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Review: Poetry Reader for Russian Learners; Siblings in Tolstoy and Dostoevsky: The Path to Universal Brotherhood

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Overall, the book does a thorough job of documentation. In proficiency terms, it reads more like a fancy “Advanced High” text than “Superior.” The authors do not speculate about the potentially more controversial conclusions pertaining to some of the postulates underlying the program until toward the end of the volume. After all, it is unlikely that a school with only two years of Russian aiming for an “Intermediate Low” speaking proficiency will create a two-year curriculum with the intent to prepare participants for a fourth year at “Advanced.” Most of the interesting speculations come in Al-Batal and Glakas’s view of Flagship results beyond proficiency. The authors demonstrate the reserve of professional expertise that Flagship students take from the program—a result of the emphasis on both interdisciplinary studies and the learners’ ability to participate fully in professional level communication by the end of the program.

The book is pleasantly and logically formatted. But readers will certainly need the three-page abbreviation list to follow the extensive alphabet soup of capital letters, some of which depart from the traditional and familiar acronyms (e.g., FL as “foreign language” is traditional; LOE as “languages other than English” is nontraditional).

All in all, Murphy and Evans-Romaine have brought together the essential documentation that shows how over the first ten years of the Flagship Language Program, people have gone from level two to level three. Let threedom ring!

Richard Robin
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Poetry Reader for Russian Learners, edited by Julia Titus and published by Yale University Press, is a welcome addition to the field of foreign language pedagogy, especially for those interested in further cultivating students’ interest in Russian culture and literature. As Titus herself writes, “one of the many wonderful rewards of learning a foreign
language is the ability to read literary masterpieces in the original.” Secondary to acquainting students with the rich tradition of Russian poetry, this anthology also activates students’ awareness of Russian grammar, syntax, and lexicon through a series of carefully thought-out exercises. Since the collection aims to include a wide range of texts suitable for learners at different levels, it is ultimately up to the instructor to make appropriate choices in terms of text selections from the anthology, which accompanies each poem with a brief biographical sketch of the poet, a glossary of key words in the margins, and a series of assignments that focus on grammar, syntax, and lexicon.

Accompanying each poem are a series of task-based exercises that stress grammar and vocabulary. For example, after reading Pushkin’s Роза (1815), students are asked to identify imperfective and perfective verbs. Parallel to grammar exercises, lexical questions invite students to differentiate between “дети” and “дитя,” thereby introducing students to the importance of roots in word formation. Other assignments ask students to list first conjugation and second conjugation verbs in a given poem, while others focus students’ attention solely on cases.

In addition to providing students with a variety of poems by Russian poets, the anthology has a companion website and complete audio files for each poem that are available for downloading through iTunes. The audio component is particularly valuable as it activates students’ listening skills and makes the poetry more accessible. The audio component can likewise help students memorize the poems, thereby improving their pronunciation and vocabulary.

In terms of the collection, Titus’s selections represent the classical canon of Russian poetry, well familiar to any Russian and taught in Russian schools as part of the school curriculum. Accordingly, the selections showcase predominately poets of the nineteenth century and twentieth century: Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, Evgenii Baratynskii, Fedor Tiutchev, Alexander Blok, Anna Akhmatova, Vladimir Mayakovskii, and Sergei Esenin, to name a few.

Above all, however, this anthology activates students’ awareness of the Russian language on the level of grammar, syntax, and lexicon, which can be best achieved with students who have been exposed to a minimum of one hundred and fifty hours of Russian instruction.
(Intermediate Low), as it relies on knowledge of aspect, conjugation, and cases.

In terms of this, Poetry Reader for Russian Learners may be best suited for Russian heritage learners, who are more likely to have a larger lexical understanding of words and their roots. Indeed, for heritage Russian speakers, for whom comprehension is more or less natural and awareness of the grammar and structure of the language is acquired through instruction, Titus’s anthology offers a dynamic way to demonstrate the structure of Russian.

Ultimately, Poetry Reader for Russian Learners is likely insufficient as a primary textbook but would instead work well as a supplement in intermediate and advanced language classes. In the hands of an experienced pedagogue, Poetry Reader for Russian Learners can not only enhance students’ passion and interest for Russian literature but also stimulate their knowledge of the Russian language.

Naya Lekht
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This is a fine book that makes a strong contribution to the study of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, while also demonstrating a framework that could be usefully applied to other literature of the period. It convincingly shows that sibling relations in the works of these two authors have been woefully underexamined, and it demonstrates that time and again, key scenes and ideas in their novels are structured around sisters and brothers. Reading from this perspective repeatedly brings new clarity not only to the scenes in question, but also to entire novels, and indeed, to the oeuvres to which they belong. The analysis also effectively brings the roles of women in these narratives into clearer focus and calls attention to patriarchal bias in the critical tradition. It is refreshing to see the looming fathers of War and Peace and the Brothers