

## National Poets and Cultural Saints of Europe: German (questionnaire)

Literary culture: German

Contributor: Hannah Dingeldein, PhD, academic staff member

Institution: University of Mannheim

Date: December 16th, 2016

Place: Mannheim

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.)

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832)

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”).

Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) [4/4.5]

There are many poets that could be ranked third; for example, other writers of Weimar Classicism or Romanticism. A selection as well as a scalar assessment would be difficult.

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.”)

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832)

Again, Friedrich Schiller follows closely behind. The notion of a “national poet” has been widespread within the German / German-speaking literary and cultural tradition [4.5/5]. However, with regard to German history, the relevance of the concept “national poet” has been significantly reduced in recent times (see also Answer 12).

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.)

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the age of the so-called *Dichter und Denker* (poets and thinkers)—there were actually plenty of writers that were highly relevant to the process of canonization (e.g., Johann Christoph Gottsched and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing), and still are today. It is very difficult to select a rival great poet that was later marginalized. There are indeed writers that were later marginalized to some degree, such as Christian Fürchtegott Gellert (one of the most-read authors of the Enlightenment), Friedrich Maximilian Klinger, whose play *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) gave the epoch its name, or Jean Paul. But none of them could really have been called a “rival poet” compared to the position of the one “national poet.”

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”).

The canonization of Goethe as the “national” or “greatest” poet had already begun during his lifetime:

1774: With the release of his epistolary novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (The Sorrows of Young Werther), at the age of just twenty-four, Goethe quickly becomes a highly celebrated writer all over Germany and in large parts of Europe;

1786–1788: Goethe’s journey to Italy (*Italienreise*) marks the beginning of a new productive chapter (afterwards described as the classical period) in his career towards becoming the “greatest poet”;

1832: Part two of his work of a lifetime, *Faust*, is published posthumously, shortly after Goethe’s death;

1885: The first Goethe Society (*Goethe-Gesellschaft*) is founded in Weimar; the Weimar Goethe Society (still) edits the renowned Goethe Yearbook (*Goethe-Jahrbuch*).

The following editions of Goethe’s work (*Goethe-Ausgabe*) are crucial to the process of canonization:

– *Göschen-Ausgabe* (1787–1790)

– *Cotta-Ausgabe* (1827–1830, complemented 1840)

– *Weimarer Ausgabe*, also called *Sophienausgabe* (1887–1919)

– *Jubiläums-Ausgabe* (1902–1807)

– *Artemis-Gedenkausgabe* (1948–1954)

– *Hamburger Ausgabe* (1948–1960)

– *Berliner Ausgabe* (1965–1978)

– *Frankfurter Ausgabe* (1985ff.)

– *Münchner Ausgabe* (1985ff.)

Goethe’s current stature could be assessed as [3,5/4].

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).

At the age of twenty-six, Goethe was invited by Grand Duke Carl August to his court in Weimar, which very soon became a prominent and important cultural and literary center under the influence of the grand duke’s mother and patron of the arts, Anna Amalia. Goethe stayed there for most of his life;

Madame de Staël wrote a meaningful and widely recognized book on German culture and literature, *De l’Allemagne* (On Germany), in 1813, in which Goethe plays a prominent role;

Johann Peter Eckermann (1792–1854): A confidant (and not only a secretary) to Goethe. In 1836, his influential *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (Conversations with Goethe in the Last Years of His Life) was released;

Friedrich Wilhelm Riemer (1774–1845): Goethe appointed Riemer to be the editor of his literary estate (along with Eckermann);

Friedrich von Müller, a state chancellor of the Grand Duchy of Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach and a close friend of Goethe, published, among other works, his conversations with the famous poet;

In 1885, the first Goethe Society was founded in Weimar at the grand duke’s suggestion, by Grand Duchess Sophie and Grand Duke Carl Alexander of Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach; the society, aimed at the research and dissemination of Goethe’s work, gathered support from very influential individuals and even royalty, the Emperor of Germany being one of the members;

There were several philologists, historians and philosophers, such as Herman Grimm (e.g., *Goethe-Vorlesungen*, Lectures on Goethe, 1877), Georg Simmel (e.g. *Goethe*, 1913), Emil Staiger (a three-

volume study on Goethe, 1952–1959), and Karl Otto Conrady (volumes on Goethe, 1982–2006), that valued Goethe’s work highly, and thereby promoted the process of canonization;  
 Dozens of writers (contemporaries of Goethe or born later) composed their writings in the tradition of this “greatest poet” and/or paid homage to him in one way or another (e.g., Thomas Mann in *Lotte in Weimar*);  
 There are many more individuals, researchers, institutions, interest groups, and others worth naming, but this would be beyond the scope of this questionnaire.

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.*

Goethe’s works have been integrated into the education system since the 1860s, and have remained heavily present [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”).*

Jacob Grimm (1785–1868) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786–1859); “poets” in the broader sense [4/4.5]  
 Thomas Mann (1875–1955); prose writer [4]  
 Franz Kafka (1883–1924); prose writer [4]

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”).*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827); composer [5]  
 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791); composer [5]  
 Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840); painter [5]

It is very difficult to choose only three artists. Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), Johannes Brahms (1833–1897), and Richard Wagner (1813–1883), for example, should be mentioned as well.

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”).*

Martin Luther (1483–1546); protestant theologian [5]  
 Immanuel Kant (1724–1804); philosopher [5]  
 Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) and Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859); scholars [5]

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

It is difficult to say why Goethe was considered “national.” His use of vernacular language and regional dialects (as in the early play *Götz von Berlichingen* and his *Sturm und Drang* lyrics), his position as a minister of state in Weimar, and his rejection of the French Revolution could be some of the reasons. In any case, Goethe would not have described himself as a “national poet.” In contrast, it is easy to say why Goethe was considered the “greatest poet.” The success story of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (even Napoleon read it), including the so-called Werther fever (*Wertherfieber*); the (in part radical) renovation of literary diction; his singularity and originality; his multifaceted personality, interests, and competences (poet, minister of state, director of the Weimar court theater, naturalist scientist, illustrator, translator, traveler, letter-writer, and more); his extraordinary productivity in both the qualitative and quantitative senses; his thirst for knowledge and education; and last, but not least, his impact on the following generations of writers, artists, and philosophers. Goethe fascinated, and, as one result, his “great” name and reputation were capitalized on in the process of nation–building.

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

In the nineteenth century, the age of nation-building, a new interest arose in the national German education system. The demand for a national German literature canon (Georg Gottfried Gervinius), for a national theater (*Nationaltheater*), and a “national poet” must also be considered in this context. The further development of the “German nation” evidently shows the problematic dimension of the notion and concept of the “national poet”; Imperial Germany, National Socialism, and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) preempted the “national poet” for their ideological purposes. For example, the National Socialists understood Goethe’s *Faust* as expressing the typical German character. (Especially for East Germany’s purpose, Friedrich Schiller’s revolutionary *Sturm-und-Drang* attitude may fit even better.) Notably, after 1945, the concept and term “national poet” seems mostly problematic against the background of German history. It is interesting that Goethe himself refused the concept of individual national literatures (*Nationalliteraturen*) in a conversation with Eckermann in 1827. Instead of national literatures, he preferred the notion of world literature (*Weltliteratur*).

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.*

On the one hand, the fact that the position of a national or greatest poet was occupied by a single poet—Goethe—is based on the particularity of his person and success story, as described above (see Answer 11). On the other hand, the notion of a “national” or “greatest poet” could be considered inextricably linked with the general myth of a (single) hero: the fewer competitors that exist, the more the “star” shines. Of course the hero, as the “national” or “greatest” poet, gathers adorers around him (or her)—sometimes even rivals or enviers—but they will never be able to reach the same “sacred” status. This point segues to the image of the “great”/“national” poet as an untouchable saint or even a god (see Answer 14). From another point of view, the “national”/“greatest” poet Goethe—or more specifically a particular stage in his life and creative period—can also be considered with regard to another great poet, Friedrich Schiller. The period from the early 1790s to 1805, the year of Schiller’s death, is the time of the *Dichter und Freundschaftsbund* (bond of friendship) between Goethe and Schiller. Although Schiller felt inferior to the “great poet” Goethe, especially in the beginning of their friendship, both poets are often interpreted as two coequal “great” poets, despite their very different personalities and very different ways of thinking and writing. Interestingly, even though Schiller was physically larger, the Goethe–Schiller statue in Weimar (*Goethe-Schiller-Denkmal*) depicts both poets with exactly the same body height; that is to say, as equally “great.”

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.

I think there are indeed some analogies and discrepancies between the notion of a “greatest” or “national” poet and the veneration for religious saints that can be considered. Some parallels may be as listed below:

Their fame endures for centuries;

The “sacred” writings are transmitted within a literary tradition from generation to generation, from century to century;

Adorers may go on a “pilgrimage” to places of worship; in the case of Goethe, his birthplace in Frankfurt, his main residence, his summer house in Weimar, or his sepulture;

Commemoration ceremonies and cult of personality flourish among their adorers;

The foundation of (Goethe) associations whose members or “disciples” join together regularly for reading and interpreting the “holy writing,” for adoring, and not least for confirming the “great” poet in his status as a great poet;

The veneration of the poet’s words and writings and the process of exegesis can even assume a religious character;

The “propagation” of his words, for instance with the foundation of new local associations (there exist about fifty local Goethe societies);

The increasing temporal distance promotes the status as a “saint”: the name and term *Goethe* becomes detached from the human being and the individual Johann Wolfgang Goethe that was born 267 years ago, and instead turns into some kind of concept or idea, such as a “great poet,” a “national poet,” or a religious saint; one can read about his life, but none of the living know what he was like as a normal human being; this promotes inviolability, elevation, and transcendence, as well as the creation of legends and myths around the “great” poet;

The concept of “genius” (*Genie-Gedanke*) within the *Sturm and Drang* period conceptualized the poet as a “genius” with a godlike creative power and urge;

Ironically, the adored poet Goethe himself argued against any kind of revealed religion and creator;

The saint-like and uncritical adoration of individuals must be considered with respect to its problematic dimension: as shown above (see Answer 12), the “holiness” of great poets was misused in German history for dangerous ideological purposes on several occasions.