

**Romanticism and National Poets on the Margins of Europe:
Prešeren and Hallgrímsson**

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Slovenian and Icelandic literatures – as examples of “small”, “weak” or “peripheral” literary systems (Moretti; Even-Zohar, *Polysystem*; Juvan, “World Literatures”) – are no exception in reflecting one of the most distinctive cultural phenomena of European romantic nationalism, the “national poet” (Nemoianu; Cornis-Pope & Neubauer 11–132).¹ The notion of a national poet, applied to France Prešeren (1800–1849) and Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–1845) respectively, signifies a writer’s specific cultural role and position in the history of a literary field. According to Nemoianu, the institution of national poets blossomed primarily in romanticism, when the dramatic appeal of biographies and aesthetic merits of selected poets were employed as cultural symbols in nation building. On the one hand, national poets enabled ethno-lingual communities (imagined as “nations”) to enhance their internal cohesion and sense of collective identity; on the other hand, national poets were instrumental for facing the anxieties caused by competing European nationalisms. In the international arena, the icon of a national poet proved that a nation – especially one without statehood or suffering from historical discontinuities – resembled other modern or traditional nations and could cope with their intellectual power, historical lineage, founding myths, and linguo-artistic perfection (cf. Nemoianu 249–250, 254–255). National poets were established in that period also to demonstrate to traditionalists that romanticism did not amount to ephemeral individual fantasies and arbitrary inspiration. As noted by Nemoianu, the romantics constructed “a solid pedigree of their own,” a kind of “a viable Romantic alternative to the classical and the neoclassical tradition.” A national genius’s achievements and evocations of the nation’s and European past were regarded as modern classics entitled to join the European post-mediaeval canon of Dante, Cervantes, and Shakespeare (cf. Nemoianu 250).

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Poets' lives and works as well as their reception within the nineteenth-century horizon of national awakenings lent them some of their "national" prominence (cf. Leerssen 116–118). These poets were involved in "culture planning" (Even-Zohar, "Culture") and political action in the spirit of cultural nationalism: for example, by writing or allegorizing national programs; establishing cultural institutions and media with national-awakening intentions; through their appearances at public meetings or on covers of leading newspapers. In their texts and lifestyles, they attempted to stress and elevate their own author function (cf. Heitmann 138–141) in individualized or sublime self-portraits displaying their exceptional personalities, connoting themselves as tragic victim or prophet of the "spirit of the nation," for example. Hand in hand with ethnographers, antiquarians, and historians, many of them partook in collecting and artistically adapting folk literature, inventing and rediscovering their homelands' relics, and depicting heroic or catastrophic pasts. The national role of poets was sometimes recognized already during their lifetimes, not only by their sympathizers and members of literary circles, but also by the media that advocated the national cause. However, in Prešeren and Hallgrímsson's cases, the role of national poet was institutionalized only posthumously, through a long process of canonization (cf. Dović, "France Prešeren"): once the poet's legend and his or her key texts had been embraced by the discursive practices of cultural memory, the poets and their works continued to function as points of reference in the process of imagining and reinterpreting the national identity.

The aura of national poets was above all a reflection of their efforts to render topics of presumably national importance in the aesthetic codes that were regarded as "standards" of modern artistic developments in core European systems or/and as endemic to the Western tradition. As Nemoianu succinctly puts it, "establishing a 'national poet' was a kind of shorthand, a summary of the achievements and of the profile" of a particular nation on the imagined "Olympian plateau" of *Weltliteratur* (254–255). Nemoianu is silent about how and by whom their status as ambassadors to world literature is actually established. It can be reasonably assumed that it results from canonizing discourses. Josip Stritar's 1866 essay, which made of Prešeren the Slovenian national poet, is indicative because it explicitly determines his *saintly* status through relations with the nationally profiled canon of world literature: "Every nation has a man whom he imagines with *a holy, pure nimbus above his head*. Prešeren is for the Slovenes what Shakespeare is to Englishmen, Racine to the French, Dante to the Italians, Goethe to the Germans, Pushkin to the Russians, and Mickiewicz to the Poles." (Stritar 48; transl. adapted from Dović, "France Prešeren" 105; emphasis M. J.) In Stritar's view, Prešeren's position in relation to both national and world literature is

equivalent to that of Shakespeare, Goethe, or Dante. With his act of installing Prešeren into the national and global canon simultaneously, Stritar consciously avoided older nationalist strategies of representing domestic celebrities as metaphoric clones of the established world classics (e. g., portraying a minor poet Koseski as “Slovenian Schiller”).

It appears that the notion of the national poet, typical of Europe, could be subsumed under that of “cultural saint.” On the horizon of nationalism understood as a secularized, civil religion (cf. Bellah; Perkins), the idea of cultural saints is interpreted with reference to public figures in mass psychology and pop culture (Hammer). It is well known that Bellah’s concept refers to a “transcendent universal religion of the nation,” a set of quasi-religious beliefs, expressed primarily in America’s founding documents, currency, and presidential inaugural addresses, according to which the American nation and liberty are chosen, protected by God. Through references to the repertoire of the civil religion’s founding myths and catchwords, the representatives of American political, economic, military, and cultural power could induce a sense of collective identity to a heterogeneous, multi-cultural, and pluralistic society. Although the concepts of civil religion and cultural saint have been developed mainly as tools for understanding post-WW II American society, they can be justifiably applied to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe as well. As a matter of fact, the US needed civil religion (“In God we trust”) to forge its own, quasi-religious version of nationalism, whereas the European post-Enlightenment variety already conjured an organicist and culturalist notion of nation as an inborn transcendence of people sharing the same ancestors, territory, history, heroes, memories, and language. Additionally, the language of nineteenth-century European nationalism, whose similarities with religion were recognized already by contemporaries, adopted many Judeo-Christian symbols and narratives, using them as imaginary bricks of social transcendence (cf. Perkins). Intertwined with the dominant religion or supplanting it during the processes of industrialization, the European brand of civil religion empowered the existing nation states and motivated emergent nationalist movements. In this context, the function of establishing collective identities cannot be reserved for poets. They are but a historically specific subset of cultural saints. In post-industrial societies in which cultural nationalism and aesthetic discourse are waning, the role of national poets is becoming residual, dependent on official rituals and institutions. Their position as cultural saints is being assumed by political, media, or popular culture figures (like film and rock stars) who, however, are “worshipped” only by groups of fans. Nevertheless, there are pertinent analogies between the Christian tradition of sainthood and national poets, both in their lives (*vitae*),

marked by exceptional virtue or martyrdom, and practices and symbols of their posthumous elevation, remembrance, and worship (*canonisatio, dulia*).

The impetus for comparison between Jónas Hallgrímsson and France Prešeren was the impression that they were some kind of doubles, living far apart and not knowing of each other (cf., for Hallgrímsson: Jónsdóttir; Ringler; Óskarsson). The poets were born and died almost at the same time; both were of peasant origin and obtained higher education in the capitals of the Danish or Habsburg monarchies, to which their people were dependent; in the 1830s, they contributed significantly to almanacs published in their mother tongues to establish a “nationalized” public sphere (*Fjölnir; Krajnska čbelica*); they both experienced tragic emotional turbulence (including deaths of their friends) and, with their benign free-thinking bohemianism, aroused suspicion, pity or indignation, on the verge of social exclusion; both wrote literature in their free time and earned money in intellectual professions; both are held to be leading romantic poets, who shaped their countries’ cultural identity; and, finally, they were canonized as cultural saints only towards the end of the nineteenth century; their monuments in their respective national capitals were erected almost simultaneously (1905 to Prešeren, to Hallgrímsson in 1907, cf. Dović, “Nacionalni”; Helgason). However, a closer look – albeit paradoxically based on “distant reading” (cf. Moretti 10–12), i.e. second-hand expertise and translation – shows that the contents of their work are hardly comparable.

Notwithstanding their aesthetic qualities, Hallgrímsson’s literary texts were created on various occasions and *ad hoc* external incentives. Transferring semiotic material from “world famous” Schiller, Chamisso, and Heine into the Icelandic periphery, he masterfully hybridized borrowings from European literary centers of modernity with domestic traditions, e.g., the Old Norse meters. His poetry typically sought to depict Icelandic landscapes in aesthetic settings, either bucolic or sublime, and put them into the perspective of natural or national history, both the objects of his study and extensive fieldwork (cf. Egilsson). Hallgrímsson thus differs from Prešeren not only in poetic orientation, but even more in his study of the natural sciences, as well as in his multifarious oeuvre, which includes literary criticism, essays on natural history, and narrative prose. Prešeren, on the other hand, wrote only poetry and was considered a sentimental poet of love during his lifetime. Only in the 1860s, was he recognized by Stritar and others as a romantic classic who – following the Roman elegists, Petrarch, Byron, Kollár, and the Schlegel brothers – combined Romance and other European forms with modern existential and erotic confession, metapoetic reflection, and the national cause. His occasional, satirical, and jovial poems were relegated to the

margins of his canon. From a Slovenian point of view, Hallgrímsson's work seems closer to the post-romantic generation of "Young Slovenians," Prešeren's first canonizers. Similarly, a variety of genres and contents covered by the Icelandic almanac *Fjölnir* shows more parallels with the literary review *Slovenski glasnik*, published since the 1850s and addressed to Slovenian educated classes, than with the contemporaneous almanac *Krajnska čbelica*, which contained only poetry of a rather mediocre quality (with the exception of Prešeren).

Metaphorically and with regard to their canonization as cultural saints, the difference between Jónas and Prešeren can be epitomized by the opposition of de-centered and centered paradigm. The Icelandic cultural saint authored a multi-genred and multi-voiced oeuvre, his canonic role in Icelandic history had significant competitors (Bjarni Thorarensen as the representative of romantic poetry, the politician Jón Sigurdsson as the father of the nation), whereas the Slovenian cultural saint, whose work is centered around his single lyrical voice (with many registers but one subjectivity) figures as the only national poet, the only true romanticist, and the unanimously accepted founding figure of the nation. The difference of their work and cultural function may be deduced from a symptomatic placing of their memorials: Jónas's sculpture has been moved across Reykjavík and come to rest in a beautiful, but intimate corner of the urban *nature* – in the park near the city pond Tjörnin (cf. Helgason); Prešeren's statue, on the other hand, remained on the central square of Ljubljana's Old town, the genuinely *urban* place for massive gatherings and entertainment. Here, Prešeren's saintly image at times ceases to play the national poet role and approximates that of present-day pop icons.

Nevertheless, the superficial parallels between Jónas and Prešeren are far from insignificant. It is not so much by the substance of their opuses, but through their apparently surface similarities that the analogies of their structural functions come to the fore. As we have learned from Nemoianu, the institution of national poets operates on the threshold between an individual national literature and the general space of the "world republic of letters." Consequently, analogies between our cultural saints are connected to the nineteenth-century emergence (cf. Domínguez) of marginal art systems 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 (cf. Casanova). As already noted, Prešeren and Hallgrímsson became sanctified as national poets in two remote literatures, which at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth century belonged to the economic and cultural periphery of the nascent world literary market (cf. Moretti 7–40).

Icelandic and Slovenian literature adjusted to their conditions the general European process of autonomization, which operated – through a significant participation of the national poets – on several interdependent levels. As discourse, intended primarily for aesthetic perception, literature was abandoning its religious and educative functions, and was assuming the character of autotelic, imaginative, free, and individualized expression. As discourse that cultivates vernaculars, imbuing them with semantic complexity, lexical richness, and grammaticality, literature asserted its public role, attempting to diminish the role of a “foreign” language in administration and high culture (i.e., Danish and German). Occupying the space of public discourse, vernacular belle-lettres disseminated a range of representations that the nascent “imagined community” recognized as the essentials of its cultural memory, contemporary social experience, and ethnospace (e.g., Hallgrímsson’s national landscapes and motifs from sagas; Prešeren’s elegiac evocation of medieval Duchy of Carantania). Finally, with its media, social networks, and institutions, literature evolved to a social subsystem on its own, although in part also serving the political needs of nation building (cf. Juvan, “Syndrome”). As such, the Slovenian and Icelandic literary systems, aiming to help their nations achieve cultural and administrative autonomy, tactically utilized the institutions and the public sphere established by the ruling regime (i.e., the Habsburg Empire and the Kingdom of Denmark).

In essence, Prešeren and Hallgrímsson were elevated to cultural sainthood because *they* were thought, in turn, to have elevated their national literatures to the level, on which the national was becoming European. The Slovenian and Icelandic national poet appropriated aesthetic canons of what was during that period constructed as the European tradition and European modernity. Prešeren, on his part, attempted imaginatively to join his native idiom to the historically shifting centers of the European literary system. His strategy, typical of a romantic national poet, was to render his utterly individual poetry as a modern classic: his composition was balanced and tectonic and he eruditely drew on the ancient, medieval, renaissance, baroque, classicist, and romantic European poetry, intertextually referring to their motifs, imagery, stylistic features, poetic genres, strophic and verse forms. As shown by Egilsson, Jónas’s strategy was different: although he, too, embraced forms like *ottava* or *terza rima*, he preferred to elevate Iceland by verbalizing the national landscape according to the aesthetic rules of respected European traditions. In spite of such differences, they share a pattern: precisely in their function as national poets, they grounded their national literatures in a cosmopolitan horizon of *Weltliteratur*, that is, in the context of aesthetic traditions and recent trends that were felt to be central to all Europe.

Further, Jónas and Prešeren were involved in the cultivation of their ethnic languages and efforts to equate its public value to that of the Danish or German. However, as peripheral authors from the two emerging nations striving for cultural recognition, they were bilingual and did not bother to publish in dominant languages. By their poetry in Danish or German, they nevertheless sought recognition among their countrymen, not in wider public of the Danish or Austrian empires. Their cultural concepts, based on liberal nationalism and romantic aestheticism, publicly struggled with more realist and utilitarian programs of national awakening. They were active within smaller circles of ethnically conscious intelligentsia, who based their nationalist and enlightenment literary endeavors on the aesthetic discourse. With their strategy to attract the educated classes by establishing a “nationalized” public space through a literary almanac, they failed to arouse interest of wider social strata. Only later, when the ideology of cultural nationalism largely conquered Slovenian or Icelandic public media and influenced local population through education, reading houses, public libraries, nationalist rallies and the like, Prešeren and Hallgrímsson were singled out as national poets. Their lives and work were canonized and preserved in cultural memory not only through official forms of collective remembrance (literary criticism and biography, anthologies and scholarly editions, school curricula, memorial days, monuments, toponymy and the like), but also through popular culture, which adopted their works and lives in forms of jovial anecdotes, oral histories, stereotyped images, and catchwords.

Icelandic and Slovenian literatures are geographically distant, belonging to different language groups. Their nineteenth-century socio-economic structures were divergent. Multi-ethnic kingdoms to which they belonged had few if any direct contacts. Icelandic and Slovenian early nineteenth-century authors probably knew next to nothing about each other. But precisely because of the absence of *rappports de fait* between the Slovenian and Icelandic romantic literary cultures, their juxtaposition can serve as a case study for a comparative approach that, adopting a transnational perspective, addresses European literatures as a complex system of multidirectional cultural transfers (cf. Leerssen, Juvan, “World Literatures”). 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. National poets and other cultural saints are among the most prominent phenomena of this kind.

In conclusion, I should admit that the hidden agenda of the present comparative outline is to encourage internal de-colonization of Euro-comparatism. Instead of the “peripherocentric” tendency to demonstrate “regularity,” “development,” and “completeness” of peripheral national literatures by relating them primarily to some metropolis of the world literary system (Juvan, “Peripherocentrism”), we should be attentive to other marginal literatures and their mutual contacts, structural analogies, and differences. We will pay for this shift by losing the illusion of being shareholders of cultural capital accumulated in core-states, but we may gain insight in singular local articulations of transnational cultural patterns (cf. Attridge).

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Abstract

Slovenian and Icelandic literatures – as examples of “weak” or “peripheral” literary systems reflect one of the most distinctive cultural phenomena of European romantic nationalism, the “national poet.” National poets, such as the Slovene France Prešeren (1800–49) and the Icelander Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–45), enabled ethno-lingual communities (imagined as “nations”) to enhance their internal cohesion; on the other hand, national poets were instrumental for facing the anxieties of competing European nationalisms. In the international arena, they proved that a nation – especially one without statehood – resembled other nations and could cope with the canon of world literature. These poets themselves attempted to render topics of presumably national importance in the aesthetic codes that were regarded as “standards” of modern artistic developments in core European systems or/and as endemic to the Western tradition. Lives and works of Prešeren and Hallgrímsson, as well the processes of their posthumous canonization, show many striking parallels, regardless of differences that can be epitomized by the opposition of de-centered and centered cultural paradigm. Through their apparently surface similarities, the analogies of their structural functions come to the fore. These also shed light on analogous developments of the aesthetic autonomization and nationalization of the two emergent peripheral literatures during romanticism. The paper points out that the notion of the national poet can be subsumed under that of “cultural saint” because of pertinent analogies between the Christian tradition of sainthood and national poets, both in their lives (*vitae*) and practices and symbols of their posthumous elevation, remembrance, and worship (*canonisatio, dulia*).

Key words: national poet, cultural saint, romanticism, center and periphery, Slovenian literature, Icelandic literature

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