

National Poets and Cultural Saints of Europe: Slovenian (questionnaire)

Literary culture: Slovenian

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1. Which individual poet (male or female) is generally considered to be the greatest poet in your literary tradition? (Give the first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death.)

France Prešeren (1800–1849)

2. Are there other poets that come near or even reach such a status? If yes, name up to two, give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess their stature in relation to the greatest poet (scale 1–5; 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).

Oton Župančič (1878–1949) [3.5]

Srečko Kosovel (1904–1926) [3.5]

These ratings are debatable (because they are subject to historical shifts): close to Župančič and Kosovel might also come Dragotin Kette (1876–1899), Josip Murn (pen name Aleksandrov; 1879–1901), or Simon Gregorčič (1844–1906), and among the twentieth-century poets, perhaps Dane Zajc (1929–2005), and others. However, it seems that Prešeren’s leading position has remained undisputed at least since the end of the nineteenth century.

3. Is there a (single) poet that is considered the “national” poet? (Give the first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death.) Is the notion of “national poet” (NP) widespread in your literary culture? (Assess on a scale of 1–5; 1 = “irrelevant,” 5 = “very common.”)

France Prešeren (1800–1849). The notion of a national poet is very common [5].

4. Were there many rival poets to the position of national poet during the canonization process that were later marginalized? If yes, name up to three, give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess the decade of their utmost presence in the canonization processes (e.g., 1880s). (If there is no NP, answer for the “greatest” poet.)

Valentin Vodnik (1758–1819)

Janez Vesel (a.k.a. Jovan Koseski; 1798–1884)

Valentin Vodnik was intensely venerated after the 1848 revolution as the “first” Slovenian poet. Peak events in his cult were the 1858 centenary of his birth in Ljubljana (at his birthplace in the Šiška neighborhood) and the 1889 installation of his monument in Ljubljana. However, by the end of the nineteenth century Prešeren’s cult was already far ahead whereas Vodnik’s fame was waning. Janez Vesel (a.k.a. Koseski) was Prešeren’s contemporary and extremely popular among the pre-March (*Vormärz*) nationalists in the 1840s. However, the value of his poetry was systematically neglected by “Young Slovenian” critics in 1860s, and a proper cult never developed.

5. *Which period of canonization of the NP (or the greatest poet in case of no NP) was most important? (State the year or decade.) Name up to five of the most important canonization events (state the year and type; e.g., 1860: crucial textual edition; 1905: unveiling of an important memorial). Assess the current stature of the national (or greatest) poet compared to the most intense period (scale 1–5; 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).*

Crucial for Prešeren’s canonization were the endeavors of the Young Slovenians in the 1860s, who promoted higher aesthetic standards for Slovenian literature and venerated Prešeren as a singular genius that miraculously raised Slovenian poetry (and with it language and culture) to the European level. This argument has remained central ever since. Key events in Prešeren’s canonization were the following:

- 1866: Posthumous edition of *Pesmi* (Poems) with Josip Stritar’s preface;
- 1900: Major centenary ceremonies held in Slovenia and abroad;
- 1905: Installation of a large monument in the center of Ljubljana with about twenty thousand people present;
- 1944: Declaration of Prešeren’s day of death (February 8) as a major national holiday by the (Partisan/communist) Slovenian National Liberation Council (celebrated as a day off work during the communist period and at present);
- 1991: Prešeren’s “Zdravljica” (A Toast) becoming an official national anthem of the newly independent Republic of Slovenia.

6. *Who were the individuals, institutions, and interest groups (cultural factions, political parties) that played major roles in the promotion of the canonization process? State the names and assess the most active decade(s).*

- 1860s and 1870s: The “Young Slovenians” (Fran Levstik, Josip Stritar, Josip Jurčič) create the myth of a “national genius”;
- Turn of the century: Prešeren’s cause is mainly supported by liberal-oriented artists and politicians (Ivan Hribar, Josip Vošnjak, Ivan Tavčar, Janko Kersnik, and Anton Aškerc), but Prešeren also acquires somewhat more general national admiration;
- Interwar period: Prešeren enjoys unanimous acknowledgement; among his postulators, the poet Oton Župančič, critic Josip Vidmar, and writer Fran Saleški Finžgar (conversion of Prešeren’s birthplace in Vrba to a museum in 1939) stand out;
- Second World War and communist period: Prešeren’s cult is appropriated by the Slovenian communists and reaches full official status after the war (national cultural day, the Prešeren Award, naming dozens of streets and institutions);
- After 1991: the new state with its cultural establishment continues to cultivate Prešeren’s legacy.

7. *When were the works of the national (or greatest) poet fully integrated into the education system? (Name the decade; e.g., 1910s.) Assess the overall presence of the national (or greatest) poet and his or her works in education (scale 1–5; 5 = “excessive,” 3 = “not particularly strong,” 1 = “marginal”). If there were unusual shifts or breaks (due to politics, etc.), add a brief comment.*

Prešeren’s poems have appeared in every Slovenian textbook since Ivan Macun’s 1850 anthology. They formed an important part of Anton Janežič’s 1868 textbook and were substantially integrated into Jakob Sket’s textbook of 1893. Throughout the twentieth century (and in the present day), Prešeren’s texts have remained a vital (and often the most substantial) part of textbooks and Slovenian language/literature curricula—from preschool to high school and university [5].

8. *Are there other literary writers (prose writers or playwrights) in your literary culture that come close to the canonical position of the national (or greatest) poet? If so, name up to three, give their information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess their stature in relation to the national (or greatest) poet (scale 1–9; 9 = “much more important,” 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).*

Ivan Cankar (1876–1918), prose writer, playwright, and poet [4.5]

Primož Trubar (1508/9–1586), Protestant priest, writer, and translator; the author of the first Slovenian book [4]

Fran Levstik (1831–1887), writer, poet, critic, and linguist [3]

Among the living writers, Boris Pahor (born 1913) rose to great prominence in the last two decades both as a writer and as a critic of Fascism and Communism; the novelist and playwright Drago Jančar (born 1948) is considered by many to be the most prominent writer in recent decades.

9. *Are there other artists (composers, musicians, painters, architects, etc.) in your literary culture that come close to the canonical position of the national (or greatest) poet? If yes, name up to three, give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death), and assess their stature in relation to the national (or greatest) poet (scale 1–9; 9 = “much more important,” 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).*

Jože Plečnik (1872–1957), architect [3.5]

Slovenian impressionists: Matija Jama (1872–1947), Ivan Grohar (1867–1911), Rihard Jakopič (1869–1943),

Matej Sternen (1870–1949), a group of painters [2.5]

10. *Name up to three other individuals (in politics, military, scholarship, etc.) that were most venerated in the nation-building context and remain highly canonized today. Give their basic information (first name, last name, year of birth, and year of death) and assess their stature in relation to the national (or greatest) poet (scale 1–9; 9 = “much more important,” 5 = “equally important,” 1 = “marginal in comparison to”).*

Anton Martin Slomšek (1800–1862), Catholic bishop, poet, and educator [3.5]

Janez Bleiweis (1808–1881), political leader and publisher [2.5]

Rudolf Maister (1874–1937), general and poet [2.5]

Slomšek was praised as an all-around national awakener (mainly for his achievements in religion, education, and publishing) especially by the Slovenian Catholics, who, due to his virtuous life, nominated him as early as 1936 as a candidate for sainthood (gathering an impressive 400,000 signatures). His cult blossomed especially in the wake of his 1999 beatification by Pope John Paul II. Bleiweis, widely dubbed “the father of the nation,” was extremely popular during his lifetime; traits of cultic admiration were present at the public celebrations of his seventieth birthday in 1878 as well as at his funeral in 1881. However, for a number of complex reasons, a strong cult did not develop posthumously, and Bleiweis never fully enjoyed the fame of a key protagonist of the Slovenian national movement (which he would certainly deserve). Maister was praised because of his bold military manoeuvres in 1918 as a “protector” of the northern Slovenian border. Both Slomšek and Maister became more visible in Slovenia after the 1991 breakup of Yugoslavia (with a number of new monuments and christenings). Prominent figures in scholarship include the linguists Jernej Kopitar (1780–1844) [2] and Fran Miklošič (1813–1891) [2], both of whom were widely appreciated internationally but were not intensely celebrated in Slovenia. In recent decades, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek (born 1949) has become a major international celebrity. Cults of certain political leaders (Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria, Field Marshal Joseph Radetzky, the Yugoslav Karadorđević kings Peter I and Alexander I, and Josip Broz Tito) were also cultivated in certain periods but were swept away with the changes of political regimes.

11. *Briefly describe the main reason why the chosen poet was considered “national” (or greatest in the case of no NP).*

Prešeren as a poet of romantic love and disillusion is not fervently nationalist in his texts (compared to some contemporary poets) even though there are certain poems or passages in which his strong commitment to Slovenian national ideas comes to the fore (e.g., in his famous *Sonetni venec* ‘Wreath of Sonnets’ and in *Krst pri Savici* ‘Baptism at the Savica’, a controversial Byronic verse tale often considered to be the Slovenian national epic). To a major degree, Prešeren’s canonization as a national poet was motivated by the conviction that his artistic mastery was so great that he deserved to occupy this prestigious position in the “gallery” of representative poets of European nations. In this respect, Prešeren’s poetry was seen as an important means to legitimize the cultural (and soon also the political) demands of the emerging Slovenian national movement.

12. *Speculate briefly on reasons why the concept of NP did (or did not) gain ground in your literary culture.*

The structural position of the “national poet” is among the most distinctive phenomena of European Romantic nationalism. An alternative to the (neo)classical tradition, the achievements of national poets were regarded as new classics entitled to join the modern (vernacular) European canon. This was especially important for the smaller nations with no statehood and discontinuous historical traditions: the icon of the national poet proved that a nation could take part in international literary and cultural exchange on equal terms. In this context, the establishment of the national poet was a useful shorthand for the literary accomplishments of the nation in question, a summary of its achievements, and a profile on the imagined “Olympian plateau” of world literature. The Slovenian case illustrates this point quite clearly.

13. *Speculate briefly on the reasons why the position of a national (or greatest) poet was either occupied by a single poet or shared by a number of poets.*

Prešeren’s stature is exceptionally singular because a) he lived in the proper period (most NPs from the semi-periphery were from the first half of the nineteenth century), b) his *vita* fits well for canonization as a national poet and cultural saint, and c) his potential contemporary poetic rivals do not match his artistic skills (Stanko Vraz [born Jakob Fras, 1810–1851] might come close, but he switched to writing in Illyrian/Croatian at some point, thus becoming all but a “renegade” from the nationalist perspective). (See also see Answer 12.)

14. *Do you notice any interesting connotations regarding the canonization of a national (or greatest) poet that resemble the veneration and cults of religious saints? What about other artists? Specify briefly.*

As was the case elsewhere in Europe during the century of the most intense commemorative culture (c. 1840–1940), Prešeren’s cult assumed many features of quasi-religious veneration (a variety of rituals, iconolatry, pilgrimage, and processions). This was especially visible in the period around 1900 (his centenary) and in 1905 (the unveiling of the Ljubljana monument). In part, such connotations were also present during the early stage of the Vodnik cult, but were much less visible in commemoration of other artists (except perhaps in the cases of the ritualized funerals of Ivan Cankar in 1918 and Oton Župančič in 1949). Veneration of the Blessed Martin Slomšek (beatified in 1999) came to the fore later and was strictly of a religious nature. Proposals to canonize the architect Plečnik as a Catholic saint were also made recently, but the prospects seem meagre.