic fragments there were mainly only reports left of minstrels and a widespread poetic tradition in the mediaeval and Renaissance Hungarian royal courts. In a rather disillusioned letter he challenged the view of his master, Ferenc Kazinczy (1759–1831), who,