

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

Literary culture: Luxembourg

Contributor: Jeanne E. Glesener, associate professor

Institution: University of Luxembourg

Date: January 31st, 2017

Place: Luxembourg

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.)

Edmond de la Fontaine (1823–1891)

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”).

Michel Lentz (1820–1893) [5]

Michel Rodange (1827–1876) [5]

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.”)

Edmond de la Fontaine, Michel Lentz, and Michel Rodange form the triumvirate of national poets. Often mentioned together, they are the exponents of nineteenth-century Luxembourgish literature. Michel Lentz—poet, songwriter, and author of the lyrics of Luxembourg’s national hymns—knew canonization in his lifetime. As a national poet and as *the* bard of national sentiment and Luxembourgish identity, he was honored with a state funeral. Edmond de la Fontaine (a.k.a. Dicks), the most important playwright, poet, composer, linguist, and folklorist, was the exact opposite of Lentz: whereas Lentz was conservative, traditional, and tame, Dicks was exuberant, innovative, and often critical of the political establishment. His work and his vaudevilles especially were enormously popular during his lifetime, and still are today. Michel Rodange, poet and author of Luxembourg’s national epic poem *Renert – oder de Fuuss am Frack an a Ma’nsgrëßt* (Renert, or the Fox in a Tailcoat and in Human Form; 1872), was only posthumously recognized and made a national poet. The notion of a national poet was fairly common until the middle of the twentieth century [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.)

No.

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 the triumvirate of national poets and their “trinity” was formally begun in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Edmond de la Fontaine (a.k.a. Dicks):

1903: Unveiling of the “Dicks–Lentz Monument;

1923: Anniversary celebrations of his birthday; the mounting of a commemorative plaque near his birthplace, and the first edition of his complete works;

2009: Exhibition on his life and oeuvre by the National Literature Center (*Centre national de littérature*) in Luxembourg [5].

Michel Lentz:

1903: Unveiling of the Dicks–Lentz Monument;

1980-1981: Publication of an edition of his complete works [3].

Michel Rodange:

1927: Centenary celebrations of his birth;

1932: Inauguration of a monument in his honor;

1948: Creation of the Michel Rodange Prize for Radio, renamed the Marcel Reuland Prize in 1954 (see Answer 8);

1970: Inauguration of Michel Rodange High School (*Lycée Michel Rodange*) in Luxembourg City;

1972: Critical studies on his national epic;

1974: Publication of an edition of his complete works;

2002: Exhibition on his life and oeuvre by the National Literature Center (*Centre national de littérature*) [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).*

Friends and enthusiasts of Dicks had been campaigning for a monument ever since his death in 1891. Members of the *Gym*—the Gymnastics Society in Luxembourg City, whose repertoire featured most of Dick’s popular vaudevilles—played a decisive role with regard to the construction of the Dicks–Lentz Monument. The initiative also had the support of the socialist politician Caspar Mathias Spoo and the prolific and popular author and newspaper columnist Batty Weber. Grand Duke Adolphe himself contributed handsomely to the collection of funds, as did the parliament, led by the conservative state minister Paul Eyschen. Intellectuals, fellow writers, and the local council in Dicks’s former places of residence, Vianden and Remich, mainly organized the later memorial and anniversary celebration.

Michel Rodange’s canonization process is closely linked to the construction of the monument in his honor. Fellow writers and intellectuals, as well as the state, were involved in this initiative. The organization of the centenary celebrations of his birth in 1927 was a nation-wide event. They included the mounting of a commemorative plaque in the village of his birth and several commemorative services around the country and in every school in Luxembourg, culminating in a major celebration held at the Theater of Luxembourg City.

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.*

Excerpts of the work of the national poet Michel Lentz were included in the curriculum in 1914 with the publication of Nikolaus Welter's school manual *Das Luxemburgische und sein Schrifttum* (Luxembourgish and Its Literature; 1914). Excerpts by Michel Rodange and Edmond de la Fontaine are also included in the book. Note the specific situation of Luxembourgish literature in Luxembourgish, French, or German in the curriculum: whereas the publication of Welter's manual is a direct consequence of the 1912 Education Act on the inclusion of Luxembourgish in the curriculum, today there is no official curriculum for teaching Luxembourgish literature in secondary education in Luxembourg. Consequently, Luxembourgish literature is generally not taught in secondary education; it is, however, part of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs at the university [1].

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”).*

Batty Weber (1860–1940); newspaper columnist, novelist, poet, and playwright [5]

Auguste Liesch (1874–1949); novelist and poet [3]

Marcel Reuland (1905–1956); playwright and poet [3]

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”).*

Joseph Kutter (1894–1941); expressionist painter and Luxembourg's most important twentieth-century painter [5]

Lou Koster (1889–1973); composer and pianist [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”).*

Charlotte, Grand Duchess of Luxembourg (1896–1985); ruler [9]

Émile Mayrisch (1862–1928); industrialist [5]

Aline Mayrisch de Saint-Hubert (1874–1947); women's rights campaigner, essayist, cultural mediator, and philanthropist [7]

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

Lentz, Dicks, and Rodange owe their status as national poets to the fact that they created, transformed, and confirmed Luxembourgish as a literary language. Michel Lentz owes his status as national poet to the fact that he is the author of the poems that gave the words to both the official national anthem (*Ons Hémécht* ‘Our Homeland’) and the so-called unofficial national anthem (*De Feierwon* ‘The Iron Horse’). Dicks owes his recognition to his vaudevilles in Luxembourgish. By bringing the lowly native language—a German dialect—to the stage and delighting simple folk and the bourgeoisie alike, he became one of the leading figures working for the recognition of the literary qualities of Luxembourgish. With his *Renert*, Michel Rodange is said to have confirmed Luxembourgish as a standard language.

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

Lentz's poems for the official and unofficial national anthems were produced at crucial cultural and political moments in nation building. Similarly, Dicks' plays and Rodange's epic poem in Luxembourgish also had an important political function. The use of the native language, Luxembourgish, instead of one of the official languages, French and German, heightens the symbolic value of their works in the invention of a national tradition.

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.*

What strikes me most is that, as with religious saints, the deeds, achievements, or contesting nature of an author or his work fade into oblivion or are erased in the canonization process and by posterity. Canonization is therefore akin to reification: the original message of the saint, whether religious or cultural, may become lost and what survives is a tweaked and constructed memory, selected to suit the institution (church or nation) that he or she is supposed to serve or represent.