

Press has brought two major modernist writers of the past century into an imaginary conversation in English, across the language barrier.

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Twentieth-Century Russian Poetry: Reinventing the Canon. Ed. Katharine Hodgson, Joanne Shelton, and Alexandra Smith. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2017. x, 499 pp. Bibliography. Index. £36.95, hard bound, £29.95 paper. doi: 10.1017/slr.2018.352

The place of poetry has shifted in Russian culture over the past three decades. Much of its centrality and visibility has waned. Despite the fact that there exists a burgeoning poetry scene, its audience has greatly diminished and become much more specialized. At the same time, the historic Russian relationship between poetry and politics is still in effect: the state remains in control of school curricula and the institution of poetic canon that comes along with it. The excellent new volume, *Twentieth-Century Russian Poetry: Reinventing the Canon*, analyzes the transformation of the poetic canon, its idea and content, since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It presents a comprehensive and intricate overview of the canon formation and deformation from a variety of perspectives: sociological, political, historical, and literary. The volume succeeds in this project and greatly enhances our understanding of the history of Russian poetry from the end of the twentieth century until today.

As the editors clearly state at the outset of their introduction, “The aim of this collection is to investigate the state of the Russian twentieth-century poetic canon in the context of socio-political changes triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991” (1). Their main theoretical framework is Iurii Lotman’s notion of “catastrophic evolutionary patterns” (10) in Russian culture, which give rise to a reconfigured relationship with the past, either nostalgic or revisionist. The notion of memory as a cultural mechanism is prioritized here and leads to the collection’s main bold premise regarding the reinvention of the canon: “notions of constructing a poetic canon around the cult of Pushkin as supreme national poet appear to be rapidly crumbling away, and are being replaced by multiple coexisting canonical traditions” (41). This redirection sheds a new light on the relationship between “official” and “unofficial” canons and the perennial Russian problem of literature’s relationship with state power.

Fittingly for a study of the canon, the volume’s chapters are centered on individual poets and their inclusion in and reception within the canon(s). While not arranged chronologically, they form a mythological and theoretical dialogue. Not accidentally, the starting point is Joseph Brodsky, whose oeuvre and figure stand as a permanent fixture within post-Soviet culture. As Aaron Hodgson demonstrates, the canonization of Brodsky is owed equally to both “literary and extra-literary factors” (62), which means that “Brodsky can be situated in several coexisting canons: popular culture, world literature, Russian twentieth-century poetry, Russian émigré literature and prison writing” (62). This eclecticism raises the question of the misappropriation and misreading of Brodsky’s legacy, a problem Brodsky himself was acutely aware of.

Alexandra Harrington turns to Brodsky’s mentor, Anna Akhmatova, and analyzes the similar dynamics in the re-envisioning and popularizing of her legacy. Harrington dissects both the sanctification and denigration of Akhmatova, the latter exemplified by Alexander Zholkovsky’s discovery of “the Stalinist key of Akhmatova’s behavior” (89). It’s improbable that there ever will be a dethroning of Akhmatova as a cultural saint and yet her case illustrates well the perilousness and dynamism of canon formation.

The next two chapters, by Natalia Karakulina and Olga Sobolev respectively, center on Vladimir Maiakovskii and Aleksandr Blok and the competing outcomes of their inclusion within the Soviet canon and especially school curriculum. Karakulina argues that there's a continuity between Soviet and post-Soviet evaluations of Maiakovskii, which pays little attention to Maiakovskii's avant-garde roots and the complexities of his biography. If canonization dumbed Maiakovskii down, it created an alternative space for Blok: the intelligentsia was drawn to Blok not because of the revolutionary ethos of *Dvenadtsat'*, but because "he essentially remained a lyric poet in the Romantic tradition" (143). Blok's place within the current canon draws on these two vacillating tendencies.

Andrew Cahn is similarly interested in how canonization resists complexities in the case of Osip Mandel'shtam both in Russia and the west. The debates about his "Oda" to Stalin, which began in the 90s, both complicate Mandel'shtam's relationship with the Soviet regime and the heroizing of the poet in the US and Great Britain during the Cold War.

A number of chapters turn to the poets who were left out of the Soviet canon, and introduced into the post-Soviet one: from Ivan Bunin to the émigré figures of the interwar period and 1920s to the later Elena Shvarts. As Alexandra Smith concludes in her chapter on the first-wave émigré poets and Marina Tsvetaeva, in particular, "a desire to construct an image of Russia without borders appears to be indicative of the emerging Russophone poetic canon" (392). The question is again how this tendency will play out in the current retrograde Russian political climate.

Emil Lygo and Katharine Hodgson examine how the Soviet poets grow in complexity once out of the strictures of the Soviet canon. Using Boris Slutskii as a case study, Hodgson stresses how "the changing canon reveals Slutskii as a figure who demonstrates the inadequacy of simplistic divisions between official and unofficial poetry . . . and the power of poetic innovation" (288). Lygo argues something very similar in regard to the Thaw generation of poets, from Evgenii Evtushenko, Bella Akhmadulina, Andrei Voznesenskii, and Robert Rozhdestvenskii to some of the less official figures. There is a clear waning of interest in the poetic stars of the Thaw, which, Lygo claims, can be explained by their association with the Soviet regime. There's a greater interest, therefore, with the poets of the 1970s underground, "who were . . . cut off from and in opposition to the authorities" (354). Yet, as Slutskii's biography suggests, the official can hardly be separated from the unofficial. A piece on the underground poets would have been therefore welcome.

Stephanie Sandler's chapter on some of the most promising contemporary poets and trends provides a fitting coda for the collection. She emphasizes how we need to "see canon creation as the work of culture, as a process that is open-ended . . ." (393). In this spirit, this excellent volume both answers the questions it poses and leaves them productively open. No scholar of Russian poetry and culture should bypass it.

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Gulag Letters. By Arsenii Formakov. Ed. and Trans. Emily D. Johnson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017. ix, 294 pp. Appendixes. Index. Photographs. \$85.00, hard bound.

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Arsenii Formakov, a Russian-Latvian poet, educator, novelist, journalist, and cultural figure was arrested on July 30, 1940 in Daugavpils, Latvia. The "anti-Soviet