

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

Literary culture: Georgian

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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.)

Shota Rustaveli (c. 1160 – after c. 1220)

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”).

Ilia Chavchavadze (1837–1907) [4]

Akaki Tsereteli (1840–1915) [4]

Vazha-Pshavela (1861–1915) [4]

Galaktion Tabidze (1891–1959) [4]

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.”)

Ilia Chavchavadze (1837–1907); 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.)

It is actually Ilia Chavchavadze himself that was marginalized for almost two decades after the Sovietization in 1921 (by the Soviet regime, namely the Georgian Bolshevik government), but his figure was revived by Stalin in 1934–1937. (See also Answer 4.)

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”).

1894–1907: On August 2 (*Iliaoba*), the feastday of Chavchavadze’s patron, the Prophet Elijah, a few hundred people would visit Chavchavadze’s estate in Saguramo, close to Tbilisi;

1907: Assassination of the poet by the Bolsheviks and a public funeral at the Mtatsminda Pantheon;

1913: Unveiling of the memorial at Chavchavadze’s grave;

1937: The state acknowledges Chavchavadze with an official celebration of the centennial of his birth; his collected works are published in five volumes; he reenters Georgian literary history and research; since then, once a decade, his anniversaries are officially celebrated;

1957: One of the central avenues in Tbilisi is named after him;

1958: Unveiling of his monument (together with Akaki Tsereteli) at the main (Rustaveli) avenue in Tbilisi;

1987: Ilia Chavchavadze is canonized by the Georgian Orthodox Church as Saint Ilia the Righteous;

Since 1987: Publication of the full and annotated collection of his works in twenty volumes;

Since 2003: The Georgian government acknowledges him as a state icon;

Current status [5].

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).*

Since the 1890s: The Georgian public;

1934–1937: Stalin, who ordered large-scale celebrations of Shota Rustaveli and Ilia Chavchavadze in 1937, and rehabilitated the latter because his figure had been marginalized by the Georgian Bolsheviks; Stalin's decision is now interpreted as an attempt to emphasize (in front of the Russians and other Soviet nations) that he belonged to a nation with long historic roots and an active cultural background;

1937–1991: Soviet Georgian government;

Since 1937: Georgian academia and literary scholarship; in Soviet times, especially from the 1930s to the 1950s, research and interpretation of Ilia Chavchavadze's literary works was Soviet-biased, and his public activities were interpreted from the Soviet ideologized position, suggesting that he should be seen as a materialist and a predecessor of Bolshevism;

1987–1991: The Georgian national movement against the Soviet regime;

Since 1987: The Georgian Orthodox Church;

Since 1980: Most of the political parties and groupings in Georgia;

Since 2003: The leading party (2003–2012), United National Movement;

Since 2000: Liberal activists.

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.*

Ilia Chavchavadze's works entered education in 1937 and remained heavily present later [5]. Although his poems became popular and were already memorized and recited by Georgians during his lifetime, his texts were not integrated into the education system until 1917 because the education institutions in Georgia were apart of the Russian Empire's education system; and also not until 1937 because he was marginalized. Since 1937, his works have been fully integrated into the Georgian school and university curriculum; however, the interpretation has varied in accordance with changes in ideological approaches.

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”).*

Shota Rustaveli (c. 1160 – after c. 1220) [8]

Akaki Tsereteli (1840–1915) [5]

Vazha-Pshavela (1861–1915) [5]

Galaktion Tabidze (1891–1959) [6]

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”).*

Niko Pirosmani (1862–1918); painter [3]

Zacharia Paliashvili (1871–1933); composer [3]

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”).*

King David IV, the Builder (1073–1125) [8]

Queen Tamar (1160–1213) [8]

Both rulers were already highly popular in Georgia in their lifetimes, as well as in the Middle Ages. Both became saints of the Georgian Orthodox Church. However, Georgia’s medieval history became idealized and somewhat mythologized in the period of Russian domination. Thus the two rulers that developed the strongest states in Georgia’s history symbolized the peak of the nation’s historical existence and became the most venerated. In Queen Tamar’s times, Shota Rustaveli’s epic poem, which is actually dedicated to her, was written, and this adds a cultural dimension to the importance of her figure. Thus, I would assess the stature of these three—David the Builder, Queen Tamar, and Shota Rustaveli—as equal. In comparison to Ilia Chavchavadze, in the nation-building context, these two monarchs are still venerated as more important because they represent the highest point of Georgia’s statehood and cultural development; in contrast, the figure of Ilia Chavchavadze is related to the traumatic period of Georgia’s colonization, against which he was in fact fighting with his writings and his activities. I would say that the monarchs have symbolic importance to Georgia’s national imagination and self-acceptance, whereas Ilia Chavchavadze is the much more realistic figure, with his crucial role in developing modern Georgian consciousness.

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

Georgian cultural tradition praises a canonical group of five poets, a pentad, as the greatest of Georgian poets. All of them could also qualify as national poets because the nation commemorates and venerates them, considering their written words as pillars of Georgian national identity. Georgian people and the state even try to keep parity in the forms of commemoration of these poets: their anniversaries are celebrated, main streets are named after them, monuments are erected, their works are republished and researched, and they are included in the school curriculum. However, the twelfth-century poet Shota Rustaveli is still given priority in the process of commemoration, and his epic poem *The Knight in the Tiger’s Skin* is considered the greatest masterpiece ever created in Georgia; thus, he would be better defined as a national icon.

Ilia Chavchavadze, Akaki Tsereteli, and Vazha-Pshavela all belong to the nineteenth century, the time of romantic nationalism and national rebirth, and thus fully correspond to the notion of a national

poet; after the Georgian Romanticist poets, they introduced Realism into Georgian literature and supported the European-style development of Georgian society. Among them, Ilia Chavchavadze is still more celebrated for his national role, and his contribution to nation-building. Thus, when asked to single out one national poet, he would be the most likely choice. Galaktion Tabidze is a modernist/symbolist twentieth-century poet, beloved and praised by Georgians for his individualistic, deep, and melodic poetry. On the other hand, his figure was utilized, and his social capital was used by the Soviet regime, within the Stalinist Soviet cultural policy. As with most of the modernist artists all over the USSR, he was forced to abandon his artistic preferences and develop compromising Soviet-style texts. He was awarded the official status of a People's Poet by the Soviets—the status was established in the early 1930s. This status ensured Galaktion Tabidze's popularity; however, including in Soviet times, he was more praised by readers for his symbolist poems. Today, nobody remembers this status, but they remember his symbolist poetry.

Ilia Chavchavadze, as a poet, may not even be considered the greatest in the pentad of Georgian poets. However, he is the most comprehensive figure, who, with his activities, covered all public and artistic spheres. He was an accomplished poet and a prose writer, a public essayist, a literary critic, a publisher and editor of national newspapers and journals, and a funder and chair of numerous public organizations (the Society for Spreading Literacy among Georgians, Bank of the Nobility, Drama Society, and Historical-Ethnographical Society of Georgia); he was a most notable and respected public figure. He was a major contributor to the development of Georgia's modern-style political and social culture, and a strong supporter of the country's European orientation. Although all of these services are not necessarily implied in the concept of national poet, and although in the cases of other cultures national poets may be praised for their pure poetic achievements, in the Georgian case they add national importance to Ilia Chavchavadze's figure. Finally, he is praised for the patriotic messages of his poetry, which strengthens his mission as a national poet. In sum, with his political thoughts, artistic works, and social activities, he is considered a nation-builder, a designer of modern Georgian national identity, and an inspirer of Georgia's choice of sovereign development.

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

That Shota Rustaveli's poetry was already popular in medieval Georgia shows how strong the cultural connection is to the poetical sphere within the national cultural tradition. However, in Georgia the concept of a national poet gained ground in the time of Russian colonization/domination, in a manner similar to many other national/cultural realities. The Georgian literary critic Kita Abashidze had already emphasized this correlation in the early twentieth century, saying that, within the Russian Empire, the Georgian nation was deprived of the right to govern its own political, military, or public life, and poetry was the only area where people could express themselves. The same can also be said about cultural reality in the Soviet period, when, in resistance to the Russian/Soviet domination, Georgian people gave high importance to the figures of national poets and their texts. Ironically, the same was done within Soviet cultural policy, which was partially supporting the Soviet Union's affection for its own poetic tradition. In the case of the nineteenth-century poets, the Soviet ideologists tolerated their national moods only with the amendment that they were critical of the Russian Empire, and thus would support the route of the Soviet state.

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.*

See Answer 11.

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.*

The resemblance has been clear in Georgian reality, as with other national cultures. However, the Georgian case goes beyond that of just a resemblance. Ilia Chavchavadze is actually a canonized saint of the Georgian Orthodox Church, known as Saint Ilia the Righteous. The canonization was conducted in 1987, on the 150th anniversary of the poet's birth. This can be seen as a response and involvement of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgia's reviving national movement against Russian/Soviet domination. Although, as a public figure and a political thinker, Ilia Chavchavadze was fully secular, this was not considered an obstacle to canonization. On the other hand, with his literary works, the poet was part of a deeply rooted Christian tradition. This, of course, was in support of his canonization; however, the latter moment was not adequately interpreted by that time due to Soviet reality. The whole national spirit of Ilia Chavchavadze's works was seen by the Church as grounds for appreciation of the poet's national mission. Most of all, Ilia Chavchavadze's death, by assassination by the Bolsheviks, made him a martyr, which is grounds for his canonization. Since then, the Georgian Orthodox Church has canonized a few new martyrs: victims of the Bolsheviks/Soviets, and several individuals that had contributed to the preservation of Georgia's cultural heritage, namely the tradition of the Georgian polyphonic church chantry, and medieval treasury, including icons. No other great poet was canonized, although on the 150th anniversary of Akaki Tsereteli's birth (three years after Ilia Chavchavadze's canonization) there were some expectations among the Georgian public that this poet should also be sanctified.