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ALEXANDRA SMITH AND DAVID N. WELLS

RECONFIGURING THE CANON: THE CHANGING CONTEXTS OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY RUSSIAN POETRY

Literary canons, in the sense of ‘a shared understanding of what literature is worth preserving’,¹ are created and constantly revised in the light of changing perceptions of what literature is ontologically and in relation to the societies within which it exists, and in response to the languages, methods and technical approaches that writers adopt at any given literary-historical moment. Nowhere is this competitive drive to create a ‘usable past’ more evident than in the Russian literature of the twentieth century. The focus of the years before the October Revolution on mutually contradictory Symbolist, post-Symbolist and Futurist agendas gave way to divergences between Soviet and émigré writing on the one hand, and Soviet and dissident writing on the other. The post-Soviet literary space of the 1990s saw a further rejection of the past and often a return to earlier models. Each reinvention saw the development of its own narrative and its own canon.

The most self-conscious and pervasive of these reinventions, the birth of Socialist Realism in 1932, was explicitly entwined with the Stalinist leadership’s attempts at social transformation and the creation of the new Soviet person. As David Hoffmann notes, ‘in addition to its policy of industrialisation, urbanisation, and modernisation, the Stalinist government sought to instill socialist values in all members of society and to transform human nature itself’. This attempt at human transformation, argues Hoffmann, ‘represents a particular socialist version of the more general En-

lightenment impulse to remake and improve society’.  

At the same time, Hoffmann points out that the declaration of the 17th Party Congress in 1934 that socialism had been built should not be seen as an assertion simply that old forms of artistic expression had been mechanically replaced by new ones. The achievement of socialism in fact encouraged the selective use of the past – of traditional institutions and culture – to support and further the new order. As Hoffmann writes: ‘Monumentalist art and architecture, formerly instruments of the old order, now helped legitimate the new socialist order and symbolized its accomplishments. Patriotic appeals, elsewhere used to foment bourgeois nationalism, in the Soviet Union inspired defense of the socialist motherland’. 

Yet although the ethics of socialist realism remained dominant throughout the Soviet period, in fact Soviet culture was by no means monolithic, as has been made clear in several studies on Stalinist and post-Stalin cultural developments.

The situation observed by Gerald Smith that an official canon of poets was constructed by the Union of Soviet Writers bureaucracy and by loyal critics and academics who promoted it through textbooks and the broadcasting media implies that the existence of strict boundaries between official and unofficial writing, even if these varied over time, was clear to writers and readers alike. As Smith notes, the official poetic canon manifested itself in the Biblioteka poeta (Poet’s Library) series. This be-


3 Ibid.


gan to be undermined, however, by the emergence of the post-Soviet *Novaia biblioteka poeta* (New Poet’s Library) series, launched in 1995, and intended to accommodate twentieth-century Russian poets who did not attain high political recognition and who were often victimised by the regime. As Smith suggests, ‘many persons who became outstanding poets rather than rank-and-file journeymen under the Soviet system […] seem to have advanced themselves largely outside the official system of nurture by making contact with a guru’ who would offer her/his patronage.⁶

In their co-edited book on the twentieth-century poetic canon in the post-Soviet period, Katharine Hodgson and Alexandra Smith discuss the emergence of several canons (including pedagogical and personal canons) in the 1990s following the influx of previously unpublished and suppressed texts. These underpin the diversity of the post-Soviet literary landscape created by the rediscovery of Thaw poetry, émigré writing and the unofficial poetry of the 1970s and 1980s. Commenting on Dmitrii Bykov’s textbooks on Soviet literature published in 2012 and 2014,⁷ Hodgson and Smith observe that the significant influence of popular culture on Russian literary trends triggered the re-evaluation of the Soviet-era era vision of the canon as monolithic and authoritative. They conclude that ‘Bykov’s idiosyncratic approach suggests that a more democratic, flexible, and inclusive understanding of the literary canon is starting to take root’ and characterise his vision of an all-inclusive canon as ‘something on which we can all have our opinions’.⁸

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⁶ Ibid., p. 199.
The present collection of articles provides several examples of shifting attitudes towards the twentieth-century poetic canon. It also reinforces the idea that the notion of canonicity found in the works of several important poets and in the reception of Russian poetry in the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods was more fluid than static. The case studies offered in the present collection of articles thus support Katerina Clark’s view of Soviet culture as a cultural ecosystem comprising different competing trends. Such a view emphasises the absence of a universal blueprint for socialist culture and enables the view of Soviet culture as a dynamic system that could change in relation to socio-economic changes in the Soviet Union. It also suggests that insisting on a sharp dichotomy between intellectuals and the Party precludes any nuanced understanding of the cross-fertilisation that in fact occurred between official and unofficial cultures. Clark rejects the view of Soviet culture as something that was formed by the Party in a Bronze Horseman-like manner and resulted in the imposition of Socialist Realism ‘upon an unsuspecting intelligentsia’. Clark believes that there was ‘no absolute agency in the evolution of Soviet culture’ and goes on to say that ‘any renegotiation of the ratio of center and periphery (canonical and noncanonical) takes place within the existing language, as cultural revolution can only occur within a given ecosystem’. Such a vision of Soviet culture as an evolving system is especially helpful in the re-evaluation of the twentieth-century poetic canon owing to the fact that poetic texts can be easily memorised, and are thus easily capable of transgressing geographical and political boundaries, including censorship and self-censorship.

10 ibid.
11 Gronas, Mikhail, Cognitive Poetics and Cultural Memory: Russian Literary Mnemonics, New York: Routledge, 2011, p. 82.
The analysis of Tsvetaeva’s 1934 memoir about Andrey Bely offered here shows well how Soviet and émigré readers were appreciative of the importance of Russian and European modernist culture for the formation of new aesthetic renderings of reality. Tsvetaeva’s story offers an evolutionary view of Russian poetry and challenges ideological restrictions that obstruct creative dialogue between different branches of Russian literature. Her vision of Bely as an important Russian modernist writer rather than a Soviet writer might be seen as an attempt to fill the gap in Russian collective memory at a time in the 1920s and 1930s when Russian modernist ideas were suppressed in the Soviet Union and often also frowned upon by editors of major émigré journals. Olga Sobolev’s discussion of the use of Blok’s image and poetry in Soviet films also points to the existence of competing views of the poetic canon. It demonstrates how in the post-war period Blok was canonised by the Soviet intelligentsia as a marker and a bearer of cultural capital that allowed the intelligentsia to reclaim some of its earlier social prestige. The use of Blok’s poetry in Soviet films, Sobolev argues, incorporated this social group’s opposition to restrictive official attitudes towards culture and to the limitations of the Soviet canon. Zakhar Ishov’s and Denis Akhapkin’s articles on Brodsky also illustrate an attempt to bypass the Socialist Realist canon and to use canonical English and Italian poetry as models for emulation. Similarly, Josephine von Zitzewitz analyses the strategies of self-canonicalisation found in the works of the poets belonging to the Leningrad Underground group of poets who were active between the 1970s and 1990s. Their ironic appropriation of Soviet literary themes and devices, even as they emulated Soviet models of literary organisation, prompted their readers to reconsider existing poetic canons promoted by official poets and critics. Georgina Baker’s interpretation of Il‘ia Kutik’s interest in epic poetry suggests that Kutik’s ongoing engagement with Homer is linked occasionally to the revival of the eighteenth-century Russian ode. Baker’s observes that in Kutik’s poem
‘Luk Odisseia’ (‘Odysseus’ Bow) ode and epic are diminished from their role in his models Horace and Homer, reflecting the disruption of the collapse of the Soviet Union and Kutik’s emigration, and offers a new approach to the use of neo-classical themes by contemporary Russian poets in the context of their reassessment of the imperial legacy. Taking a broad perspective, Olga Voronina’s survey of new trends in Russian museum culture highlights a shift from the passive absorption of official narratives about poets’ lives to non-monumental interactive approaches to the past that enable post-Soviet visitors to experience the contextual setting of their favourite poetic works. As Voronina puts it, ‘post-Soviet cultural history is now in the making, and there is a chance that literary memorials will be in the vanguard of its formation’. It can be added to Voronina’s observation, that the contribution of literary museums to the formation of the new poetic canon/s is also indicative of the emergence of a post-Soviet subjectivity oriented towards a more democratic use of cultural heritage and creative appropriation of the past.