

Preface

Although the idea of looking at canonized poets and artists as “cultural saints” is of a slightly earlier date, the story of this co-authored book truly began in early spring of 2010, when I first met Jón Karl Helgason. It was in Reykjavík, and we had just started working together on a research project on two national poets, France Prešeren and Jónas Hallgrímsson. At the time, both of us were deeply involved in the study of the posthumous fate and role of these two iconic figures, and we were already attentive to the “saintly” aspects of their public after-lives. The comparative work was truly rewarding. We were surprised to see how many details overlapped within these two distant national cultures that lacked any mutual *rappports de fait*: the procedures of canonization were alike not only in terms of their structures, but even in the temporal respect. Because we were simultaneously working on other similar cases (mostly in central and northern Europe), we came to the inevitable conclusion that there must be a certain pattern behind all this. Realizing that canonization was the key term for our further analyses, we drafted a first attempt at a framework that we would eventually develop into a tool for the systematic study of cultural saints throughout Europe; a concern that has remained central to our work ever since.

Nevertheless, when Jón Karl visited Ljubljana in the summer that same year, his suggestion that the two of us pen a book on cultural saints together came as a great surprise to me. In the humanities, collaborative writing is still not very common. However, I did like the idea and, as time passed and the project evolved, I enjoyed it increasingly more. Naturally, we took advantage of the tools that facilitate long-distance cooperation, such as Dropbox and Skype; however, the physical places where we met and advanced our ideas were those that offered inspiration to us at critical moments: the isolated monasteries near Lake Ohrid in Macedonia, the lagoons of Venice, the canals of Utrecht and Amsterdam, the heated cafés of summertime Paris, the thriving streets of springtime Berlin, and the laid-back setting of the Moselle Valley in Luxembourg, generously accommodated by Sigurður Björnsson.

In Berlin, when the manuscript was nearly completed, we went out one evening to listen to some music in a jazz club near Alexander Square. Jón Karl, knowing well that I play improvised jazz, took me by surprise one more time—with a suggestion that our book be written as a series of improvised solos. At that stage, the idea seemed quite odd. However, as often happens with such provocative impulses, it made me think again about what we were trying to do together. Certainly, we were not writing a call-response text. Instead, we aimed to create an impression of unified authorship—or, to put it differently, our aim

was to outsmart the fact that an idea has to be conceived and formulated in the mind of an individual. After all, a sentence needs to be written down, and followed by another sentence. This book was written in the same manner: each sentence was written down either by me or by Jón Karl. To a reader, it might be perfectly clear who wrote the respective two chapters on the Slovenian and the Icelandic national poet—but we did our best to write the other chapters in a truly collaborative manner.

Obviously then, the time for a “jazz book” has yet to come, and this preface shall so far remain the only attempt in this direction. In any case, I would like to thank Jón Karl for his ideas and inspiration, and, above all, for suggesting this common enterprise—perhaps it was “in the air” from the very beginning, but most probably it never would have occurred to me.

Jón Karl, consider this a “cue”: the moment for your solo is approaching . . .

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Even though I do not play any instrument, I certainly love jazz. Here is my alternative attempt to “take it away”.

The concept of cultural sainthood first suggested itself to me in 2003, when I was finishing a book in Icelandic on the transportation of Jónas Hallgrímsson’s physical remains from Denmark to Iceland in 1946. The entire affair was in many ways like a travesty of the Catholic tradition of translating saints’ relics from one location to another, such as from an original grave to a consecrated crypt in a church. This was all the more surprising to me because Iceland had been a Protestant country for almost four centuries. At this point, I thought that the Icelandic case was in some ways exceptional. However, the more I learned about the canonization of national poets in other countries, the better I realized that the cultivation of Jónas’ memory in Iceland (even the most absurd aspects of it) was following a common European pattern. The influence of several colleagues and friends was instrumental in this respect. Most important were my compatriot Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson, a leading authority on Icelandic Romanticism, the eminent literary scholars and comparatists Joep Leerssen from the Netherlands and Marko Juvan from Slovenia, and last but not least my co-author Marijan Dović.

A defining moment was a conversation that Sveinn Yngvi and I had over breakfast at a modest hostel in the lovely city of Madison, Wisconsin in 2007. After having taken part in a poorly-attended panel on Jónas Hallgrímsson at an annual Scandinavian Studies conference in the United States, we came to the conclusion that the only sensible way to promote and develop our “Jónas Hallgrímsson studies” internationally was in cooperation with other scholars of European Romanticism. We designed a research project on cultural saints

and introduced it at the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) matchmaking in Paris in April 2008. At this event, Sveinn Yngvi and I hooked up with Marko and Joep, and together with scholars from two other countries we wrote up a grant proposal entitled “Cultural Saints of the European Nation States”. To our great disappointment, we did not receive the grant, but this was nevertheless the beginning of a very fruitful cooperation, starting with a conference on cultural saints in Amsterdam in January 2010 that Joep generously hosted under the umbrella of the impressive *Study Platform on Interlocking Nationalisms* (SPIN).

A second defining event was my research trip to Slovenia in the summer of 2010, already mentioned by Marijan. Funded by a generous European Economic Area (EEA) grant that Marko had applied for on our behalf, Sveinn Yngvi and I were able to stay for three weeks at the Institute of Slovenian Literature and Literary Studies in Ljubljana, and Marko and Marijan were similarly able to visit the University of Iceland for three weeks. (It was during Marijan’s stay in Iceland that I first realized he was not only an accomplished scholar but also an excellent jazz violinist and composer.) These mutual visits made me see our topic from a variety of new perspectives and also laid the foundation for the precious friendship that has been essential for the complex but rewarding task of co-authoring a book a thousand miles apart. Even though I was the one that suggested to Marijan that we work on it together, it has truly been due to his encouragement, intellectual energy, and dynamic ambition that we are at the stage of presenting our ideas publicly here. Hence I would like to conclude on a truly sentimental note: Marijan, thank you for orchestrating us to this end.

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Many people contributed to this book, and we want to thank them here. First and foremost, we would like to thank our families for their invaluable support. Also, we are thankful to the associates at our home institutions: Marko Juvan and Sveinn Yngvi Egilsson for their contributions in all stages of the project, Simon Halink for valuable comments on the entire manuscript, Haukur Ingvarsson, Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, and Daisy L. Neijmann for comments on Chapter One, Marko Marinčič for comments on Chapter Two, Luka Vidmar and Bojan Baskar for comments on Chapter Three, Jane Victoria Appleton for comments on Chapter Five, and Donald F. Reindl for proofreading a major part of this book. A very special thanks goes to Joep Leerssen and Ann Rigney for their inspiration, support, and hospitality during remarkably focused conferences in Amsterdam (2010, 2015) and Utrecht (2012). Finally, we would like to express our deepest gratitude to Jernej Habjan for his outstanding reading of the manuscript: without him, this book would simply not be the same.

Many other scholars contributed to our ideas as well, whom we cannot mention here—let us just refer to their works in our bibliography. Likewise, we want to thank the friendly staff at Brill, especially Jennifer Obdam, Marti Huetink, Michael J. Mozina, and the two anonymous reviewers for their most valuable remarks. Several individuals also assisted us in attaining the illustrations and resolving copyright issues. We would like to thank (in alphabetical order) Ágnes Balasi, Bojan Baskar, Damir Globočnik, Sandór Hites, Örn Hrafnkelsson, Georg Jäger, Roman Koropeckyj, Sigríður Melrós, Jaume Subirana i Ortín, Levente T. Szabó, Katre Talviste, Carme Torrents Buxó, Bela Tsipuria, Miriana Yanakieva, and Marjana Žibert.

We are also grateful to the journals *Primerjalna književnost*, *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies*, and *Studies on National Movements*, and to the editors/publishers of *Literary Dislocations* (edited by Sonja Stojmenska-Elzeser and Vladimir Martinovski; Skopje: Institute of Macedonian Literature, 2012), *Culture Contacts and the Making of Cultures* (edited by Rakefet Sela-Sheffy and Gideon Toury; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2011), *Ódáinsakur. Helgifesta þjóðardýr-linga* (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2013), and *Commemorating Writers in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (edited by Joep Leerssen and Ann Rigney; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) for allowing us to reproduce sections of our published articles and chapters in this book. Furthermore, we would like to acknowledge that the writing of this book was supported by the Slovenian Research Agency (project J6–6846, “National Poets and Cultural Saints of Europe: Commemorative Cults, Canonization, and Cultural Memory,” 2014–2017) and the University of Iceland Science Fund. We also benefited notably from international comparative projects such as SPIN and its *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe*, the National Movements & Intermediary Structures in Europe (NISE) initiative, and the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) and its *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*. One of the two editors of that volume was John Neubauer, a prominent scholar and a great colleague, who sadly passed away in October 2015. His invaluable research on national poets shall remain a continuous inspiration for our work.

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Luxembourg, June 2016