

Rann, J. (2018) Review of Katharine Hodgson, Joanne Shelton, Alexandra Smith, Twentieth-Century Russian Poetry: Reinventing the Canon. *Modern Language Review*, 114(1), pp. 176-177.
(doi:[10.5699/modlangrevi.114.1.0176](https://doi.org/10.5699/modlangrevi.114.1.0176)) [Book Review]

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Deposited on: 12 March 2019

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Review for *MLR*

***Twentieth-Century Russian Poetry. Reinventing the Canon.* Edited by Katharine Hodgson, Joanne Shelton, and Alexandra Smith. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers. 2017. X+499pp. £36.95 (pbk £25.95, PDF £0.00). ISBN 978-1-78374-087-1.**

No matter how critical or cautious it may be, any discussions of a literary canon cannot help but reinforce the canon as a concept. Every counter-canon is still a canon and every debunking, dissection, or reinvention involves naming a few names. My first question, therefore, on opening this thought-provoking collection of essays was a superficial one: who has made the cut? There are eight chapters devoted to individual poets – Joseph Brodsky, Anna Akhmatova, Vladimir Maiakovskii, Aleksandr Blok, Osip Mandel'shtam, Ivan Bunin, Elena Shvarts, and Boris Slutskii – and two chapters about groups – late modernist émigrés the 'Paris Note' and the stadium-poet superstars of the Sixties (Evgenii Evtushenko et al.). These are supplemented by an introduction and two concluding discussions on the canon and national identity and the canon and recent poetry. Partisan armchair anthologists might quibble at the absence of their favourites, but more important than the 'who' is the 'how'. and the 'what'. How do the editors and contributors approach the canon in general and the Russian poetic canon in particular?

One of the reasons for the persistence and elusiveness of the canon as an idea is that it is hard to draw a line between the canon as a pantheon (even an ephemeral, imaginary one) and the canon as the institutions, practices, and discourses that perpetuate such cultural hierarchies. The single-author structure of the collection, which replicates the form of the traditional canon, if not necessarily the content, makes it especially difficult to know the dancer from the dance, to distinguish product and process. This focus on individuals rather than themes is at once the book's greatest strength and its greatest weakness. On the positive side, the essays give a good outlet for the contributors' considerable expertise on the afterlives of particular poets. While they differ in the balance they strike between qualitative and quantitative analysis and between literary and extra-literary factors, the chapters are uniformly instructive and, in some cases, extremely suggestive. (Especially rewarding are Andrew Kahn's nuanced differentiation of American and British responses to Mandel'shtam and Alexandra Harrington's wide-ranging treatment of Akhmatova.) The book will be an excellent resource for students and scholars of Russian poetry looking for a comprehensive, insightful, and up-to-date guide to the canonical status (or otherwise) of a given Russian poet.

There are, however, drawbacks to this quasi-encyclopaedic organisation of material, especially for any non-specialists who might be hoping to use the diverse story of Russian poetry in the last century, with its mixture of reverence and repression, of politics and personality, as a basis for comparison or as grist to a particular theoretical mill. The editors and contributors are certainly comfortable with recent debates on, for instance, the canon and celebrity and the canon and national identity, and nearly all the chapters prompt questions of wider significance. How does politics affect the international reception of poetry? How does canonization in the underground manifest itself in official culture? Does the canon necessarily reserve a place for writers who 'fill a gap' in a historical narrative? But these remain as questions only and I was left wanting more, especially since the final essays

and the excellent introduction show the advantages of a more synthesizing approach. Whether this is a criticism or a plaudit, I do not know, but I found myself wishing for a second, more thematic volume that would not only provide a more systematic exploration of contexts of reception that are only touched upon – notably, translation and transnationalism and the poet in pop culture – but also go further in answering some of the many fascinating questions raised here.

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