

Alexandra Smith: The canonisation of Russian émigré poets in the post-Soviet period (Tsvetaeva, Khodasevich, Nabokov)

The recovery of the legacy of the first wave of émigrés (1917-1939) – whose writings were taboo during the Soviet period – is one of the most striking developments of the last twenty years. As Greta Slobin points out, “The reception of the first wave diaspora in 1990s Russia presents a unique opportunity to observe an emerging, albeit one-sided, dialogue between two cultures with disparate yet intimately related histories of struggle in the name of a single national cause: to serve as keepers of memory and guardians of culture. The potential benefit of this historic encounter between the homeland and the diaspora is generally acknowledged, but the process reveals a tale of competing cultural monopolies, incongruous resemblances, and matching nostalgia”. The present paper will focus on the reclamation of the first wave's legacy in relation to the appropriation of the past and of its suppressed history and memory. It will be argued that the process of canonisation of the several major poets of the first wave of Russian emigration reveals Russia's attempt to overcome the trauma of the division between the two cultures and the rediscovery of Zaitsev's notion of "purifying effects of nostalgia where the poetic prevails over the memories of violence" as well as of Merezhkovsky's vision of literature as the Logos of the national spirit. It will be demonstrated that the recent cultural re-invention of Russian national identity in terms of transnational and transcendent model offers opportunities for re-writing an unabridged version of twentieth-century Russian cultural history.