

Prešeren after Prešeren: The Canonization of a National Poet and Cultural Saint

Prešeren after Prešeren is not merely another contribution to the long series of volumes on the life and work of the renowned Slovenian poet France Prešeren (1800–1849) that have been produced in the deep-rooted tradition of Prešeren studies (or “Prešernology”) during the last century and a half. Namely, this is the first book that scrutinizes Prešeren’s “afterlife” within Slovenian culture, a study that reads not only literary texts, but also rituals and memorials. Rather than addressing the poet alone, it is concerned with his interpreters, canonizers, and mythographers. More specifically, the research focuses on the mechanisms of the canonization that after Prešeren’s death brilliantly transformed the figure of this Romantic poet into the ultimate emblem of (emerging) Slovenian nationality: a national poet and cultural saint. The theoretical (and terminological) innovations that the author introduces and defends in this book make it inherently impossible to deal exclusively with Prešeren. Moreover, a thoroughly comparative approach is strongly demanded by the fact that many of the treatments of the poet’s legacy are locked into a national horizon and therefore inclined to favor an apparent uniqueness, a “syndromic” nature of the Slovenian case. Therefore, the book has two parts: it first deals with the broader theoretical and historical contexts of veneration of cultural saints in Europe, and then offers a nuanced and complex picture of Prešeren’s canonization in Slovenian culture.

The first part of the book, “National Poets and Cultural Saints in European Literary Cultures,” consists of four chapters. The opening

chapter explains the context of the research and discusses the key terms (national poets, cultural saints, and canonization). The next chapter provides a historical overview of commemoration practices dedicated to poets and writers, extending from the early commemorative cults in Ancient Greece and the early modern period (especially the Petrarch cult) to the French revolution. The third chapter reviews the essential developments during the long nineteenth century, a period that brought commemoration to the forefront like no other period before or after. In analyzing this turnabout, particular attention is paid to the cult of the centenary, monument mania (*Denkmalwut*), and the ritual aspects of commemorations that closely bind this practice with the veneration of religious saints. Focusing on the connections of commemoration culture with nation-building, the chapter concludes with an analysis of the emergence of “national poets,” curious figures whose posthumous careers turned them into paradigmatic cultural saints. Finally, the last chapter provides an analytical model for studying the canonization of cultural saints. Devised as a tool for systematic investigation into various cases of canonized artists, the framework fits especially well with the national poets and other writers celebrated and canonized in Europe from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. It is derived from the distinction between (a) the canonical potential inherent in the candidate’s biography and works (*vita*), (b) posthumous canonization in the narrow sense (*cultus*: the production and reproduction of the canonical status), and (c) the consequences of the entire process for society at large (*effectus*).

The second part of the book, “The Canonization of France Prešeren in Slovenian Literary Culture,” consists of five chapters. The first one scrutinizes Prešeren’s potential for canonization (*vita*). As the close analysis reveals, the first impulse that triggered the process was considering Prešeren’s poetic works as a (linguistic or artistic) *miracle*, an opus of undisputed aesthetic quality. However, it was the rich potential of *aenigma* in the poet’s life and works that made possible the wide variety of Prešeren’s continuous (mis)appropriations. The

next, central chapter of the book deals with Prešeren's canonization (*cultus*) in detail, starting with the campaign for his tombstone in Kranj (and the associated translation of his relics) in 1852. The main focus is placed on the period from 1866 (the first posthumous edition of Prešeren's poems with an influential introduction by Josip Stritar) to 1905 (the unveiling of the Prešeren monument in central Ljubljana), when Prešeren's cult truly came to occupy the central position within the agenda of the Slovenian national movement. Following the broader concept of canonization explained in the first part of the book, the analysis considers not only the discursive practices of canonization, but also its ritual, material, educational, and political aspects.

The next two chapters compare the canonization of Prešeren with two other national poets. In the first case, Prešeren is compared to the Icelander Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–1845), another Romantic who enjoys the status of a national poet in his culture. The overview of parallels and dissimilarities in the two canonization processes reveals that there are striking analogies between the two poets in two very distant literary cultures, but it also turns out that the canonical position of Prešeren is more dominant in Slovenian culture when compared to the status and role of Jónas in Iceland. The next comparison takes place within two related Slavic cultures, Slovenian and Czech, which shared the political context of Habsburg domination at the time. Again, the canonization accounts of Prešeren and Karel Hynek Mácha (1810–1836), the Czech national poet, reveal striking parallels. Moreover, in this case it is possible to trace the Slovenian reception of the Mácha cult and expose the discursive strategies that imported Mácha into the Slovenian cultural field as the national poet and cultural saint of a brotherly Slavic nation: the “Czech Prešeren.”

In the closing chapter, the book focuses on the specific implications of Prešeren's cult (*effectus*) by rethinking the influential theses on the “Prešeren structure” and “Slovenian cultural syndrome” as a specific means of (self)understanding of Slovenian literature and its relations to the nation(al). It critically questions the simplified

explanations of the birth of the nation through (Prešeren's) poetry, pointing out that the diagnosis of a "syndrome" as something specifically Slovenian is false: it proclaims as an anomaly conditions and processes that were typical for (emerging) small national cultures in Europe. On the other hand, however, the stubborn persistence of such theses that continues up to the present day has obviously produced specific, even "syndromic," effects within Slovenian culture. Among these is the strong domination of Prešeren's myth in the narrative on the "birth of the nation" that strongly overshadows the contributions of other artists (e.g., Valentin Vodnik and Janez Vesel, a.k.a. Jovan Koseski), intellectuals (e.g., Jernej Kopitar and Fran Miklošič), and political protagonists of the national movement—especially Janez Bleiweis, dubbed the "father of the nation."