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"National Poets" in Small European Literary Cultures

"Tautas dzejnieki" mazo Eiropas tautu literārajās tradīcijās

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Summary National poets are a phenomenon highly pertinent to many literary cultures in Europe and also beyond. The importance ascribed to the individuals labeled with this particular qualifier has varied considerably from case to case. However, the institution of the national poet contributed significantly to the formation of individual literary cultures throughout the so-called long 19th century and has often persisted to the present day. This article looks at the national poets in various European literatures and offers some insights into the relationships between their lives, their works, their cults, and their function in nation-building. The particular focus is on small and (semi-)peripheral literary cultures (such as Hungarian, Bulgarian, Polish, Montenegrin/Serbian, Latvian, Ukrainian, Catalan, Irish, Icelandic, Slovenian, and Czech), where the role of venerated poets seems to be particularly prominent. In smaller literary cultures, the institution of the national poet offered a promising way to secure at least a modest place in the gallery of the "great immortals", the canon of the emerging *Weltliteratur*. In turn, the national poet had to comply both with the expectations of their particular national community and those of the "law-giving Other", the international canon of world literature. This is one reason why the unique position of the national poet of a particular culture was not necessarily occupied by the poet that dealt with national issues in the most ardent manner.

Kopsavilkums Tautas dzejnieku fenomens ir raksturīgs daudzu Eiropas un ne tikai Eiropas tautu literārajām tradīcijām. Tas, cik liela nozīme katrā konkrētajā gadījumā piešķirta ar šo nosaukumu apzīmētajām personībām, mēdz ievērojami atšķirties. Tomēr tautas dzejnieka jēdziens ir lielā mērā veicinājis nacionālo literāro tradīciju attīstību tā dēvētā garā 19. gadsimta laikā un nereti ir saglabājies līdz pat mūsdienām. Šajā rakstā aplūkoti tautas dzejnieki dažādās Eiropas valstīs un sniegts ieskats dažās kopsakarībās starp šo personību dzīves gājumu, darbiem, kulta statusu un lomu nācijas attīstībā. Galvenais uzsvars ir likts uz mazajām un (semi) perifērajām literārajām tradīcijām (piemēram, ungāru, bulgāru, poļu, melnkalniešu/serbu, latviešu, ukraiņu, katalāņu, īru, islandiešu, slovēņu un čehu), kur godājamu dzejnieku loma šķiet īpaši būtiska. Mazo tautu literatūrām tautas dzejnieka jēdziens dāvāja cerību nodrošināt sev kaut vai nelielu vietu starp "nemirstīgajiem dižgariem" topošajā pasaules literatūras kanonā. Tautas dzejniekam pašam savukārt nācās atbilst gan savas nacionālās kopienas prasībām, gan tām, kuras uzstādīja "likumdevēji Citi" starptautiskajā kanonā. Tas ir viens no iemesliem, kāpēc tautas dzejnieka specifiskajā lomā ne katrā kultūrā nokļuva tieši tāds dzejnieks, kas visaktīvāk rakstītu tieši par nacionālo tematiku.

"A national poet must write poetry that closely identifies with the nation's cause – or is thought to do so" (Neubauer 2010: 11). This is how John Neubauer characterizes the relation between national poets and their poetry in the first paragraph of his influential introduction to "*Figures of National Poets*", the section of the *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* devoted to national poets. In this article, I explore the various implications of this succinct statement – including its apparent obviousness – and especially scrutinize its coda "or is thought to do so". I start by discussing the institution of the national poet in the context of emerging national and international canons. I then go on to chart an overview of the national poets of small European literary cultures for which this phenomenon seems to be particularly pertinent, before finally examining a series of intriguing (poetic) statements by selected national poets.[1]

My research draws on the invaluable insights of scholars such as Virgil Nemoianu, John Neubauer, and Marko Juvan on the topic of national poets. However, I also make use of the results of studies on nationally motivated pan-European commemoration of writers (Leerssen, Rigney 2014; Dović 2015) and on the (cultural) canonization of poets, writers, and other artists in the context of Romantic nationalism. Indeed, research on the posthumous "careers" of significant national poets from various regions of Europe has shown that many of them occupy the social role of "cultural saints" (Dović, Helgason 2017, 2019). From a comparative perspective, their lively commemorative cults and the ways in which they were canonized are strikingly similar. During the canonization process, these poets were often referred to as "national" and were considered to have contributed enormously to the national cause. Compared to their illustrious afterlives, however, the lives and works of the future national poets seem quite varied. Their poems, for example, reveal a diversity of ideas that do not always coincide with the ideals of the leaders of national movements, their most fervent promoters. In this respect, several questions arise regarding the way these poets envisioned the nation and its future, expressed their belonging to the national community, or longed for its emancipation. The aim of this article is therefore to point out, on the one hand, the diversity of the poets labeled

1 A brief note on the concept of "small literary cultures": among the competing terms such as 'minor', 'dominated', '(semi-)peripheral' or 'small' I finally opted for the latter. For a recent attempt to define "small literatures", see Glesener et al. (2025). The apt expression "literary culture", which refers to a broader cultural field, comes from the four-volume *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*, as explained by its editors Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer (2004).

"national" in small European literary cultures (not only in terms of their biographies, personalities, political views, and actions, but also in terms of their poetics and the way they treated national themes in their poetry) and, on the other hand, the unity of their social function and structural position within society.

National poets, national literatures, and the emerging canon of world literature

When did national poets appear, and why? According to Virgil Nemoianu, there is an important new dimension that characterizes the canonization of poets designated by this adjective (as opposed to the earlier cases):

> What happens in the eighteenth and in the early nineteenth century is the emergence and/or consolidation of the nation-state, which feels that it has to legitimize itself by a number of features that some call institutional, others simply ideal. Even in cases when such nation-states do not yet exist (in fact *particularly* under these circumstances), validation of an ethno-linguistic ("national") group by a personal and autonomous literature is seen as indispensable. (Nemoianu 2002: 249)

The need for original cultural production (often in swiftly developing vernacular languages) became a pressing concern within the emerging national movements. Among the reasons for such a shift, Nemoianu emphasizes the need not only to reach a high level of cultural sophistication but also to demonstrate this level to others. These circumstances welcomed the emergence of the institution of the "national poet". As a Romantic alternative to the classical and neoclassical traditions, the major achievements of national poets were regarded by nationally oriented intellectuals as the new "classic" masterpieces entitled to join the modern European canon, which began to be formed in the vernacular languages during the late Middle Ages. This was especially important for smaller nations without statehood and with discontinuous historical traditions: equipped with a national poet, a nation was able to take part in the international literary exchange on equal terms. A national poet came to function as what Anna Makolkin calls a "name-sign", an iconic representation of a specific nationality – both for the nation in question and for a foreign observer.[2]

In this context, Nemoianu characterizes the establishment of a national poet as a useful shorthand for the literary accomplishments of the nation, "a summary of its achievements" (Nemoianu 2002: 254). From the perspective of small literary

2 In an excellent semiotic analysis of "heroic biographies" of Taras Shevchenko, Anna Makolkin explains that the poet's name "abbreviates, simplifies and reduces the notion of Ukraine and Ukrainian culture to a single sign" (Makolkin 1992: 1). Her conclusions could easily be generalized to all literary cultures with strong cults of national poets.

cultures, the institution of the national poet offered a promising path toward securing at least a humble corner in the gallery of the "great immortals", the canon of the emerging world literature (*Weltliteratur*): "Yes, the western 'decisional centers' [..] were saying: we will make room for you, but not too much; what we need is a token representation, an 'ambassador' to our courts, a recognizable sample of your endowments and achievements" (Nemoianu 2002: 254).

Building on Nemoianu's theory, Marko Juvan notes that the institution of the national poet "operates on the threshold between an individual national literature and the general space of the 'world republic of letters'" (Juvan 2012: 596). At the same time, the national poets were able to strengthen the sense of cohesion and identity within the emerging national communities and, on the other hand, to help them cope with "the anxieties caused by competing European nationalisms" (Juvan 2012: 593). With this second emphasis, Juvan places national poets firmly in the broad context of the emerging world literature with its centers and peripheries. From this perspective, it is also much easier to understand the fact that in dominant cultures the commemorative culture was less focused on nation-building than in the dominated ones. Obviously, the question of the national poet became pivotal especially for the newcomers on the "scene dominated by major European literatures whose widely spoken languages, extensive cultural influence, and long-lasting historical continuity embodied standards against which the development of all newcomers was measured" (Juvan 2012: 596–597).

Although this international and competing dimension of the figure of the national poet seems to be decisive, a comparative look at the canonization of individual national poets reveals interesting analogies. Even if these poets differed considerably in terms of their biographies and careers as well as the themes and styles of their writings, they were all canonized according to similar patterns: "From this perspective, it appears that even most remote European literatures, during their nation-building, adapted to their particular needs the same matrix, which was diffused all over Europe and disposed with roughly identical goal-oriented repertoire of cultural practices, forms, and representations" (Juvan 2012: 598).

However, those that supported the canonization of national poets – usually writers and other intellectuals that were strongly committed to the cultivation of the national language and literature, and in later phases also political leaders that advocated national awakening – found themselves in a rather difficult situation. They had to look in two partly contradictory directions during the "construction" of national poets because they "sought to be desired and recognized by two unequal Others" (Juvan 2017: 12) – by the nation they were trying to establish, and by the core of the emerging world literature system that represented cultural prestige:

> On the one hand, nationalist writers assigned the role of the Other to a particular imagined community they were planning to establish through their intellectual and political work. Thus, they strove to stoke enthusiasm among the majority of the population, which was indifferent to nationalist ideology, for a cultivated public use of their vernacular and their literary publications, which were intended to imagine and lend ideological coherence to the quasi-collective subject they called a "nation." On the other hand, however, nationalist groups of writers directed their desire to be desired and recognized towards the very center of cultural and political domination that played the role of universal, law-giving Other. (Juvan 2017: 12)

It is certainly worth keeping this crucial insight by Juvan in mind when asking the next question, which arises of its own accord: Who are the national poets, and where are they most strongly represented?

National poets in small European literary cultures

In fact, it is hardly possible to find a single literary culture in Europe that has not at some point flirted with the notion of the national poet.[3] In some cases, however, this idea was developed more intensely and elevated to a veritable institution. Research to date leaves little doubt that it is precisely the smaller, subordinate, and (semi-)peripheral European literary cultures in which the institution of the national poet has flourished the most. In such cultures, the national poet has posthumously often been turned into an unsurpassed figure, an individual elevated above all other writers, if not all public figures altogether. In such literary cultures, the concept of the national poet is well known, widespread, and accepted. Practically everyone claims to know who their national poet is, and the institution of the national poet occupies an exalted position in the national pantheon.[4]

It is therefore not surprising that the literary cultures with the most prominent national poets are not the major, dominant European literatures with centuries-old traditions (possibly based on a rich imperial history), but rather the smaller, often dominated literary cultures that were intensely engaged in the processes of cultural cultivation and nation-building in the era of Romantic nationalism: they strove to develop and establish their own language, literature and culture while fighting for

3 A preliminary attempt at an overview of the national poets of Europe can be found in the introductory article to the thematic section "National Poets and Romantic (Be)Longing", which was published in *Arcadia* (Dović 2017: 3–6). However, the findings of that time can now be considerably supplemented on the basis of new insights.

4 For a comparative discussion of national pantheons of Europe, see Dović (2023: 8–18). Again, research on the structure of national pantheons seems to be a highly promising topic, especially for smaller cultural communities.

cultural and political autonomy. This conclusion can be corroborated by the questionnaires drawn up as part of the project *National Poets and Cultural Saints of Europe* (2014–2017).[5] Admittedly, specifying the most notable cases is a rather arbitrary (and therefore controversial) endeavor. However, there is a large number of national poets from small European literary cultures that stand out in many respects. The following two dozen cases seem to be among the most interesting:[6]

1. Scottish: Robert Burns (1759–1796) [5]
2. Danish: Adam Oehlenschläger (1779–1850)
3. Irish: Thomas Moore (1779–1852)
4. Polish: Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) [5]
5. Greek: Dyonisios Solomos (1798–1857)
6. Slovenian: France Prešeren (1800–1849) [5]
7. Icelandic: Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–1845) [4]
8. Czech: Karel Hynek Mácha (1810–1836) [5]
9. Serbian/Montenegrin: Petar II Petrović Njegoš (1813–1851) [3.5/5]
10. Ukrainian: Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861) [5]
11. Hungarian: Sándor Petőfi (1823–1849) [5]
12. Flemish: Guido Gezelle (1830–1899) [3.5]
13. Galician: Rosalía de Castro (1837–1885) [5]
14. Georgian: Ilia Chavchavadze (1837–1907) [5]
15. Estonian: Lydia Koidula (1843–1886) [4]
16. Catalan: Jacint Verdaguer (1845–1902) [5]
17. Albanian: Naim Frashëri (1846–1900)
18. Bulgarian: Hristo Botev (1848–1876) [5]
19. Slovak: Pavol Országh, pen name Hviezdoslav (1849–1921) [5]
20. Romanian: Mihai Eminescu (1850–1889) [5]
21. Lithuanian: Jonas Mačiulis, pen name Maironis (1862–1932) [4]
22. Latvian: Jānis Pliekšāns, pen name Rainis (1865–1929) [5]
23. Armenian: Hovhannes Tumanyan (1869–1923)
24. Jewish: Hayim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934) [5]

The above list deliberately does not include national poets from established literary cultures such as Italian, English, French, Spanish and Portuguese, where the role of national poets was ascribed to poets from more distant literary eras who were already internationally canonized as the European "literary greats". The Russian and German cases are not listed either, as these literatures cannot be considered small –

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5 With the help of a questionnaire distributed to selected (literary) experts from various literary cultures in Europe, the aim was to investigate which poets are considered "national" and what rank they occupy in a particular literary culture. The completed questionnaires for 26 literary cultures are publicly available on the project website (https://cultural-saints.zrc-sazu.si/en). Unfortunately, the collection is not complete.

6 The poets are sorted by their year of birth. The number in square brackets indicates the respondents' assessment (if available) of the prevalence of the concept of the national poet in the given literary culture (the scale ranges from 1–5, with 5 meaning "very high").

although in both cases there are poets that can qualify as "national" and even conform to the pattern typical of small literary cultures, such as the Russian Romantic poet Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837). Apart from this, the situation in German literary culture is somewhat unclear due to the competition between Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832) and Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), whose cult was truly dominant throughout the 19th century (cf. Dingeldein 2017). The question remains to what extent Danish, Polish and Ukrainian literary culture can be considered small. However, in selecting a single candidate from the Romantic period (Oehlenschläger, Mickiewicz, Shevchenko), they followed a pattern typical of small literary cultures, and in the Polish and Ukrainian cases in particular, the cults of national poets developed under conditions of foreign political domination.[7]

Finally, the list does not include those small literary cultures in which the institution of the national poet seems to be somewhat weaker and it is not entirely clear who would be the national poet – either because there are several contenders for this position (if the candidate has not been so widely and enthusiastically canonized), or because the concept of the national poet is simply not so widespread.[8]

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7 In an attempt to define a small literature, Jeanne E. Glesener, Marko Juvan and Benedikts Kalnačs emphasize that not only the size of the nation, but also the historical (post)imperial / (post) colonial situation is among the key determinants (Glesener et al. 2025).

8 I add a brief comment here about the small literatures that are not on the list. In Swedish literary culture, the poet and composer Carl Michael Bellman (1740–1795) is often referred to as the national poet, with some competition from the poet and bishop Esaias Tegnér (1782–1846), author of the famous Romantic national epic *Frithjofs Saga* (1825). In Finnish literature, the situation is complicated by a linguistic dilemma: Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804–1877), who wrote in Swedish, competes with Aleksis Kivi (1834–1872), who wrote in Finnish. In Norwegian literature, the Romantic author Henrik Wergeland (1808–1845) and the Nobel Prize winner Bjørnstjerne M. Bjørnson (1832–1910) share the podium. In the Faroe Islands, the poet and sailor Nólsoyar Páll (1766–1808) partly fits the profile, but he is seen more as a national hero. In Luxembourg, where the concept of the national poet is widely known, there is no clear favorite: the position is shared by a "triumvirate" of Edmond de la Fontaine, pen name Dicks (1823–1891), Michel Lentz (1820–1893), and Michel Rodange (1827–1876). The situation also seems to be undecided in Croatian literature: the Baroque poet Ivan Gundulić (1589–1638) from Dubrovnik, who was canonized in the 19th century, competes with a number of later poets among whom none could actually be called a national poet. The situation is somewhat different in Macedonian and Belarusian literary culture, which do not seem to have developed strong national poets, and the same applies to Austrian literary culture. And what about small literary cultures without their own state? In French Provence, the candidate is (or was) undoubtedly Frédéric Mistral (1830–1914), but the term is not universally recognized. In Basque literary culture, the Romantic bard José María Iparraguirre (1820–1881) competes with his much older poetic compatriot Bernard Etxepare, the author of the first book in Basque (1545). The Frisian situation with Gysbert Japicx (1603–1666) and the Greek part of Cyprus with Vasilis Michaelides (1849–1917) are also very special.

What conclusions can be drawn from simply looking at the above list? Let us first consider where the prominent national poets come from. Are there regions that stand out in terms of the geographical distribution of the phenomenon? As Neubauer (2010) has already noted, there is a striking density of strong cases in East-Central Europe. However, this is by no means their exclusive domain. Supercanonical individuals of this kind can also be found in other parts of Europe: in literary cultures such as Icelandic, Galician, Scottish, and Ukrainian, as well as Georgian and Armenian.

What about the generational structure? Is it possible to determine a period in which a typical national poet has lived and created? The years of birth and death suggest that the majority of the most honored national poets of the European (semi-)periphery were active in the 19th century. Ignoring the somewhat earlier Burns, one sees that the first and perhaps the most prominent group of national poets was active in the first half of the 19th century (from Mickiewicz to Petőfi). The second large group of national poets (from Gezelle to Eminescu) was most active in the second half of the 19th century – and only a small number of poets (from Maironis to Bialik and Hviezdoslav) were most active in the first decades of the 20th century.

When did these poets come to be regarded as "national"? The first group of national poets, where probably some of the most prominent examples are found, was canonized in a posthumous process that reached its peak in the second half of the 19th and early 20th century. Unsurprisingly, this climax roughly corresponds to the phase of the "mass movement" in which the majority of the population already harmonized with the goals of the nationalists – the so-called Phase C, according to Miroslav Hroch's well-known account of European national movements (Hroch 1993: 6–7). In the second group and even more so in the somewhat belated third group, however, canonization sometimes took place parallel to the lives of the individuals: commemorative cults and prestigious titles, which were only awarded posthumously to the poets of the first group, could thus be bestowed on individuals from such cultures while they were still alive.

What about the gender structure? It is virtually impossible to overlook that the list shows a grave imbalance in terms of gender: it contains only two women. Rosalía de Castro, a prominent icon of Galician culture and author of the famous collection *Cantares Galegos* (Galician Songs, 1863), can arguably be considered a true national poet, whereas the position of her Estonian counterpart Lydia Koidula, otherwise a major figure of the Estonian national movement, is partly threatened by other prominent poets such as Juhan Liiv (1864–1913) and Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (1803–1882), the author of the Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg*.[9]

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9 For the Galician and Estonian cases, I rely mainly on the questionnaires (Rábade 2017; Talviste 2017).

What position do these individuals have within their respective cultural (national) communities? What place do they occupy in the national pantheon in comparison to other great artists, national leaders, politicians, religious figures, and kings? This question becomes quite complex, especially when one tries to answer it on a comparative level. However, the data obtained from the questionnaires allow some cautious and broad observations. There are few cultural communities in which the national poet seems to be the most revered and towering figure, eclipsing all other figures from the nation's past: Slovenian, Ukrainian, and Latvian are among them. In most cultures, however, this is not the case. Sometimes a religious figure (such as St. Sava in Serbia), a political revolutionary hero (e.g. Vasil Levski in Bulgaria), or a king or other historical ruler (as in the Flemish or Georgian case) appear to be more revered. Sometimes great political leaders and "fathers of the nation" are more prominent, such as Jón Sigurðsson in Icelandic, František Palacký and Tomáš Masaryk in Czech, Lajos Kossuth in Hungarian, and Theodor Herzl in Jewish literary culture.[10] Similarly, prominent national linguists (Vuk Karadžić in Serbia) and "awakeners" (Ľudovít Štúr in Slovakia) can beat national poets, as well as other artists of great international fame (e.g., the composers Bedřich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák in the Czech case, and the painters Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck in the Flemish).[11]

Is it possible to identify a set of common characteristics of the national poets that made their canonization possible? As can be seen from the data collected so far, the lives (*vita*) and careers of the national poets were extremely diverse, as were their poetic works (*opera*) and the scope and nature of their activity (*acta*) outside the strictly literary field.[12] Some were "just poets", others were also diligent and intense practitioners of the "cultivation of culture" (Leerssen 2006: 566–574), and some of them were even heroes that literally sacrificed themselves in the (armed) struggle for national liberation. Equally large diversity characterizes their political orientation: it ranges from conservative (many national poets were priests) to moderately liberal to decidedly left-wing. It is obvious that the unity of the group can be found neither in the lives nor in the works of the individuals. Rather, it is based on the structural similarity of their canonization and veneration – processes that were passed on from culture to culture and spread throughout Europe in the form of an epidemic that culminated from the mid-19th century until the end of the World War I. The peaks in

10 "Father of the nation" is another category quite pertinent to many small literary cultures (cf. Dović 2023: 16–18). It would certainly require further comparative research.

11 The comparative study of European "national pantheons" and their structure is certainly a very promising field, but also a complex and slippery one – especially from a methodological point of view.

12 On the categories *vita*, *opera*, and *acta*, cf. Dović and Helgason 2017: 78–81.

the intensity of veneration of national poets are thus more or less contemporaneous in most literary cultures, regardless of the period in which the person chosen for canonization lived.[13]

Finally, if the canonization of a particular national poet within his or her native literary culture was obviously successful (enormous prestige within the respective community), the question remains how successful their "worlding" was – the attempt to exhibit the candidate in the gallery of poetic greats and to present him or her as a major figure within the global hyper-canon of *Weltliteratur*. In other words, did the strategy so aptly described by Nemoianu, Neubauer, and Juvan actually work? In most cases, the answer is negative. The individuals on the list above, no matter how excessively revered at home, have not really made it internationally – perhaps with the exceptions of Burns, Mickiewicz, and Shevchenko. The strategy has indeed failed. However, the reasons for this are complex and far beyond the scope of this article.

The traits of the national in the works of national poets

On this basis, the original question of the extent and manner in which the national is inscribed in the works (*opera*) of the national poets can now be revisited. Do national poets treat national themes in a similar way? Is it possible to find a general pattern that can be compared to that of commemoration and canonization? We shall see that there can be no single answer. As an extreme case, one can consider poems that passionately support national liberation or even call for an uprising and armed struggle. At least two national poets, the Hungarian Sándor Petőfi and the Bulgarian Hristo Botev, actually sacrificed their lives for the national cause (after which little ingenuity was required to present them as saints/martyrs of the nation). Their poems often follow this image. Consider, for example, one of Petőfi's most intriguing revolutionary visions, "*Talpra magyar*" (Rise You Magyars, 1848):

> Rise you Magyars, your country summons!
> Here's the moment, now or never!
> Shall we be slaves or free men?
> This is the question—you must choose!—
> By the God of the Magyars
> we swear,
> we swear, slaves
> We no longer be!
>
> (Neubauer 2010a: 49, transl. by John Neubauer)

13 In other words, the Romantic genius from a peripheral literary culture becomes an object of mass adoration practically at the same time as a long-deceased poetic icon with an already established cult (e.g., Dante and Petrarch in Italy, Shakespeare in England, Camões in Portugal, etc.).

The poetry of Hristo Botev, a committed revolutionary who dedicated his life to the national liberation struggle, can be similarly combative. Botev often dreams of heroic death: in his uncompromising "*Moyata molitva*" (My Prayer, 1873), he predicts his own demise on the battlefield:

> Make powerful this hand of mine
> for the rising of the slaves;
> I'll join them at the battle line
> that I may find my grave.
>
> (Penčev 2010: 119, transl. by Kevin Ireland)

Ironically (or perhaps typically), Botev's "prophecy" actually came true: in 1876 he died in a battle with the Ottomans, leaving behind the enigma of his last moments (including the fact that his corpse was missing, which again resembles the Hungarian case). This enigma was cultivated on a large scale in one of the most persistent posthumous cults of cultural saints in the region (Penčev 2010: 125–127). In the case of Botev and Petőfi, all elements of the biography (*vita*) coincided perfectly with their respective canonization as national poets, martyrs, prophets, and saints.[14]

If not the national poets themselves, their poetry might become a powerful weapon in national struggles. A prototype national poet of the region, the great Polish Romantic Adam Mickiewicz, wrote his early masterpiece, "*Oda do młodości*" (Ode to Youth), in 1820. Although the poem was banned by the Russian censor in Vilnius for its patriotism, it was widely read and circulated in illegal manuscripts, becoming a kind of anthem of the generation and adopting a pivotal role during the (unsuccessful) Polish insurrection against the occupying Russian forces in November 1830.[15] Especially its two final verses appeared frequently on the walls of Warsaw in those turbulent days and powerfully inspired the national uprising:

> Hail, Dawn of Liberty! Oh, Long live Thou!
> Thou carriest the Redeeming Sun so bright.
>
> (Zawadzki 2007: 53, transl. by Jarek Zawadski)

The case of Petar II Petrović Njegoš is in many ways more complicated. In his famous epic poem *Gorski vijenac* (The Mountain Wreath, 1847), the poet resolutely summons his disheartened compatriots to an armed uprising that would finally put an end to centuries of Ottoman rule. This is a memorable response from the determined hero Vuk Mićunović to the somewhat hesitant Prince-Bishop (*vladika*) Danilo:

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14 On Petőfi, see Neubauer (2010a) and Hites (2017); on Botev, see Kambourov (2017).

15 On Mickiewicz, see Koropeckyj (2008).

What misfortune has come over you now
that you do wail like some sad cuckoo-bird
and drown yourself in our Serbian troubles?
Is today not a festive occasion
on which you have gathered Montenegrins
to cleanse our land of loathsome infidels?

(Njegoš 2000, transl. by Vasa D. Mihailovich)

The Mountain Wreath, written by a person who is both a national poet and a secular and religious ruler, is definitely a national epic – and the writing of such a work is definitely a strong attribute in the canonization process. However, from today's perspective, it also seems to be a deeply problematic poem. It contains the idea of a potentially genocidal cleansing that has become controversial, especially in the context of the Balkan wars at the end of the 20th century. Furthermore, there is an ongoing and fierce dispute over the question of Njegoš's nationality: is he a Serbian or a Montenegrin national poet?[16]

In his famous *Daugava* (1919), the much-celebrated Latvian "people's poet" Rainis – who belongs to the third, latest group of national poets – envisioned the great Latvian river as a powerful symbol, a national "river of destiny". The appeal of his patriotic verses prophesying an independent Latvia became manifest during the Latvian War of Independence (1918–1920), when the defenders of Riga were deeply inspired by the poem. Seven decades later, such an appeal resurfaced in the course of the Baltic "singing revolution" (1987–1991). In the arrangement by the composer Mārtiņš Brauns, the mighty choral song "*Saule, Pērkons, Daugava*" (Sun, Thunder, the Daugava) became a major musical symbol of (non-violent) resistance against the Soviet rule during this period:[17]

Latvia was put down by the Sun,
Where the ends came together.
White sea, green land.
Latvia had the key of the gate,
Which Daugava will protect.

(Kudiņš 2019: 34, transl. by Jānis Kudiņš)

The famous "*Zapovit*" (Testament, 1845) by the Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko is another fine example of overtly nationalist poetry – even if the unity

16 On the complex case of Njegoš, see Slapšak (2010) and Baskar (2019).

17 As Neubauer (2010: 16–18) has already noted, practically all national poets in East-Central Europe were widely appropriated not only by the nationalists, but also by the communists. Rainis, as an outspoken leftist, was no exception. His cult flourished during the Soviet era, but the nationalist traits in his *opera* played an important role in the fall of the communist regime in Latvia (cf. Kalnačs 2017; Zelče 2020).

of this poet's life, deeds, and (artistic) works is perhaps less obvious.[18] In this poem, the lyrical subject clearly places the new deity, the Nation, above the Creator God:

> When I am dead, bury me
> In my beloved Ukraine,
> My tomb upon a grave mound high
> Amid the spreading plain,
> So that the fields, the boundless steppes,
> The Dnieper's plunging shore
> My eyes could see, my ears could hear
> The mighty river roar.
>
> When from Ukraine the Dnieper bears
> Into the deep blue sea
> The blood of foes … then will I leave
> These hills and fertile fields –
> I'll leave them all and fly away
> To the abode of God,
> And then I'll pray … But till that day
> I nothing know of God.
>
> (Shevchenko 1977: 198, transl. by John Weir)

Whenever the poetry of a national poet contains such overt statements, the adjective "national" seems to have a solid basis in the works – regardless of the fact that there may be other, more complicated and ambiguous poems within the given opus. (Indeed, the legacies of the national poets – including Petőfi, Botev, Shevchenko, and especially Njegoš – are very complex and offer numerous interpretative possibilities.) However, canonization tends to avoid the complex reading of texts and instead builds on a series of easy-to-understand, simplified patterns that one might call "mantras".

The Catalan national poet Jacint Verdaguer, author of the national epic *Canigó* (1886), also penned the famous collection *Pàtria* (Homeland, 1888) where he treated the national past and present in a dreamy, nostalgic mode of *enyorança* (longing). Among the most remarkable pieces are his lengthy ode "*A Barcelona*" (To Barcelona) as well as one of his most beloved poems, "*L'emigrant*" (The Emigrant), an expression of a longing for the native soil. The poem opens with the famous verse "*Dolça Catalunya*", widely known and sung to the present day:[19]

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18 On Shevchenko and his cult, see Makolkin (1992) and Noack (2019).

19 The musical arrangements of poems were instrumental in maintaining and reproducing the canonical status (*cultus*) of national poets over long periods of time. In Verdaguer's case, another such poem is his hymn to the Virgin Mary entitled "*Virolai*", the verses of which are still widely known and sung by Catalans. On Verdaguer as a national poet and cultural saint, see Sunyer and Subirana (2019).

Sweet Catalonia,
Land of my heart
To be far from you
Is to die of longing.

(Verdaguer 2007: 203,
transl. by Ronald Puppo)

However, even the more subtle or restrained articulations of national (longing) can be sufficient for a writer to become a national poet. One of the features often found in the works of national poets is the appropriation or even invention of the (national) past, and several national poets have indeed written great national epics, works that are considered constitutive of their national literatures. In any case, the glorification of a nation's past greatness is a common strategy on the basis of which a simple prophecy can reconnect the past with the future. Take, for example, Thomas Moore's "*Erin, Oh Erin*" (1810):[20]

The nations have fallen, and thou still art young,
Thy sun is but rising, when others are set;
And, though Slavery's cloud o'er thy morning hath hung,
The full noon of freedom shall beam round thee yet.
Erin, oh Erin, though long in the shade,
Thy star will shine out when the proudest shall fade.

(Moore 1832: 72)

Another example is Jónas Hallgrímsson's "*Ísland*" (Iceland, 1835), in which the "Bard of Iceland" laments the lost days of fame, the dwindling glory of the ancestors:[21]

Iceland, frost-silvered isle! Our beautiful, bountiful mother!
Where are your fortune and fame, freedom and happiness now?
All things on earth are transient: the days of your greatness and glory
flicker like flames in the night, far in the depths of the past. …
Oh, it is bitter to stand here, stalled and penned in the present!
Men full of sloth and asleep simply drop out of the race!
How have we treated our treasure during these six hundred summers?

(Ringler 2002: 101, transl. by Dick Ringler)

In the case of Hallgrímsson, his activities at the level of *acta* – that is, outside the purely literary sphere – were also crucial in making this poet an icon of Icelandic

20 During the canonization of Moore in the late 19th century, it was stressed that he had proved that "Erin deserved her place, historically, culturally, and morally, among the nations of the earth" (Kelly 2014: 93).

21 On the nationalist dimensions of this and some other poems by Hallgrímsson, see Egilsson (2011: 135–142).

nationalism. Other national poets, however, may not have been as directly involved in the efforts of their communities' national movements. For France Prešeren, the undisputed Slovenian national poet, poetry was the only means of (national) expression. In his magnum opus *Krst pri Savici* (The Baptism on the Savica, 1836), the Slovenian equivalent of a national epic, Prešeren also evokes the myth of the ancestors that lived in independence and glory in the times before the (violent) Christianization in the 8th century. After that, the situation looks rather bleak:

> Old pillars of Slovenedom are cast down,
> And all our laws on ancient habit based;
> All bow before Bavarian Tesel's crown,
> The sons of Slavdom 'neath his yoke are placed,
> And haughtily the aliens strut and frown
> Within our homeland, by bright fortune graced.
>
> (Prešeren 1999: 119,
> transl. by Henry Cooper and Tom Priestly)

However, the traits of national ideology cannot really explain Prešeren's unrivaled position on the Slovenian Parnassus. In general, Prešeren's complex poetic opus is not explicitly nationalist, but instead inspired by Romantic cosmopolitanism and humanist universalism. In this respect, there are other Slovenian poets whose poetry at first glance seems to better fit the ideal of the national poet – at least from the point of view of the Slovenian nationalists of the generation after Prešeren that became aware of the pressing need to establish and maintain a cult of the national poet. In the eyes of many, a subtle poet of disillusionment like Prešeren, whose work was primarily characterized by love poetry, was simply not fervent enough – and such suspicions were regularly voiced in the early phase of his canonization (Dović 2010: 104–105). In Romania, too, Mihai Eminescu was initially attacked for his "poisonous version of anti-national pessimism" (Mihăilescu 2010: 87). In the end, however, both Prešeren and Eminescu were unanimously elevated to the prestigious throne of the national poet. This apparent controversy can be well explained by the observations of Nemoianu and Juvan: as (subaltern) candidates for the hypercanon, national poets first had to be recognized as "great", classical and exemplary – and only then could they become "national".

Perhaps the most radical illustration of this point is provided by the Czech national poet Karel Hynek Mácha. His major lyrical-epic poem *Máj* (May, 1836) was written at a time when the Czech literary establishment already expected poetry to express a resolute national consciousness. Ironically, Mácha seems to be the least "national" of the many enthusiastic Czech poets of the time. An exception might be the introductory verses to *May*:

The Czechs are a good nation!
Anyone unfortunate, moaning in need,
should turn to a Czech;
he will give speedy help.

(Pynsent 2010: 57,
transl. by Robert Pynsent)

However, interpreters have never agreed on the real intention of this four-verse jingle, which stands in sharp contrast to the whole of *May* and to Mácha's poetry in general. Could it be that Mácha was simply making fun of the nationalists? Even without deciding on one of the explanations (cf. Pynsent 2010: 57–58), it is clear that there is nothing explicitly national in *May* – but it is certainly an excellent and extremely complex work of art. It seems that it was not the national zeal (which was obviously lacking), but the later critical reassessment of Mácha's poetry as esthetically highly relevant (it should not be forgotten that the poem was initially fiercely denigrated by the nationalists) that was decisive for his elevation to the status of the national poet.

In this respect, Mácha's case is similar to that of Prešeren, in which the mantra of a Slovenian poetic genius, worthy of standing alongside Dante, Schiller, and other European classics, was remarkably influential and resonates even today. Such an assessment of Prešeren's role was initiated by the poet and critic Josip Stritar in his 1866 preface to the first posthumous edition of Prešeren's poetry. Although this essay marked the beginning of the canonization of the Slovenian national poet, the peculiar argument developed by Stritar seems to be a genuine *signum temporis* and could be applied to many other cases:

> Every nation has a man whom it imagines with a holy, pure nimbus above his head. What Shakespeare is to Englishmen, Racine to Frenchmen, Dante to Italians, Goethe to Germans, Pushkin to Russians, and Mickiewicz to Poles – so is Prešeren to Slovenians [..]. If nations were to be assembled on the Judgment Day to demonstrate how they had managed their talents and how every one of them had participated in universal, human culture, the small Slovenian nation could prove itself confidently among others with one small book, Prešeren's *Poems*. (Stritar 1866: 15, 48, transl. by the author of this article)

Conclusion So what can one ultimately say about national poets, about this "peculiar way of viewing literature", as Virgil Nemoianu (2002: 255) has so aptly put it? Evidently, national poets are a phenomenon closely associated with nation-building in general: it was the national movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries that invented and canonized them, making them into a genuine literary

institution that often lasted well into the new millennium.[22] More specifically, however, it should be considered a phenomenon intimately linked to Romantic nationalism. It is not just that the invention and canonization of national poets fits well with the general historical development of this characteristic type of national thinking (Leerssen 2014: 5–12). It is the specific connection between the arts and the nation, between poetics and politics, so characteristic of the national poets, that makes them appear as one of the most distinctive features of Romantic nationalism.

Although there are some deviations from the pattern, it is fairly safe to assume that the phenomenon of national poets, invented to represent a nation both to itself and to others, was particularly pronounced in small European literary cultures. As has been seen, in many of these cultures national poets occupy a prominent, exalted position within the national pantheon. It has also been observed that, although the patterns of their canonization were quite similar in many cultures, their works were quite varied and not necessarily predominantly nationalistic. The main reason for this could be that their canonization had to satisfy two very different requirements. They not only had to please their nationalist postulators at home but also aspired to be recognized by "the Other" – the core of the emerging literary world-system – and included on an equal footing in the ranks of exemplary European classics. In most cases this second mission, their "worlding", was not successful. There is still a grave imbalance between the prestige and veneration of national poets within their respective literary cultures and their (marginal) position in the canon of world literature – but this is certainly an issue that is well beyond the scope of this study.

The samples of nationally motivated poetry discussed in the last part of this article support the conclusion above. National poets may have dealt with national themes in different ways, to different extents, and in different modalities: and many of them did so with unprecedented excellence. However, this was not the only condition of their eligibility. Their selection does not appear to be directly dependent on the frequency or strength of the distinctly national poetic imagery of their poetry. When considering the afterlives of national poets, an attentive look at their (posthumous) canonization reveals the mechanism of their elevation to this exalted structural position. Among the many parameters of canonization, the concept of appropriation is of particular importance here; compare the table in Dović and Helgason (2017: 94–95). In the process of canonizing particular national poets, their works and the compact totality of their "life and deeds" were routinely interpreted as

22 National poets, often nearly forgotten in the (late) 20th century, can resurface with surprising agility, especially in turbulent times. Consider, for example, the role of Prešeren and Rainis in the period of the emancipation of the Slovenian and Latvian nation-states around 1990, or the role of Verdaguer in the recent Catalan attempts to gain greater sovereignty.

highly relevant to the national cause – whereas the actual poetic content, diluted into empty signifiers and simplified mantras, became less important. Recalling the statement quoted at the outset of this article, it may now become more evident why John Neubauer (whose work will remain an enduring inspiration for the study of national poets) could not simply state that a "national poet must write poetry that closely identifies with the nation's cause", but had to add the coda "or is thought to do so".

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