
Through an examination of the dramatic developments in Russian culture and society brought about by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 this book aims to redefine the 20th-century Russian poetic canon.

Comprised of thirteen articles, Twentieth-Century Russian Poetry, Reinventing the Canon, developed from a series of workshops at which contributors gathered to share their ideas and discuss how they might develop their work for publication.

The first article, “Introduction: Twentieth-Century Russian Poetry and the Post-Soviet Reader: Reinventing the Canon” written by Katharine Hodgson and Alexandra Smith, examines the state of the Russian 20th-century poetic canon in light of the socio-political changes that occurred in the wake of the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. It explores the developments in Russian culture that emerged in a period which witnessed both a dramatic break with the recent past, as well as a reclamation of neglected elements of the 20th century’s cultural legacy.

The second article, “From the Margins to the Mainstream: Iosif Brodskii and the Twentieth-Century Poetic Canon in the Post-Soviet Period” by Aaron Hodgson aims to put the rise of Brodskii’s popularity in post-Soviet Russia into context. Hodgson argues that Brodskii’s posthumous popularity resulted from his earlier reception in Russia and the West. He suggests that both the rise of popular culture and the influence of the Russian media on the literary imagination were factors in creating a mythologised image of Brodskii as a martyr and a figure who links Russian national and Anglo-Saxon literary traditions.
The third article, “Golden-Mouthed Anna of All the Russias: Canon, Canonisation, and Cult” written by Alexandra Harrington examines the non-literary factors which contributed to Akhmatova’s popular appeal and canonicity. Among these were her iconography, her strategies of charismatic self-presentation, and the virtual industry of adulatory biographies and canonising memoirs devoted to her.

In the fourth article, “Vladimir Maiakovskii and the National School Curriculum”, by Natalia Karakulina, the author focuses on the national school curriculum, and in particular, the material on Maiakovskii from earlier periods that was covered in the final year of school education. She examines the image of the poet that students take from this material, how Maiakovskii’s image changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the approach to teaching literature in both Soviet and post-Soviet schools, and what role the study of Maiakovskii plays for students who are in their final year of education.

The fifth article, “The Symbol of the Symbolists: Aleksandr Blok in the Changing Russian Literary Canon”, by Olga Sobolev, attempts to determine the distinguishing characteristics of Blok’s body of work that put it at the center of 20th century Russian literature and how they have helped to maintain the cultural value of his works, through an analysis of Blok’s critical reception up to the present day. The formation of a literary canon is inextricably linked to the issues of self-determination and nationhood, thus examining how Blok’s works attained this status could aid in understanding issues in contemporary Russia such as the creation of national identity and bridging the gap between the two cultures created by Soviet authoritarianism.

The sixth article, “Canonical Mandel'shtam”, written by Andrew Kahn, examines the recovery and interpretation of Mandel'shtam’s legacy in the Soviet Union and in the West, and his role as a representative of his cultural and historical context. In addition the article investigates how his critical writing contributed to his views as a literary thinker, and, finally, the complex question of the relation between moral courage, literary fame and political drama as the source of his authority.

The seventh article, “Revising the Twentieth-Century Poetic Canon: Ivan Bunin in Post-Soviet Russia”, by Joanne Shelton, explores some of the means by which Bunin’s poetry became established in the canon, and argues that the institutional model of canon formation appears to have been more important in establishing Bunin’s canonicity than the poet-based model of canonisation. However, the contribution of poets to the process of canon formation cannot be ignored due to the difficulty in drawing a distinction between the two models. The chapter also examines how the Bunin has become an institution through extra-literary factors such as commemorations of his life, museums, or statues dedicated to his memory, and how these have helped to secure his place in the canon of post-Soviet poetry.

The eighth article, “From Underground to Mainstream: The Case of Elena Shvarts”, by Josephine von Zitzewitz, examines Elena Shvarts’ popularity (1948–2010) in the 1990s and 2000s and discusses how Shvarts’ work entered the poetic canon of post-Soviet Russia. Finally, it discusses the factors that made her work was more accessible to a general readership.

In the ninth article, “Boris Slutskii: A Poet, his Time, and the Canon”, Katharine Hodgson discusses Boris Slutskii’s position in the post-Soviet canon. Slutskii’s poetics were inspired by the futurists,
constructivists, and early Soviet avant-garde, and the author claims Slutskii exemplifies how an individual poet’s standing within the literary canon may begin to shift. This may not be due to discoveries of new works by that poet, or attempts by advocates of that poet to change readers’ perceptions, but by a change in the context in which the poet is seen as a result of a gradual change in the canon.

In the tenth article, “The Diasporic Canon of Russian Poetry: The Case of the Paris Note”, Maria Rubins argues that the canonical shifts that defined Russian literary history in the late 20th century involved not only a large scale reassessment of Soviet-era poetry and the inclusion into the canon of previously silenced voices and texts, but also the recovery of diaspora poets. The author claims that the attention given to the Russian diasporic canon has been insufficient. To support her claim the author presents the taxonomy of the Russian diasporic production, and develops some relevant criteria, focusing in particular on the interwar poetic group known as the Paris Note.

In the eleventh article, “The Thaw Generation Poets in the Post-Soviet Period”, Emily Lygo examines how the reputations of these poets and the narrative about poetry in the Thaw period changed after the radical political and cultural changes in the USSR of the late 1980s and then Russia in the early 1990s. After analysing the canon of the Thaw Generation in the late-Soviet period, the author investigates how the Thaw Generation has been positioned in the canon in the post-Soviet period.

The twelfth article, “The Post-Soviet Homecoming of First-Wave Russian Émigré Poets and its Impact on the Reinvention of the Past”, by Alexandra Smith, outlines the history of the post-Soviet reception of émigré poetry of the first wave. She attempts to demonstrate the lack of a homogenising canon in today’s Russia, pointing out that there are competing views on the role of the canon as an important aid in the production of works of art, and in the formation of national and transnational identities.

In the thirteenth and final article, “Creating the Canon of the Present”, during her assessment of canon-formation, Stephanie Sandler examines the issues of language, aesthetic categories, textual boundaries, story-telling and the performance of poetry. She asserts that each of the poets examined can be seen as canonical after sufficient time has passed for us to look back at the present time in retrospect. Sandler argues that there are poets are pressing us to rethink what is meant by the canon and how it is formed.

The aim of this collaborative work is to examine the state of the Russian 20th-century poetic canon in the context of socio-political changes triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This scholarly book clearly demonstrates the co-existence of competing views on the role of the canon in artistic production and the shaping of both national and transnational identities. The collected essays in this work are of interest to students and scholars specifically interested in Russian literature, and/or post-Soviet literary and cultural developments in Russia. However, they are also of value to anyone interested in the more general issue of cultural responses to rapid, far-reaching social change.
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