

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

Literary culture: Flemish

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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.)

Guido Gezelle (1830–1899)

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”).

Karel Ledeganck (1805–1847) [3.5]

Prudens van Duyse (1804–1859) [2.5]

Albrecht Rodenbach (1856–1880) [2.5]

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.”)

Guido Gezelle (1830–1899) [3.5]

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.)

Karel Ledeganck was considered the “father” of the Flemish national movement because of a lyrical volume he published in 1846, *De drie zustersteden* (The Three Sister Cities), in which he contrasted the glorious past of Flanders in the Middle Ages with the economic and cultural decline in the nineteenth century. In one of his poems, Prudens van Duyse penned a quote that would become a device in the history of the Flemish movement: “De Taal is Gantsch het Volk” (The Language is the Whole Nation). Both poets are situated in the liberal wing of the cultural scene. As an answer to this liberal and secular ideology, the poet-priest Gezelle launched the idea that language was the deposit and the protector of a traditionalist Christian society. This opposition remained central in the Flemish cultural field up to the twentieth century.

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 Gezelle as a national poet is positioned in the period 1900–1945.
1901: Start of the edition of Gezelle’s poems by the Amsterdam editor L. J. Veen.

1926: Installation of the Gezelle Museum in Bruges

1930: Inauguration of a large monument to Gezelle in Bruges, attended by the king and queen of Belgium on the hundredth anniversary of the poet's birth

1930–1939: First critical edition of the complete works of Guido Gezelle

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).*

Some important critics such as Hugo Verriest (1840–1922) and Pol De Mont (1857–1931) first showed the literary importance of the poetic works of Guido Gezelle, followed by critics in Holland, such as Albert Verwey (1865–1937). The editor L. J. Veen achieved a commercial success with several editions of volumes by Gezelle connected with the promotion of the Flemish School. In Flanders, modernist critics as August Vermeylen (1872–1945) declared Gezelle the forerunner of a modern Flemish nation oriented toward Europe. As a response, Catholic intellectuals claimed Gezelle as their icon of a traditionalist vision of Flanders.

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.*

Gezelle was integrated in the education system (4.5). Of great importance were school editions of his volumes, such as *Kerkhofblommen* (Churchyard Flowers), with twenty-three editions from 1906 onward by Caesar Gezelle (1876–1939), a nephew of the poet.

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”).*

Hendrik Conscience (1812–1883) [8]

Hugo Verriest (1840–1922) [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”).*

Pieter Paul Rubens, painter (1577–1640) [8]

Anthony Van Dyck, painter (1599–1641) [7]

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”).*

Charles V, emperor (*Keizer Karel*) (1500–1558) [9]

Tijl Uilenspiegel, fictional hero and freedom fighter, c. 1500 [5]

Breydel and De Coninck, masters of medieval craft guilds and freedom fighters, fourteenth century, central in the battle of 1302 (fictionalized by Hendrik Conscience) [4]

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

Guido Gezelle renewed the national literature in the Flemish part of Belgium, and after 1900 he was canonized as the most important poet in the Netherlands. His renewal was based on the idea that modern literature in Flanders should be connected with the long tradition of Catholic writers and the vernacular or the spoken everyday language of the Flemish people. He wrote many rhetorical verses to convince the Flemish to love their language and Christian character.

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

National poetry in the Flemish part of Belgium played an important role in the process of nation-building, especially in consciousness-raising and the large-scale construction of the Flemish movement. Romantic poets revealed the soul of the nation.

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.*

Guido Gezelle added the notion of religion to the image of Flemish identity. He advocated a traditionalist Catholicism. After 1870 there were severe ideological discrepancies between the Liberals and Catholics. They had a different view of the national ideal. This evolution led to two ideological blocs. As long as the Catholic bloc remained dominant in the cultural field, Gezelle could be celebrated as a national poet. He lost this dominant position of reference after 1950. Hendrik Conscience (1812–1883), a prose writer, went beyond ideological tensions and reached a broader public.

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.*

In the period from 1900 to 1945 one can speak of a cult around the figure of Gezelle. The "poet-priest" was venerated because of his perfect manner of living, his charity, and his willingness to sacrifice his person and poetry for a higher ideal (including national and religious sentiment).