

Introduction

Shakespeare and Dante are Saints of Poetry: really, if we think of it, *canonized*, so that it is impiety to meddle with them. . . . They *are* canonised, though no Pope or Cardinals took hand in doing it!¹

In his famous lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, the Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) introduces two of the ideas that we elaborate on in this study: poets as saints and canonization. Carlyle's pioneering role in this respect becomes even more salient when one takes into account the fact that he delivered his London lectures on different types of heroes as early as in 1840—which almost exactly corresponds to the period when a shift in the patterns of the veneration of “heroes” happens throughout Europe, bringing to the fore artists and particularly writers.

Inevitably, our perspective in this study is quite different from that of Carlyle. Focusing on the lively developments from the mid-nineteenth century on, we aim to chart the ways in which certain writers and other artists have become major figures of the (national) cultural memory, partially emulating the symbolic and social role played for centuries by religious saints. In this respect, our work on the concept of cultural sainthood should be viewed within a broader tradition of exploring nationalism as a specific form of a civil and invisible religion.² Through the analysis of poetic and political afterlives of various European artists, which is followed by an in-depth analysis of the posthumous careers of two Romantic writers, Slovenian and Icelandic, we continue to develop the view of the so-called national poets as cultural saints. Referring to the two major cases and many other significant cultural figures that have been objects of veneration, we bring these concepts into discussion within a broad range of fields—from established disciplines such as literary and cultural studies to contemporary interdisciplinary approaches such as nationalism and memory studies.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part, “Towards a Theory of Cultural Sainthood,” opens with a general discussion on the various contexts of cultural sainthood (Chapter One). We then focus more specifically on the

1 Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 138.

2 This idea was extensively explored, for instance, in the 1960 book by Carlton Hayes entitled *Nationalism: A Religion*. See also Gellner, *Nations and Nationalisms*; Wright, “Reconciling the Histories of Protestant and Catholic in Northern Ireland”; and Stevens, “Nationalism as Religion”.

commemorative cults of writers in Europe, identifying major shifts in this practice from antiquity to the nationally motivated commemoration of the nineteenth century (Chapter Two). Finally, we present an analytical model of canonization as a tool for further (case) studies on cultural sainthood (Chapter Three). In the second part of the book, “National Poets from the European Periphery: Two Case Studies” (Chapters Four and Five), we explore in considerable detail the afterlives of two national poets, the Slovenian France Prešeren (1800–1849) and the Icelander Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–1845). In a thorough analysis that considers various aspects of our canonization model, we illustrate the major significance that the veneration of cultural saints has had for shaping their respective societies.

We are very well aware that some of the concepts that we employ are far from self-explanatory. Although we attempt to justify their use throughout the book, we briefly present here the basic parameters of our discussion and outline the semantic range of our central notions. While the concept of the *national poet* has been widely discussed for a long time, we are aware that the other concept introduced in the title of this book—that of the *cultural saint*—has seldom been used in scholarly discussion, even though it has often been alluded to. Its most obvious feature is the involvement of a certain transposition of the concept of sainthood into the realm of culture. This transposition is not new in itself, as the quotation from Carlyle indicates. On numerous occasions, the transfer of religious practices and concepts—such as veneration, ritual, idolatry, relics, cult, or “charisma”—to secular culture has been acknowledged and described; for instance, in reference to the great masters of poetry (as in Carlyle’s case),³ to a number of celebrated composers and painters, to twentieth-century popular music icons such as Elvis Presley, or to political personalities such as Evita Peron.⁴ However, somewhat surprisingly, the term “cultural saints” has not been analytically used in a scholarly context until quite recently.⁵ Only cautiously has it been employed in reference to the “immortal” figures of cultural history and the worship of celebrities of contemporary popular culture.⁶

3 Especially from the 1930s on, some studies were critical towards such a transfer—for instance, Božuslav Brouk’s “*Máchův kult*” and Yrjö Hirn’s *Runebergkulten*. See also an early study on the veneration of Shakespeare, *The Genesis of Shakespeare Idolatry* (1931) by Robert W. Babcock, and *The Cult of Shakespeare* (1957) by Frank E. Halliday.

4 On the Presley cult, see Meltzer and Elsner, “Introduction,” x.

5 See Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, 1.

6 Hamner, “Cultural Saints,” 447–448; and Laderman, *Sacred Matters*, 57.

It would be quite appealing to further elaborate on the concept of cultural saints for the analysis of icons of popular culture. However, our use of the notion is more specific. Primarily, we focus on the relations between the national movements and their favoured figures. Accordingly, in our definition the concept of cultural saint applies to departed artists and intellectuals that have been singled out as leading representatives of their regional or national culture and are made to embody certain elementary cultural and political ideals, hence appropriating a social status and symbolic significance that has traditionally been reserved for regal authorities and religious saints. One of the central notions of our discussion is *canonization*, a suggestive concept that allows for a simultaneous focus both on the cultural saints themselves and on those who manage their afterlives in the long and winding trail towards the official confirmation. From this perspective, it is possible to ascertain a number of analogies between the veneration of religious saints (especially in the Christian context) and the inauguration of their cultural counterparts. These analogies may serve as a starting point for an investigation into possible religious extensions of allegedly secularized national movements. Basically, we suggest that the focus on veneration and canonization of cultural saints—and particularly of national poets as paradigmatic cultural saints—can deepen our understanding of national movements and their inner structure and dynamics, and provide a fresh, productive perspective on one of the vital dimensions of European nationalism, in particular within smaller states and regions.

In order to do so, it seems inevitable to further clarify the relation of the proposed concept of cultural saints to the tradition of religious sainthood and holy people in general, particularly in Christianity.⁷ How is one to understand the “sainthood” of national movements’ chosen ones? Indeed, one can observe a number of parallels between the medieval Christian cults of saints and the European cults of cultural saints. Both have visibly contributed to the general organization of space and time and affected the social life of communities through a variety of rituals. The former covered medieval Europe with a grid of shrines,⁸ whereas the latter dotted the urban landscapes of modern Europe with a dense grid of cultural memory sites.⁹ As we exemplify, the patterns of veneration and canonization adopted in both were often suspiciously similar. Even if the highly formalized canonization procedure, developed relatively late within the Catholic Church, has no exact formal match in the cultural field, the broader outlines of canonization are very much alike. Dealing with

7 See Head, “The Holy Person in Comparative Perspective”.

8 Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 11.

9 Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott*, 160.

“corpses” and “corpuses” binds both practices as well: not only the mortal remains but a range of other relics has been given significance in both contexts. Even though the structure of the “corpus” differs—in the case of Christian saints, it consists of the (narrated) virtuous life, exemplary behaviour, and miracles, whereas the cultural saints’ corpuses consist chiefly of artworks—it was handed down in a similar manner; namely, through the procedures of reproduction, appropriation, procreative multiplication, professional exegesis, and systematic indoctrination.

Yet it is quite urgent to stress one crucial difference that should prevent us from pushing the analogy too far. The main point in this case relates to the posthumous powers of saints, which in the hagiographical tradition are also labelled *virtutes*—a vague concept referring to both the (moral) virtues and the powers of a saint. The Christian saintly cults rest on faith in such powers. Departed in earthly terms, a saint as a member of the heavenly communion of saints performs as a mediator, an intercessor—becoming a shortcut for direct communication with the Creator, the actual source of saintly powers. Thus, the saints’ terrestrial relics, which attract large-scale worship, are much more than symbols: they *are* the continuous real-time presence of saints. The ritual addressing of a Christian saint at the very locus of “joining of Heaven and Earth,” therefore, is never only a symbolic gesture.¹⁰ Cultural saints, on the other hand, are generally not expected to produce posthumous miracles; even if they might exert certain ethical ascendancy over the individual, they possess no independent transcendental afterlife. As the case of Jónas Hallgrímsson and several other cases indicate, the veneration of cultural saints can apparently transgress this boundary. Although such symptoms certainly deserve attention, we treat them as a breaking of the rule, an excess. In this respect, in the case of cultural saints the extensive interest in bones and other relics simply does not have the same status as in the case of religious saints: even when the ritual practices mimic and emulate religious veneration, they ought to be observed as a secular simulacrum lacking the transcendental dimension.¹¹

This difference is probably fundamental, but it is not the only one. It is noteworthy, for instance, that the cults of cultural saints were extremely misogynist: whereas in Christianity a number of female saints were eventually admitted among their male colleagues, cultural “saintesses” are almost a non-existent

10 Brown, *The Cult of the Saints*, 1.

11 In this respect, the addressing of a cultural saint as though he were “looking down” at the gathered crowd, often used in orations, should be understood merely as a rhetorical figure.

category.¹² Another important difference is the fact that the Christian saints were chiefly canonized due to their exemplary, virtuous life, martyrdom, miracles, and so forth, and only in exceptional cases due to their works (e.g., theological writings). In case of cultural saints, however, the canonization rests primarily on their (art)works.¹³ Moreover, the lives of cultural saints were not necessarily akin to the *vitae* of the holy saints. In fact, sometimes it was exactly the opposite; from an ethical point of view, they might have been so shamefully flagrant that the appropriate rhetoric for their justification could only be invented within the process of appropriation and canonization.

Such differences certainly point out that the reference to the saintly tradition, implied in the metaphor of cultural sainthood, is not to be taken too literally. We are not proposing that cultural saints have simply replaced patron saints and martyrs in the modern secular world. As further explained in Chapter One, the reality of both of these phenomena is far too complex for such a generalization, especially given the changing role that Christian saints have played in different regions of Europe since the Reformation. In order to comprehend the historical background of cultural saints, it is necessary to take into account a number of other types of personalities who have been idolized and venerated for social purposes, including legendary heroes and heads of states. In this respect, it should be noted that, very often, the term *cultural saint* could effectively be replaced by other similar concepts—such as *idol*, *icon*, *hero*, or *prophet*.¹⁴ Or, in the words of Thomas Carlyle: “Hero, Prophet, Poet,—many different names, in different times and places, do we give to Great Men.”¹⁵ In this case, we chose the term *cultural saints* as a productive research perspective that will hopefully enable us to encounter new dimensions of what was the actual historical role of “Great Men”—beyond Carlyle’s Romantic conceptions.

In our view, the concept of cultural saints should primarily be seen as a kind of *shorthand* indicative for the ways in which certain individuals, operating within the field of culture, have been idealized and utilized in the context of

12 Among the national poets, for instance, Rosalía de Castro in Spanish Galicia and (in part) Lydia Koidula in Estonia seem to be the only cases.

13 See Habjan, “Od kulture svetnikov do svetnikov kulture”. An English version is forthcoming.

14 All of these concepts are discussed by Anna Makolkin in relation to the “heroic biographies” of the Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko (Makolkin, *Name, Hero, Icon*). Furthermore, John Neubauer distinguishes between national poets and national icons, but also explicitly mentions the concepts of saints and prophets (Neubauer, “Figures of National Poets”). The notion of a prophet fits exceptionally well for several national poets, among them certainly Adam Mickiewicz, Hayim Nahman Bialik, and Sándor Petőfi. For further discussion of the writer as a (national) prophet, see Kohn, *Prophets and Peoples*.

15 Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 126–127.

modern nationalism. An important feature of this utilization is a certain shift to particularity compared to the universality of the Christian saintly cults. Although every person was, at least in theory, invited to join the Christian community and amend his or her ways through the virtues of the saints, the national movements along with their cultural saints typically addressed narrower communities: *nations*. It is well beyond of the scope of this study to provide a full historical account of how these peculiar entities came into being.¹⁶ However, we would like to note that we have paid special attention to the works of those cultural and literary historians who focus on the issues of cultural nationalism.¹⁷ As we see it, the wider context of the research on cultural saints remains within the domain of the cultural nationalism and its basic matrix of the “cultivation of culture”.¹⁸

Precisely at this point, we would like to introduce a new perspective on this matrix. There is no doubt that the meticulous nation-building efforts of the emerging army of philologists, striving to secure the necessary intermediary structures of fully-fledged national cultures, can be seen as the rational, methodical backbone of national revivals, as these processes were often referred to. However, we demonstrate that cultural saints and their veneration may be seen as representing the reverse side of the matrix, its *emotive* pole. Our sense is that the impact of cultural saints and their cults has been still somewhat underestimated in nationalism studies. This is why we argue that the social construction and veneration of significant personae from the cultural field has decisively contributed to fostering a common symbolic imaginarium, stabilizing shared memories, and maintaining social cohesion of the emerging communities. Cultural saints, we propose, have been instrumental in mobilizing masses for the aims of national movements, and they have played an important role in the course of European nationalism. Unlike religious saints, they were not expected to perform proper miracles, yet they in fact managed to incite a large-scale social transformation. In a metaphorical sense, their post-humous powers manifested themselves in a gradual shaping of the “Europe of Nations” as we know it today.

16 This has been exceptionally well done in the key works on nationalism. See in particular Gellner, *Nations and Nationalisms*; Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales*; and Hroch, *Das Europa der Nationen*.

17 See Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe*; Even-Zohar, “The Role of Literature in the Making of the Nations of Europe”; and Cornis Pope and Neubauer, “General Introduction”.

18 Leerssen, “Nationalism and the Cultivation of Culture”.

A number of cultural notables and even a greater number of those concerned with their canonization—we refer to them as *postulators*—was involved in this process. The selected individuals include certain “men of letters,” such as linguists or other scholars, but, above all, it was artists who functioned as cultural saints in most cases: poets, writers, composers, and painters. For quite obvious reasons, artists working with language were of particular importance from the national standpoint. As we show, the prototype of a cultural saint is represented by writers and poets, particularly those who reached the status of national poet. Such a structural position was legitimized within the pan-European discourse of Romanticism and adopted by individual literary cultures, especially the peripheral and dominated ones, and the two central figures of our case studies—France Prešeren and Jónas Hallgrímsson—certainly share this privileged role within their respective communities.¹⁹

Finally, we would like to comment briefly on the temporal and spatial focus of our study. In the temporal respect, we pay close attention to the developments from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. As we demonstrate, this period provided particularly fertile ground for the cultivation of cultural saints—regardless of the period in which the individuals in question lived. In our two cases, the figures chosen for veneration were Romantic greats, but artists from earlier periods, such as Shakespeare, Dante, Cervantes, or Camões, were utilized as well in the course of the increasingly nationalized, as well as pan-national (pan-Slavic, pan-Scandinavian, etc.), continental commemorative fever. In the early twentieth century, this practice reached its peak. One may infer that, once the political goals of many national movements (i.e., nation-states) were achieved after the First World War, the oversized statures of cultural saints would diminish. However, the forces of cultural nationalism possess dynamics of their own. Cultural saints usually remained on the national agendas even after the euphoric phase of their veneration. In a somewhat more rigid, institutionalized form, they often continue to play an important role in their respective communities up to the present day. This is why in the Epilogue we comment on several peculiar contemporary developments that indicate that the concept of cultural saints is relevant not only from the historical viewpoint, but also in our day and age.

As regards the spatial setting of this book, it certainly follows a particular European perspective that has already been employed in a number of studies on (cultural) nationalism. In our study, this perspective has been slightly

19 On the role of national poets especially in (semi)peripheral literary cultures of Europe, see Nemoianu, “National Poets”; Neubauer, “Figures of National Poets”; and Juvan, “Romanticism and National Poets”.

expanded to include related developments in countries such as Georgia or Israel, and to some extent the United States. However, there is one specific feature of our study that we would like to emphasize at the end of this Introduction. In contrast to many works that spring up in major European academic communities, our book primarily observes the national movements and their cultural saints from the viewpoint of the European (semi)periphery. We believe that this is something that makes our argument even stronger. Especially for the smaller ethnic communities with weaker historical traditions, cultivating secularized saintly cults has never been only a matter of curious fashion. Quite the contrary, it has been one of their essential “survival tools”.