

‘It is unseemly to be famous’: Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, and the melodramatic dynamics of the myth of the Russian poet in Russia and the West

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Russian literary celebrity of the Soviet era is conditioned by specific factors that challenge key assumptions in scholarship focussed on Western culture. These factors (which include stringent censorship, doctrinaire cultural policy, and *samizdat*) and the problems they pose in relation to literary celebrity are explored here through an examination of the careers of poets Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966) and Boris Pasternak (1890-1960). Both experienced popular adulation, but were also subject to official anathematisation that conferred notoriety. Political repression rendered them crucial role models for the Soviet and post-Soviet intelligentsia, engendering hagiographic representations based on their own self-fashioning in both Russia and the West, against the background of Cold War politics. Akhmatova’s melodramatic self-presentation has recently formed the basis for attempts to challenge her cultural authority, considered here in relation to gender and the paradoxical notion of posthumous celebrity. Finally, the cases of Akhmatova and Pasternak offer a useful prism for considering literary fame in relation to neo-Darwinist meme theory, because they illustrate the extent to which making an impact on public consciousness involves insistent repetition of culturally-ingrained, recognizable patterns and models of authorship and fame. Overall, this article demonstrates that apprehension of the specificities of Soviet literary culture makes a significant contribution to understanding literary fame and celebrity more broadly.

Keywords: literary celebrity; Russia; melodrama; life-writing; Akhmatova; Pasternak

Introduction

Literary celebrity in Russia, especially in the Soviet period, presents certain challenges to conceptions of celebrity focussed on Anglophone or Western European culture. Studies of contemporary Russian celebrity are emerging (Goscilo and Strukov 2011, Goscilo 2013) but,

with the exception of the cult of Alexander Pushkin (Kelly 2001), its literary historical forms remain largely unexplored. The central problems posed by the Russian context will be identified here through analyses of the careers of Pasternak and Akhmatova, two canonical poets who survived the ‘necropolitics’ (see Mbembe 2003) of the Stalinist regime.

Ohlsson *et al.* (2014) propose three differentiations in the concept of literary celebrity. First, they suggest, a writer’s cultural capital should be taken into account, noting that studies of literary celebrity usually centre on ‘quality’ authors from the most prestigious areas of the literary field (p. 36). Certainly, Byron, Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde, Gertrude Stein, and James Joyce loom particularly large (Glass 2004, Jaffe 2005, Mole 2007, McDayter 2009, Leick 2009, Goldman 2011, Tuite 2015). While acknowledging the importance of extending discussion beyond ‘highbrow’ literary celebrity – as some scholars have (Hammill 2007, Weber 2012) – this article examines two ‘culturally “authoritative”’ poets (Moran 2000, p. 6), who enter into the suspicion-laden, ‘compulsive *pas-de-deux*’ with mass culture described by Huyssen (1986, p. 47), and explored in relation to literary celebrity by, for example, Jaffe (2005) and Goldman (2011).

The justification for this focus relates to the second differentiation advocated by Ohlsson *et al.*: namely, geographical. Akhmatova and Pasternak are instructive because, despite affinities with modernists elsewhere, from 1917 they operated in a markedly different situation from their counterparts in Western Europe or North America. Although the Russian context conforms to broader European expectations of ‘highbrow’ authorship as ‘intellectual and moral instruction’ (Braun 2011, p. 323), it is conditioned by political factors that distort and exaggerate this model, including rigid censorship and the regime’s doctrinaire cultural policy. National specificities can be apprehended particularly clearly through the lens of literary celebrity, as the work of Baer and Korchagina on novelist Boris Akunin’s post-Soviet contemporary celebrity illustrates (2011, pp. 78 and 86-87).

Thirdly, Ohlsson *et al.* emphasize the need for a diachronic perspective that considers the ‘changing uses of [...] the same literary celebrity over time, even long after [...] death’ (2014, p. 38). Shifts in the ‘meanings’ of writers are characteristic of Russian culture, because of its turbulent history and the overwhelming importance of ideology, especially in the Soviet era (Goscilo and Strukov 2011, p. 9), as is illustrated by the ways in which Pushkin has been co-opted to various, often competing, causes (Levitt 1989, Sandler 2004). Later writers were thus acutely aware of celebrity’s diachronic aspect, as discussion of Akhmatova will show. This article also considers the demythologising tendency that has surfaced in post-Soviet culture in relation to Akhmatova particularly, and investigates the historical function of her celebrity (Ohlsson *et al.* 2014, p. 3), by exploring the role that she plays in the late- and post-Soviet intelligentsia’s self-mythology. Finally, in addition to the above differentiations, the cases of Akhmatova and Pasternak highlight a further distinction; that of gender.

Contemporary Russian book publication is largely driven by the market, as elsewhere in Europe or in America (Polowy 2011, p. 527), but this was not so under communism. This problematizes two interlinked assumptions underpinning most accounts of literary celebrity and celebrity culture generally. First, that it is a product of democratic capitalism (Marshall 1997, pp. 246-247, Rojek 2001, p. 188), ‘irrevocably bound up with commodity culture’ (Rojek 2001, p. 14), and second, that ‘mass-media representation is the key principle’ in its formation (Rojek 2001, pp. 13 and 45-46, Ohlsson *et al.* 2014, p. 35). Tuite (2007), for instance, distinguishes between ‘merely famous’ authors and literary celebrities on this basis, seeing the literary celebrity as a ‘cultural commodity produced by highly-developed capitalist relations of production and consumption and a fully industrialized form of print capitalism’ (p. 62).

According to these arguments, literary celebrity could not have existed in the USSR where, from the mid-1920s, the authorities exerted control over who was celebrated and what

was published. The term ‘celebrity’, by these definitions, is applicable neither to Soviet authors who were awarded state honours and bombastically promoted through the media, such as Maxim Gorky or Mikhail Sholokhov, nor to popular non-conformists like Akhmatova, who for long periods was denied access to the mass technologies for printing the word and reproducing the image that are seen as fundamental to literary celebrity in Anglophone and Western European culture. Indeed, one of the difficulties in apprehending Soviet celebrity arises from the simultaneous existence of these official and unofficial cultural spheres. Both Akhmatova and Pasternak were undoubtedly popular (even if the extent of this popularity is difficult to measure), but were anathematised by officialdom in the mass media - does this constitute literary celebrity? Some regime-promoted authors were successful among a mass readership, but can they be thought of as celebrities? These issues matter, not least because of the frequency with which the terms ‘celebrity’ and ‘famous’ are used by literary scholars, biographers, and cultural historians in support of arguments and in justification of selections. Literary celebrity was certainly a feature of Soviet culture, but the political context inflected it in distinctive ways. Non-conformist authors like Akhmatova and Pasternak assumed particular importance as symbols of resistance and guardians of cultural memory, and an understanding of how the mythologies surrounding them were shaped and transmitted helps to illuminate the workings of celebrity more broadly.

Akhmatova

Akhmatova exemplifies what Rojek (2001) calls ‘staged celebrity’, displaying ‘calculated technologies and strategies of performance and self-projection designed to achieve a status of monumentality in public culture’ (p. 121). She was a talented self-fashioner, shaping ‘a distinctive personality’ and ‘consistent mode of perceiving and behaving’ (Greenblatt 1980, p. 2). The cultural context of the 1910s when her career began was neo-Romantic, demanding

a deliberate aesthetic patterning of behaviour. Akhmatova's older contemporary, Alexander Blok, conceived his poetry as a lyric diary, conditioning the public to a way of reading that conflated poet and poetic persona. Postcards of Blok were available from at least 1909, long before Russian cinematic stardom was established (Freidin 1987, p. 44).

The exotic-sounding pseudonym 'Akhmatova' (she was born Anna Gorenko) connoted both nobility and a sense of Empire through its Tatar associations, and quickly became a brand in the manner described by Mole (2007, pp. 16-17). Physically striking, Akhmatova cultivated 'visual trademarks' (p. 18), such as her profile with aquiline nose, bead necklace, and straight fringe. Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' includes 'elegance, ease of manners', and physical beauty (1993, p. 150), and Akhmatova exploited these to maximum effect. Portraits by influential artists were reproduced in her books and in journals, and readers recognized her in public from these (Reeder 1995, p. 140). Her public profile was augmented by her marriage to fellow poet Nikolay Gumilyov, producing a form of what Apter (2010) calls 'celebrity gifting'. Akhmatova and Gumilyov published poems ostensibly about one another, generating interest as a celebrity couple. Akhmatova also established other intertextual relationships that enhanced her celebrity: when a poem dedicated to her by Blok was printed alongside hers to him it sparked persistent rumours of an affair (Meyer 2013, p. xxvi).

Akhmatova's poetry hovers between Romantic self-dramatization and modernist impersonality. Her early lyrics conformed to the 'hermeneutic of intimacy' reading paradigm that, for Mole (2007), characterises Romantic celebrity culture, in that their confessional tone created the impression that they gave access to a fascinating individual, and their elliptical narratives involved readers in a form of collaboration with the poet. However, her economical, emotionally restrained, and intertextual poetic idiom also bore a distinctively

modernist ‘stylistic stamp’ or ‘imprimatur’, turning the author into a ‘formal artifact’ (Jaffe 2005, p. 20).

Thus far, Akhmatova’s literary career resembles those of modernist literary celebrities elsewhere. However, in the 1920s, she became the focus of extensive negative press from Marxist critics who deemed her poetry outmoded and overly personal. In 1925, she was silenced by a Central Committee ban that remained in place for fifteen years, during which time she wrote major works in secret, such as *Requiem* (1935-40), which depicts the speaker’s psychological breakdown following the imprisonment of her son. Inspired by Akhmatova’s own biographical circumstances, *Requiem* is crucial to her self-fashioning as martyr and unofficial chronicler of the Stalinist purges. The suffering of mother and son is presented through analogy with Christ and Mary, and Akhmatova emphasises her conception of the poet as a tragic opponent of tyranny by means of allusion to Pushkin’s famous poem, ‘I have raised myself a monument not made by human hands’ (1936), writing: ‘And if ever in this country/They plan to raise a monument to me [...]’. Unlike Pushkin, Akhmatova does not eliminate the physical monument, and this is simultaneously a gesture of self-monumentalisation and an ironic comment on Soviet-era official fame, with its predilection for statues in public spaces.

Despite being unpublished, Akhmatova remained an unofficial classic: a contemporary observes, ‘paradoxical as it may seem, she was well known’ (Magonenko 1990 cited Meyer 2013, p. xl). This can be explained by her successful early self-fashioning, the ‘mnemonic’ qualities of her poetry (Gronas 2011), and the fact that she epitomised a lost era of Russian culture for which there was immense nostalgia (Rylkova 2007). Soviet literacy campaigns and *riskovannost’* – the willingness to engage in politically risky behaviour, including possessing outlawed literature – probably gained her new readers and contributed to her continuing reputation. When, in 1940, Akhmatova was finally permitted to publish

again, her collection of poems sold out immediately. Soviet readers queued along the streets to buy it and second-hand copies fetched remarkable prices (Haight 1976, p. 111).

In 1946, Akhmatova was denounced for a second time in the post-war clampdown on culture led by Zhdanov. A protracted mass-media campaign labelled her a propagator of 'decadence' and 'pessimism', whose poems were 'completely individualistic' and 'empty', depicting a 'frantic little fine lady flitting between the boudoir and the chapel' (Haight 1976, p. 144). Akhmatova herself was presented as a relic of aristocratic culture, 'a harlot-nun whose sin is mixed with prayer' (Zhdanov 1946). This formulation, appropriated from apolitical Formalist scholarship, had featured vituperatively in the 1920s campaign, when Akhmatova was characterised as 'not quite a harlot burning with passion, not quite a mendicant nun', who had responded to social change in a 'feeble', 'hostile' manner, and whose poetry was 'saturated with the wretchedness of nervous debility characteristic of a refined aristocrat of the *fin de siècle*' (Haight 1976, pp. 69-74).

These personalised campaigns constituted crude, formulaic propaganda that served to hammer home an ideological position through reiteration, and they made Akhmatova publicly notorious. Rojek (2001) treats celebrity as 'the attribution of glamorous or notorious status to an individual within the public sphere' (p. 10). Notoriety, like any celebrity, operates 'through impact on public consciousness' but 'whereas celebrity functions within a general moral framework that reaffirms paramount order, notoriety usually connotes transgression, deviance and immorality' (p. 31). Rojek's main examples of notorious celebrities in democratic cultures are serial or mass murderers, including Stalin (p. 145). In the Soviet order, the perceived social threats were different, but the function of notoriety was comparable: transgression, deviance, and immorality were prominent accusations against Akhmatova.

Rojek (2001) observes that ‘notoriety allows society to present disturbing and general social tendencies as the dislocated, anti-social behaviour of folk demons’ (p. 93). This emphasis on the anti-social underpins the vilification of Akhmatova, who symbolised individualistic attitudes that the regime deemed counter-revolutionary. Her modernist self-presentation as larger-than-life genius – in short, her very status as pre-Revolutionary literary celebrity – rendered her antipathetic to a social order based ideologically on the collective. In this context, celebrity, which elevates the individual, was an inherently dangerous, subversive phenomenon (unless the individuals concerned were state-endorsed heroes, annexed to the official cult of Stalin, such as the pilot Valery Chkalov, or Aleksey Stakhanov, who was feted in the Soviet and international press as a record-breaking coal miner). Transgression, Rojek notes, is also a feature of positive celebrity, and her notoriety made Akhmatova an emblematic figure for non-conformists. She herself saw celebrity as encompassing notoriety: ‘I was famous, then I was very infamous, and I am convinced that essentially they are one and the same thing’ (Chukovsky 1987 cited Reeder 1995, p. 324).

Although most of Akhmatova’s mature poetry was not published in Russia until *perestroika*, oppositional works like *Requiem* circulated clandestinely in the 1960s in *samizdat* (literally ‘self-publishing’), another specificity of Eastern bloc culture that destabilises prevailing Western conceptions of how literary celebrity is made. *Samizdat* is best defined negatively – ‘any text [...] endorsed by an official organ of the state that reaches its audience without any change in meaning’ is not *samizdat* (Kind-Kovács and Labov 2013, p. 3).

Harker *et al.* (1990) observe that Bourdieu – an influential presence in studies of literary celebrity – makes no allowance for the ‘unique, innovative options which must lie at the heart of a concept of agency which has any measure of autonomy from the structures’ of a given field (p. 206). *Samizdat* (which included visual and audio texts) is one such innovation,

operating illegally and independently of official culture. A collective enterprise requiring numerous agents and materials, it constituted a vast ‘transnational and transsystemic space of communication’ (Lindenberger 2013, p. xii) that regularly breached the iron curtain in both directions (Parthé 2004, p. 46).

Rojek (2001) states that celebrity ‘presupposes a mass communication system that is reliable, versatile and ubiquitous’ (p. 188). Similarly, Mole (2007) asserts that celebrity culture requires a ‘modern industry of production, promotion and distribution, and a modern audience -- massive, anonymous, socially diverse and geographically distributed’ (p. 10). *Samizdat* qualifies as such an industry in many respects. Clearly, it was not driven by market forces or commodification in any economic sense – the capital exchanged (and generated) by it was symbolic and cultural. However, although most people never touched a piece of underground literature (Kind-Kovács and Labov 2013, p. 1), it circulated widely among a non-conformist, anonymous, dispersed cultural elite. The extent to which *samizdat* created celebrity is difficult to establish, but it certainly enhanced it: the guitar-poet Vladimir Vysotsky was an unofficial Soviet ‘superstar’, most of whose fans encountered his songs through home-made recordings (Smorodinskaya *et al.* 2007, p. 670). Similarly, poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko was a Thaw-era icon whose work was both officially published and circulated in *samizdat*, giving him an appeal that extended across mass and elite culture. The wide distribution of *Requiem* in *samizdat* undoubtedly contributed significantly to Akhmatova’s cultural standing (see Volkov 1995, p. 508). The Soviet (and more broadly Eastern European) context thus illustrates how, when freedom of expression is restricted, alternative media can be improvised. This might even suggest that it is not so much the available technologies that produce celebrity, but rather celebrity that drives the production of the necessary media.

The fact that she was never overtly disobedient facilitated Akhmatova’s rehabilitation in the late 1950s-1960s. She was permitted to travel to receive an Italian literary prize (the

Etna Taormina, 1964) and Oxford honorary doctorate (1965). Keen to expand her international reputation, since most of her mature poetry had no prospect of publication she presented herself abroad as a personality and biography, and her own conception of her life formed the essential basis for life-writing about her. The three major Anglophone biographies of her to date, despite their usefulness on points of detail, are extremely hagiographic (Zholkovsky 1996a), with titles packaging Akhmatova according to her own self-mythology as martyr, prophet-genius, and tragic queen of Russian literature: *A Poetic Pilgrimage* (Haight 1976), *Poet and Prophet* (Reeder 1994), and *Anna of all the Russias* (Feinstein 2005). Haight met Akhmatova in 1964, when few sources were available, so that her book was effectively ‘ghosted’ by Akhmatova, who dictated entire passages (Holmgren 1993 p. 195). Reeder and Feinstein, writing later, could consult other sources, primarily Lydia Chukovskaya’s canonising diaries of her conversations with Akhmatova, published in the late 1970s in Paris.

These Anglophone biographies follow Russian biographical traditions, which adopted a hagiographic approach for political and social reasons. The oppositional role that many writers were forced into both under Tsarism and Soviet power, along with the covert transmission of texts that this produced, resulted in the elevation of literature to a form of surrogate religion and the author to secular sainthood (Parthé 2004). This engendered Romantic and Christological cultural expectations of the poet as heroic martyr with a cultural mission (Boym 1991). The (usually male) writer’s biography – ‘where he lived, how he suffered for his texts, how he died’ – was thus a crucial element in the literary-political paradigm (Parthé 2004, p. 64).

Memoirs such as Chukovskaya’s acquired enhanced importance as a ‘mode of wresting and bestowing power’ as a result of the deliberate distortion and suppression of evidence by the Stalinist regime (Holmgren 2003, p. xxii). This created a tendency to ‘recycle

the popular features of melodrama (a black-and-white moral schema, tragic and transcendent sacrifice)' (p. xxix). The overriding image of Akhmatova projected in memoirs is essentially that of an untarnished heroine battling head-to-head against the villainous Stalin (Zholkovsky 2000, Harrington 2011).

In the absence of democratic structures that allowed private opinions to be expressed publicly, memoirs were a prime vehicle for indulging readers' interest in the personality, tastes, and behaviour of the famous individual. The melodramatic repertoire they exhibit is also a feature of celebrity discourses, as Hermes (1995) and Turner (2004) observe. These too are characterised by hyperbolic sensationalism and ascribe stereotyped roles, manifesting concern with what Brooks (1985) calls 'the moral occult': the 'domain of operative spiritual values both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality' (p. 5). Melodrama works primarily to expose injustice and recognise virtue, and in politically repressive contexts has the important psychological and cultural function of acknowledging moral courage (Harrington 2011).

Russian hagiographic life-writing was presumably found internally persuasive by Anglophone biographers because the Cold War ideological battle was couched by the media in terms of morality, so that the lionising of dissident writers in the West was often accompanied by melodramatic rhetoric. *Time* magazine (1958), for instance, described how the 'Soviet state howled its fury at defenceless, white-haired Novelist [sic] Boris Pasternak' and portrayed Yevtushenko as an 'embattled hero' (1963).

Brooks (1985) sees the development of melodrama as a response to secularisation. The Russian elevation of literature to a secular religion can be interpreted along similar lines, and the same case is frequently made of celebrity culture. Strong connections between fame/celebrity and religious worship are observed by Braudy (1997) and Rojek (2001), among others. Rojek points out, drawing upon Weber, that such parallels 'are reinforced by

the attribution by fans of magical or extraordinary powers to the celebrity', positing a relationship between celebrity and shamanism (p. 53). In the USSR, attribution of prophetic and magical powers to writers was a habit of the non-conformist intelligentsia, broader reading public, and atheist regime alike: 'Both Lunacharsky and Gorky spoke often of the shamanistic influence of art on human behaviour. Stalin [...] undoubtedly sensed the magical powers of art as something real; this was noted by [the poet] Osip Mandelstam who saw Stalin as superstitious, regarding poets as shamans (Volkov 2009, p. 131). Russia, with its quasi-religious veneration of the writer, emphasis on the behaviour of authors in life, and melodramatic representations of them, was thus a natural home for literary celebrity, in which all these elements combine.

Marshall (1997) writes that the 'unique power of the charismatic prophet is its direct connection to a particular group of people' (p. 55). Such figures provide a model of strength for others, especially when 'the routine of a given role or group is endangered or disrupted' (Eisenstadt 1968, p. xxvii). This describes the situation of the Soviet and post-Soviet intelligentsia, for whom nonconformists like Akhmatova acquired symbolic significance. She opposed the system privately but not publicly, practising a form of 'passive resistance' (Berlin 1997, p. 53), which was an important element in her appeal. After Stalin's death, although intelligentsia members were increasingly able to confront the regime without threat of imprisonment, few dared to, so that 'a special mythology capable of exculpating passive intellectuals as well as those who collaborated with the authorities' was required (Shlapentokh 1990, p. 113). Akhmatova was a fitting celebrity exemplar, and Chukovskaya's memoirs, which described the 'anatomy and physiology of the fear which was deeply rooted in the minds of intellectuals after 1917' (p. 125), were crucial to this mythology.

Jaffe (2005) remarks that reputations, like coins, can 'lose their powers of sensuous specularity through [...] overuse' (p. 11). Post-Soviet culture has given rise to attempts to

challenge received hierarchies of cultural authority and to demythologise sanctifying narratives, with Akhmatova the main literary focus. Zholkovsky (2000) argues that she established a personality cult (the term applied to Stalin's effective use of propaganda and the mass media in his self-presentation), in a form of 'resistance-cum-replication' symptomatic of a form of Stockholm Syndrome (p 68). In reality an 'exceptionally strong personality', Zholkovsky contends, Akhmatova 'employed an entire repertoire of "weak" poses', cultivating an atmosphere of mystery and worship (1996b, p. 215). Behind the profile of the 'great poetess' and 'perfect statue', he detects an 'excruciating [...] game of fear, arrogance, posing, sadomasochism, power-seeking' (p. 216).

Zholkovsky's provocative Stalinist image of Akhmatova found its way from academic scholarship into Russian mass culture, mediated by popular writer Tamara Kataeva in her books *Anti-Akhmatova* (2007) and *The Abolition of Slavery* (2011). These became bestsellers and were discussed extensively in the media. Kataeva (now a scandalous literary celebrity herself) essentially accuses Akhmatova of defrauding the public by pretending to be a great poet and exemplary human being when she was really a fame-obsessed despot who did not suffer at all:

There was some success, but the world didn't fall at her feet. [...] Life went on, and the legends acquired details: aristocratic origins, gentry upbringing, superb education, deep religiosity, fateful passions, disappointments in love, self-sacrifice, humiliation, a bleeding maternal heart, executed husbands, persecution, banning from publication, weak health, wartime burdens, heroism, civic courage, fearlessness – these were all her inventions, and everything was absolutely, absolutely not like that (2007, p. 9).

Anti-Akhmatova prompted emotional public debate. It was described by admirers as the 'summation of Russian postmodernism', a book Derrida would have applauded, sold in high-brow bookshops and supermarkets alike (Baburov 2007). Its detractors claimed that Kataeva violates taboos essential for the survival of culture (Bykov 2007). Her speculations about

Akhmatova's body, character, and private life – including her weight gain, menopause, purported lesbianism and heavy drinking – were particularly contentious. They strongly resemble the discourses and intrusions of tabloid journalism, echoing the processes by which celebrities, once built up, can be brought 'down to earth' through forms of mortification of the body (Rojek 2001, p. 80).

But is this the scandalizing of the canon, literary celebrity, or both? Many accounts of celebrity insist that it can only occur during an author's lifetime. Tuite (2007) asserts, for instance, that 'death marks the movement from the contemporaneity of celebrity to the posthumous fame of posterity' (p. 81). Braudy (2011) also emphasises 'physical presence', observing that 'celebrity is in the moment' (pp. 1073 and 1075). Ohlsson *et al.* (2014), however, describe Stieg Larsson in passing as possessing '(posthumous) celebrity' (p. 36). If celebrity is identified as 'the point at which the public figure engages interest at the level of private life' (Tuite 2007, p. 60), then Akhmatova certainly still qualifies. In death, she remains a 'living cultural presence' (Rojek 2001, p. 64). She is Russia's only 'unforgiven' poet, the object in some quarters of genuine public anger, that 'most living emotion' (Bykov 2013). Famous dead authors often attract interest at the level of their private lives, but rarely have this affective force.

Despite the ongoing reassessment of her legacy, Akhmatova continues to be venerated by large numbers of admirers in Russia and beyond. Her grave at Komarovo, the settlement on the far outskirts of St Petersburg by the Gulf of Finland where she had a small dacha, is permanently adorned with flowers, votive candles, and icons, and the museum devoted to her in her former apartment at Fountain House in central St Petersburg is one of the city's major literature-related cultural attractions. Study of these sites – and analysis of visitors' motivations and experiences when travelling to them – could make a valuable contribution to the body of existing scholarship on celebrity shrines and secular pilgrimage (see, for instance,

Margry 2008), both in relation to Russia specifically and to literary celebrities more generally. They are also of relevance to the related and burgeoning academic field devoted to the phenomenon of literary tourism (see Watson 2006, Booth 2016).

Fig. 1



Akhmatova's grave at Komarovo cemetery, St Petersburg, reproduced with kind permission of Marianna Taymanova

Pasternak

Pasternak became a renowned poet with the publication of *My Sister Life* (1922). Its poems possess a complex, metaphorical density and bold use of prosody that can be thought of as a characteristically modernist stylistic signature (Jaffe 2005, Goldman 2011). Like Akhmatova, Pasternak was physically striking, and his 'dusky Bedouin face, burning eyes, impulsive movements – corresponded to the traditional image of a poet' (Volkov 2009, p. 192). However, while Akhmatova advertised herself, performing the aristocratic *femme fatale*, from the outset Pasternak seemed modestly to avoid public attention. One biographer, Hingley (1985), calls him 'that incarnation of self-disparagement' (p. 95).

Pasternak repeatedly expressed discomfort with the notion of celebrity. In a poem of 1956, he wrote 'It is unseemly to be famous/It does not exalt' and 'It is shameful, meaning nothing/To be the talk of the town'. He told his memoirist, Gladkov (1977), about the adulation he received at a public recitation in the 1920s:

I realized how easily I could embark upon a new career – one revolting in its cheapness and tawdry glitter. And there and then I was repelled for ever more by the limelight, by this wantonness fit for a variety show. I saw it as my task to revive the idea of poetry printed in books (p. 74).

Here, Pasternak articulates the tension between the 'solitude of creative achievement and the social pressure of the public stage on which that achievement must be displayed' that Braudy (1997) identifies as a feature of artistic fame since the eighteenth century (p. 550). One of the specificities of literary celebrity – and possibly one of the reasons that traditional literary scholarship has neglected it or regarded it with suspicion – is the pronounced dichotomy between ephemeral, superficial, immediate fame and substantial, lasting fame. This arises from the combined legacy of the classical notion that the judgment of posterity is more important than earthly fame and the Romantic idea of the lone genius not understood by the philistine contemporary crowd. Lack of recognition or of commercial success become paradoxical marks of achievement, because 'serious' literature trades in symbolic and cultural capital: the field of cultural production is therefore 'the economic world reversed' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 29). This explains why an 'element of reticence or resistance' in self-presentation is frequently integral to the construction of charisma in artistic figures (Braudy 1997, p. 178).

Pasternak explicitly rejected the idea that to be a poet required conspicuous public posturing. His contemporary, Vladimir Mayakovsky, who projected a loud, spectacular public image, served him as a counter-model: 'To avoid [...] appearing to mimic him, I began suppressing those elements that corresponded to his – the heroic tone, which in my case

would have been false, and the cult of flamboyancy' (1961 cited Hingley 1985, p. 45). This implies strategic position-taking. Hingley convincingly suggests that Pasternak's self-effacement was 'choreographed', and that drawing 'attention to his ardent wish not to draw attention to himself' was itself a successful device for attracting publicity (pp. 120-121). Volkov (2009) similarly concludes that Pasternak's image of the artist 'not of this world' was 'consciously cultivated' (p. 192).

His habitual self-deprecation and reputation for otherworldliness protected Pasternak during the state brutality of the 1930s. Volkov (2009) suggests that he 'probably sensed which buttons to push in his relationship with Stalin', speculating that the leader found Pasternak's 'infantile' behaviour appealing (p. 191). Others also believe that Pasternak enjoyed a 'peculiar kind of "fool's license"', and that his 'almost childlike directness' might have impressed Stalin more than routine expressions of loyalty (Hayward 1997, p. 14). The superstitious attitude towards 'shamanistic' poets that Mandelstam detected in Stalin is an implicit factor – Stalin allegedly once ordered that the 'cloud-dweller' Pasternak be left in peace (Sebag Montefiore 2008, p. 59). Stalin might well also have sensed and been flattered by Pasternak's sincere fascination with him during the 1930s. The poet sought opportunities to communicate directly with the leader, including writing to thank him for his official proclamation of Mayakovsky as the 'best, the most talented' poet of the age. Pasternak claimed – perhaps disingenuously – that his own significance had been exaggerated and he was glad that any suspicion that he possessed 'serious artistic power' had been removed (Volkov 2009, p. 192-193).

Pasternak's attitude towards the communist regime became increasingly oppositional from 1946 (Hingley 1985, p. 75), the year in which Akhmatova was denounced. This hostility reached its apotheosis in 1956, in the comparatively liberal but unpredictable atmosphere of the Thaw, when Pasternak made a gesture of active resistance by handing the manuscript of

his novel *Doctor Zhivago* to the agent of Italian publisher Feltrinelli, to whom he subsequently assigned world copyright. Arranging for a literary work to be published abroad without official sanction was something no Soviet writer had dared to do in almost thirty years: Boris Pilnyak, who allowed his novel *Mahogany* (1929) to be published in Berlin, had been executed in 1938.

This was an act of political defiance, certainly, but Pasternak's main concern seems to have been that his novel reach the widest possible audience, including 'even a seamstress or a dishwasher' (Finn and Couvée 2014, p. 57). He expressed envy of Alexander Fadeyev and Fyodor Gladkov, respectively the authors of *The Rout* (1927) and *Cement* (1925), two foundational novels of Socialist Realism, the officially-prescribed aesthetic, because 'major works of literature exist only in association with a large readership' (Gladkov 1977, p. 87). In this respect, Pasternak exhibits a characteristically conflicted modernist attitude towards mass culture. He disliked what he saw as the tawdriness of celebrity, but he was attracted to the idea of a mass readership, which influenced his choice of genre. In publishing *Zhivago* abroad, he invited the celebrity that he had previously disparaged. A sense of guilt appears to have been a motivating psychological factor. He told Gladkov (1977) that he felt 'terribly in arrears', was 'esteemed for more than [he had] actually done' (p. 87), and evidently worried that his survival of Stalinism could be interpreted as signifying ideological conformism.

The details of the *Zhivago* affair are well known: Soviet attempts to recover the novel failed, and it became an international bestseller. It was published in Britain and the US in September 1958, topping the *New York Times* list for 26 weeks and selling 850,000 copies by March 1959 in the US alone (Finn and Couvée 2014, p. 206). In October 1958, it was announced that Pasternak had been awarded the Nobel Prize. Two days later, the Soviet press went on the offensive. An editorial in the literary press called Pasternak a 'malicious literary snob', as 'alien to the Soviet people' as his 'small-minded' hero, Zhivago, revealed that the

novel had been rejected by Soviet journals in 1956 for being counter-revolutionary, and – unprecedentedly – quoted offending passages. Excited at the opportunity to read excerpts of banned literature, people queued to buy the paper (circulation 880,000), which sold out in a matter of hours (Finn and Couvée 2014, p. 166). A personalised mass-media campaign followed: Pasternak was denounced as ‘anti-social’ and a ‘foreign body’, the novel itself as ‘notorious’ (pp. 155 and 157). In a live radio and television broadcast, the Komsomol head described Pasternak as a ‘mangy sheep’, and compared him unfavourably with a pig, for having ‘defecated where he ate’ (Bykov 2008, p. 785). Although Pasternak was a symbol of hope for nonconformists, and received supportive letters from across the Soviet Union and abroad, many Soviet citizens assimilated the propaganda. He was threatened, stones were thrown at his home, and he contemplated suicide. Fearing expulsion from the USSR, he felt compelled to decline the Nobel.

Notorious at home, Pasternak was a sensation abroad. Recent revelations (Finn and Couvée 2014) about the extent of the CIA’s covert manipulation of the situation from the outset notwithstanding, Pasternak exercised considerable agency, fuelling foreign press attention by granting interviews. He handed his poem ‘Nobel Prize’ (1958) – in which he portrays himself as a hunted animal with ‘no way out’ – to a *Daily Mail* correspondent. It made the front page (1959), translated into English, illustrated by images of Pasternak’s handwritten text and a photograph of him looking cheerfully defiant. The article mentions Pasternak’s fears for his safety, the threats of imprisonment or expulsion, and Soviet accusations that he had sold out his country ‘for 30 pieces of silver’. Pasternak is portrayed as a lone ‘white cormorant’ among black ones, and the *Zhivago* affair is represented as a ‘symbol of one man’s struggle against the dictates of a rigid, unforgiving totalitarian order’. As Braun (2011) observes, the literary celebrity conferred by the Nobel is different in kind to Anglo-American models of authorial stardom, conforming to a ‘non-market-driven approach

to valuing literature' (p. 321) that promotes the idea of 'elite authorship' (p. 328), and tends to recognize and reward moral instruction (p. 323). The ideological battleground of the Cold War intensified the kind of 'creator fetishism' (p. 322) that Braun identifies: Pasternak was perceived not merely as elite author and moral authority, but as heroic fighter for human freedom. The Manichean rhetoric of 'white' versus 'black' used by the *Daily Mail* lays bare the typical structures of melodrama. The same is true of the presentation of Pasternak as Judas and treacherous 'anti-social' villain in the Soviet Union, where the emphasis was on transgression, deviance, and immorality, as when Akhmatova was anathematised over a decade earlier.

Braun (2011) notes that the Nobel Prize recipient 'experiences an overnight transformation in both [...] public standing and personal circumstances' (p. 321). In most cases, this transformation is presumably positive (despite elite authors' ambivalence about celebrity), but in Pasternak's it was personally catastrophic. Although his stature in the West increased exponentially, his reputation at home was severely damaged, and the stress of the situation contributed to his failing health. When he suffered a heart attack on 7 May 1960, the foreign press mounted a prurient 'round-the-clock death watch' (Finn and Couvée 2014, p. 231). Pasternak's death on 30 May (of lung cancer) was reported around the world, but virtually ignored by the Soviet press (p. 235).

The Zhivago affair was an international literary and political scandal. Tuite (2007) suggests that a 'reliance on the ambivalent affective charge of scandal' is a defining feature of celebrity (p. 78), and Pasternak's literary celebrity/notoriety was certainly founded on it. As Rojek (2001) suggests, notoriety is not necessarily motivated by self-aggrandisement: the 'acquisition of unfavourable celebrity may be pursued as a strategy to expose a state of affairs in society perceived as unsatisfactory' (p. 159). There may have been an element of self-promotion in Pasternak's gesture, but celebrity was not an end in itself – he acted in the

service of his novel and as a matter of duty, at considerable personal cost. Gladkov (1977) watched Pasternak being mobbed by the foreign press after the novel first came out in Italian:

The earlier Pasternak would have thought it an unseemly comedy, but this new Pasternak stood there obediently [...], posing book in hand before the journalists while the flash-bulbs popped away. He evidently thought he *had* to do this for some reason or other [...]. He had been overtaken by world fame, but seemed none the happier for it – one could see the strain in the awkward way he stood there, and in the expression on his face. He looked more of a martyr than a conquering hero (p. 153).

Pasternak's late self-representation is replete with martyrological motifs. Upon handing the manuscript to Feltrinelli's agent, he allegedly remarked, 'You are hereby invited to my execution' (Finn and Couvée 2014, p. 13), and the speaker of his best-known lyric, 'Hamlet' (1946), is a composite of an actor playing a Romantic Hamlet, Christ, Zhivago, and Pasternak himself, who stands alone and reluctantly faces a tragic destiny. This self-mythology was reinforced by the recitation of 'Hamlet' at Pasternak's burial service – a disappointingly scandal-free event, from the perspective of foreign journalists – accounts of which elicited the half-envious, half-admiring exclamation from Akhmatova (who was in hospital): 'What a wonderful funeral!' (Bykov 2008, pp. 872 and 10).

Both Akhmatova and Pasternak employed the Christological and martyrological motifs that had attached to Russian writers since Pushkin's untimely death. 'To speak the truth one must be a heretic', Pasternak remarked (Gladkov 1977, p. 88), and Akhmatova aligned herself in her poem 'The Last Rose' (1962) with Joan of Arc and the martyred Russian Old Believer, Morozova. This is not to suggest that the application of religious models to shape behaviour and biography is unique to Russian poets. Greenblatt (1980) identifies Christ as the recurrent model in Renaissance self-fashioning and Braudy (1997)

observes a general twentieth-century ‘preoccupation with the artist as self-styled (and actual) victim’ that unites him/her ‘with saints, martyrs, and even Jesus himself as a seeker of spiritual truths who desperately tried to shun the Roman spotlight until it sought, captured and killed him’ (p. 581). However, religious parallels have especial purchase and resonance in cultures where ‘the madness of the brave, the martyr’s stake, and the poet’s Golgotha are not just figurative expressions’ (Jakobson 1987, p. 298).

Conclusion

Geographical differentiation (Ohlsson *et al.* 2014) can highlight ideological, political and cultural distinctions that bear upon literary celebrity. Many scholars emphasise the centrality of ideology to celebrity (Dyer 1998, Rojek 2001), which either affirms the established order, or provides models of transgression and opposition. Akhmatova and Pasternak both provided models of resistance – in her case passive (she never openly challenged Soviet authority), and in his, active. This dichotomy seems to disclose an implicit gender dimension. It is notable that, while Anglophone life-writing about Pasternak tends to take a similarly hagiographic approach to that devoted to Akhmatova – as Stonor Saunders remarks, ‘a thick layer of piety [is] applied to him by his eager publicists in the West’ (2014, p. 5) – his biographers have been more alert than Akhmatova’s to the possibility that Pasternak’s public image amounted to deliberate strategy. The fact that the self-fashioning of male martyred non-conformists has not received angry public criticism in Russia in the way that Akhmatova’s has raises the possibility that a famous woman writer elevating herself to the status of heroic genius remains problematic even in the twenty-first century. The fact that she tended to advertise herself, while Pasternak was habitually self-effacing – an inversion of conventional stereotypes – further indicates that gender is an important differentiation supplementing those advanced by Ohlsson *et al.* (2014).

Ohlsson *et al.* (2014) argue that critical approaches founded on the ‘death of the author’ are now ‘untenable’ in view of the importance of various types of witness literature and the bearing the embodied figure of the author has on their authenticity (p. 34 citing Burke 1992). In Russia, the author never completely disappeared from critical discourse (Boym 1990, pp. 22 and 25). Around 600 published authors were arrested in the late 1930s (Volkov 2009, p. 118), and the idea of reducing the author to a function of the text – effacing the personality, body, and face behind literary production – has little to recommend it to a culture in which the author’s death was all-too-often literal.

Celebrities function as ‘markers of historicity and cultural memory’ (Apter 2010, p. 89). Rojek (2001, p. 48) and Braudy (1997, p. 15) both note that celebrity history influences collective memory, contributing to cultural cohesion. This function assumes particular importance when cultural experience is abnormally disjunctive and turbulent, as in twentieth-century Russia. Gronas (2011), noting that the literary canon itself is often referred to as ‘cultural memory’, argues that the mechanism for canon formation must therefore rely on a ‘specifically mnemonic – rather than a merely sociological or aesthetic – logic’ (p. 69). Cultural evolution is ‘keen on replication and perpetuation’, so that ‘to survive culturally, a text must have certain mnemonic qualities’ (p. 3). This neo-Darwinist approach can productively be extended to celebrities’ lives and images – as texts, the perpetuation of which relies on memory and repetition, potentially creating cultural icons or artefacts of them. Greenblatt uses the term ‘social energy’ to describe the force that an artefact assumes, or its ‘capacity to have an effect on the mind of the hearer or reader’, and again, ‘repeatable forms of pleasure and interest’ are key to this (Greenblatt 1990 cited Robson 2008, p. 69). Similarly, Raeburn (1984) points out that neither a writer’s sales nor critical acclaim can adequately predict or measure public reputation – media coverage is paramount, and it is not variety, but repetition, that is important (p. 8). The reworking and repeating of recognisable

patterns is crucial to shaping a compelling public image, as the melodramatic and Christological representations of Pasternak and Akhmatova by themselves and others indicates. Repetition was also key to their notoriety as well as positive celebrity, being a fundamental feature of the propagandistic campaigns directed at them.

All this suggests a fruitful methodological approach to celebrity – and to the cultural processes that turn it into fame, or *vice versa* – that involves tracing these patterns and their mutations. The study of literary celebrity has much to contribute to understanding of celebrity more broadly in this respect, because writers and their readers tend to shape and interpret behaviour, consciously or unconsciously, according to pre-existing archetypes. The melodramatic features of the Russian myth of the poet are reductive and one-sided, simplifying complex individuals and the cultural field they inhabited, but this hyperbole is precisely why they are memorable, possessing persistent affective power, making visible the ‘moral occult’.

Photograph courtesy of Marianna Taymanova

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