
National Poets, Cultural Saints: Canonization and Commemorative Cults of Writers in Europe

Marijan Dović and Jón Karl Helgason

Leiden: Brill., 2016

232 pp., €115.00

One of the most exciting comparative literary projects to appear in recent years is the Cultural Saints of the European Nation States (CSENS) project (in which both the Slovenian literary professor Marko Juvan, and Joep Leerssen have been involved). Their aim is to compare, from a transnational perspective, the formation and canonization of what is known as 'cultural saints' in several European countries. A further aim is to understand common patterns in which chosen individuals were singled out as the representatives of their national cultures, including how the memory of their lives and deeds is institutionalized. Both the project and the book *National Poets, Cultural Saints Canonization and Commemorative Cults of Writers in Europe* by Marijan Dović and Jón Karl Helgason are ambitious in scope, and their framework has proven to be a benchmark for any such studies for years to come. The combination of a comparative literature approach, cultural memory studies, and the embracement of a new theory relating to the construction of cultural saints, national poets, and cultural nationalism is truly convincing.

The authors develop the concept of cultural sainthood in the context of nationalism as a form of invisible religion, identify major shifts in canonization practices from antiquity to the nationally-motivated commemoration of the nineteenth century, and they explore the afterlives of two national poets, Slovenia's France Prešeren and Iceland's Jónas Hallgrímsson.

The book is published in the series *National Cultivation of Culture*, which addresses cultural nationalism and the canonization of cultural traditions in nineteenth-century Europe. The series editor Joep Leerssen is the founder of the leading nationalism studies centre SPIN (Study Platform on Interlocking Nationalisms) at the University of Amsterdam. In Leerssen's work on interlocking nationalism in Europe, the focus is on 'the cultivation of culture' which, in his expansion of the field, ranges from such diverse areas as the study of language and the writing of national histories to the commemoration of great authors, as well as from folklore studies and folk revivals to the establishment of national

museums – to give but a few examples. Leerssen has argued that nationalism must be studied as a cultural, political agenda, both in terms of the image that inhabitants of a region have of themselves and from a historical perspective. Moreover, understanding nationality as an academic discourse requires an integrated and comparative approach, if one is to avoid the methodological ‘autism’ found in older historical and literary historical studies.

Dović and Helgason explore the ways in which certain writers in Europe became national poets. The inauguration of national poets is a transnational idea in Europe from, say, Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) in Germany, Robert Burns (1759–1796) in Scotland, Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–1845) in Iceland, Adam Oehlenschläger (1779–1850) in Denmark, Henrik Wergeland (1808–1845) and, to some extent, Bjørnstjerne M. Bjørnson (1832–1910) in Norway, and Esaias Tegnér (1782–1846) in Sweden. The national poets became the major figures of cultural memory, taking on the symbolic role formerly played by state rulers and religious saints. Dović and Helgason want to understand what the choice of certain writers tells us about canonicity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Also, how did these acts of canonization relate to more durable forms of memory such as public monuments, banknotes, stamps, hagiographies, and the politics of memory? In the book, Dović and Helgason have managed to provide us with new theories and frameworks that help to explain the canonization of cultural saints across Europe.

The study of European cultural saints is based on the analogies between selecting and celebrating national artists on the one hand, and canonisation of religious saints on the other. Therefore, the framework established for the study of cultural saints includes a consideration of the artists’ saintly status: their ‘vitae’ and their canonization. The term ‘cultural saint’, therefore, implies that nationalism is a secularized, civil religion in which the idea of cultural saints can be seen in relation to mass psychology and pop culture, as well as a set of quasi-religious beliefs. Cultural saints are persons who are seen to have elevated the nation, fought for the nation, or lived as martyrs for the nation. This caused them to be selected for inclusion in the nation’s pantheon. Cultural saints do not have to be writers, but they often are. It is important to concentrate both on the life and the work but also on the intellectual context of the individuals in question. Often, their work implied self-conscious strategies of ‘culture planning’, which is why it is important to focus on shared features that made the cultural saints eligible for canonization. Working with these particular aspects of canonization provides current scholarship with a critical view on modern literary studies, whereas other scholars limit their interests to literary canon-formation.

The book is filled with models and the introduction of new theory. In chapter three, the main model is unfolded which makes us able to work with how writers were among the first to participate in creating national identities in Europe in the

long nineteenth century. Dović's and Helgason's ambitions and their contribution go far beyond the traditional field of literary studies; they provide us with completely novel tools for understanding the social use of literature, the literary sociology related to the cultivation of the nation, as well as nationalism and national identities. This is a highly convincing study of the artistic and literary celebration of the nation, its language, its history, and the cultivation of a national self-image, which merged with contemporary ideals of artistic expression in the nineteenth century. The book presents a useful analytical model of canonization for further studies on cultural sainthood, and it opens new perspectives for the understanding of national movements in general.

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