

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

Literary culture: Hungarian

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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.)

There are several of nearly equal rank. The one most widely held in the popular consciousness as the Hungarian poet per se is probably Sándor Petőfi (1823–1849). Other candidates are János Arany (1817–1882), Endre Ady (1877–1919), and Attila József (1905–1937).

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”).

See above, and Mihály Vörösmarty (1800–1855) [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.”)

Both Petőfi and Arany are widely considered *the* “national poets”; their cult developed in a peculiar mutuality. The notion of a national poet is highly relevant [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.)

Dániel Berzsenyi (1776–1836): The iconic poet of pre-modern Hungarian nationalism (Horatian odes, Roman republicanism, and Ossianism) that had his heyday in the period from 1810 to the 1820s; after being slightly devalued during the middle of the nineteenth century, he regained his canonical position, but nevertheless remained subordinated to the post-romantic canon.

Sándor Kisfaludy (1772–1844): Author of a Petrarchan book of poetry (1807) and historical sagas and ballads (1810–1820s); his popularity and cult remained vivid up to the 1840s; during the twentieth century he became considerably devalued.

Ferenc Kölcsey (1790–1838): The author of *Hymnus* (Hymn, 1823); after being set to music in 1844, *Hymnus* defeated Vörösmarty’s *Szózat* (Appeal) and Petőfi’s *Nemzeti dal* (National Poem) in the competition for the role of a Hungarian national anthem; although immensely influential as a literary and cultural theoretician, poet, and politician, Kölcsey was never perceived as *the* national poet. Mihály Vörösmarty was the darling of the fledgling Romantic canon from the mid-1820s; his friend, the literary historian Ferenc (Franz) Toldy (Schedel), placed him at the top of Hungarian literary evolution even in his 1864–1865 literary history (implicitly downgrading Petőfi and Arany, both of whom Toldy regarded as less climactic). Eventually Vörösmarty’s relevance was

subordinated to Petőfi and Arany's dual cult, but he maintained the canonical position, mainly due to his patriotic poem *Szózat* (Appeal).

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 respective canonizations of Petőfi and Arany feature curious parallelisms and complementariness. The practice of presenting them as twin heroes of national culture (smoothing over any potential rivalries) increasingly became commonplace in criticism from 1870 to the 1880s and onwards. The perception of their poetic and personal duality was reinforced by their friendship, the significance of which was nevertheless a bit overstressed by their very cult. Their mutuality was reinforced by creating mythical coincidences: Arany died during the weeks when Petőfi's statue was being erected in Budapest in 1882. (Arany's statue, in turn, was unveiled in 1893 in front of the national museum.) From the 1880s onward, however, Arany was increasingly presented as the cultural and anthropological embodiment of the “Magyar race” per se—as opposed to Petőfi, who, born Petrovics, was not an ethnic Magyar. Early twentieth-century modernism and political radicalism, however, was eager to find a predecessor in Petőfi, while devaluing Arany. To some extent, this was also true of communist literary criticism from the late 1940s. A two-volume edition of Petőfi's poetry, under the title *Petőfi S. összes költeményei* (Complete Poems), had already appeared in 1848, which, however, did not contain what he wrote in 1847–1849. That part of his oeuvre was published in the posthumous volume *Petőfi S. újabb költeményei* (New Poems) in 1858 with serious omissions regarding his “revolutionary poems.” In 1874 an illustrated “deluxe” edition, unifying the former two, appeared, once again omitting some anti-Austrian or anti-royalist poems. Petőfi's first “ultimate and full” edition was not published until 1892. A critical edition has been started and restarted several times since the 1950s, and is still in progress. The most influential edition of Arany's oeuvre was his eight-volume *Összes költeményei* (Complete Works) in 1883–1885, which included his epic and lyrical poetry, essays, and drama translations; his selected correspondence appeared in 1887–1889. Between 1900 and 1912, a twelve-volume revised edition was published. A twenty-plus volume critical edition was launched in 1951 by the Hungarian Academy and is still in progress. The canonical status of both has remained equally important [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).

Pál Gyulai, the most important figure of Hungarian academic criticism between 1860 and 1900, promoted Arany's “epic sobriety” as a feature more adequate to Hungarian national character than Petőfi's more dynamic passion. Frigyes Riedl's 1887 positivist monograph presented Arany as the perfect embodiment of the “attributes of the Hungarian race.” This conception of national character (i.e., soberly “rural” passivity relying on an undisturbed continuity with the past), took the moral character of the moderate politician Ferenc Deák (see below) as its model. After Petőfi's death, his cult was maintained by rural, small-town intelligentsia—that is, his main audience. The first public Petőfi commemorations (the installation of the first memorial plaque) were held in 1867. From the 1870s, the efforts at collecting information, documents, manuscripts, witness testimonies, and relic items grew into a large-scale social movement. The Petőfi Society (established in 1876) arranged most of the commemorations. In 1880, Petőfi's birthplace was turned into a museum. In his emblematic 1896 literary history, Zolt Beöthy presented Arany and Petőfi as the dual climax in the emanation of the national spirit. From the late nineteenth century onward, working class and trade union movements picked up Petőfi as their political icon. Relying on this tradition, after 1945 the

communist cultural policy presented him as a proto-Bolshevik poet that embodied the revolutionary commitment of the Hungarian people.

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.*

Both Arany’s and Petőfi’s oeuvres were integrated into the curriculum starting in the 1870s. Their presence has remained strong ever since [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”).*

Mór Jókai (1825–1904); novelist [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”).*

Franz Liszt (1811–1886); pianist, composer [4]

Ferenc Erkel (1810–1893); conductor, composer of the national anthem and historical operas [4]

Mihály Munkácsy (1844–1900); painter [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”).*

Lajos Kossuth (1802–1894); lawyer, journalist, politician, and governor-president in 1848–1849 [6]

István Széchenyi (1791–1860); politician, statesman, and the “Greatest Hungarian” [5]

Ferenc Deák (1903–1876); politician, statesman, and the “Wise Man of the Nation” [4]

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

Both Arany and Petőfi shared an interest in folk culture. Whereas Arany created some of the most emblematic representations of medieval and prehistoric Hungarian history in his epics, Petőfi largely drew on folk poetry devices, and canonized the Hungarian Lowland, or the *puszta*, as the national landscape. Petőfi also produced the emblematic poem of the 1848 revolution, *Nemzeti dal* (National Poem).

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

The self-image of Hungarian culture has been linked to national poetry to an exceptional degree. The literary cultivation of Hungarian has been one of the key priorities of national awakening since the early

1800s, and Romantic criticism raised poetry to the level of a quasi-divine manifestation. Pieces of patriotic poetry have played crucial political roles.

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.*

Perhaps it is somewhat idiosyncratic that in Hungarian culture the concept of a national poet has been developed in the conceptual and rhetorical framework of a *dual cult* of Petőfi and Arany. In a system of dichotomies that filled this framework, Petőfi was perceived as (forever) young, passionate, revolutionary, lyrical, and “naive,” whereas Arany was (inherently) old, sober, conservative, epic, and “sentimental.” With these complementing features, their figures were designed so as to cover the full potentiality of a national literary universe.

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.*

Whereas Arany's canonization curiously lacked any semi-religious connotations, that of Petőfi was a textbook example of basing literary canonization on the cults of saints. The Petőfi House, the first repository and exhibition of his personal objects (enshrined into reliquaries) representing key moments in his ritualized biography, opened in 1909 in Budapest, and was designed as a sacred space where, in a fashion similar to the worship of saints, the things that Petőfi touched could be publicly adored as relics. His mysterious death, fashioned as martyrdom, also opened his legacy for semi-religious imagination.