

Whitehead's monograph is not the easiest text to read. Especially in the first four chapters of the monograph, Whitehead's discussion of various narrative techniques may be hard to follow for someone who is unfamiliar with specific authors and narratives that she discusses, since many texts are presented only in passing, mostly as sources of particular techniques rather than engaging narratives. This shortcoming notwithstanding, Whitehead's analysis of early Russian crime fiction enriches our understanding of the detective genre and of the literary process in the nineteenth century.

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***Chekhov's Letters: Biography, Context, Poetics.*** Ed. Carol Apollonio and Radislav Lapushin. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018. xvi, 323 pp. Notes. Index. Photographs. \$115.00, hard bound.  
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This volume brings together diverse contributions by Anton Chekhov's leading North American, Russian, and English scholars in order to argue, compellingly, that Chekhov's letters deserve attention on their aesthetic merits as much as do his novels, stories, and plays. The volume begins with useful accounts regarding the publication history of Chekhov's letters in Russian and English, and regarding the history of the writer's mythologization. The volume then suggests ways in which Chekhov's epistolary corpus, consisting of some forty-four hundred letters, can be read systematically along the lines of particular genres or cultural forms: a running record of the writer's experience, a quilt of polyphonic rejoinders to diverse readers, a body of instructions to aspiring writers, a narrative about an intensely charismatic hero, a dramatic exchange of lines between this hero and other characters in his life, and an existential document. The volume goes on to offer interpretations of a number of thematic aspects of Chekhov's correspondence: its treatment of the family, the "intelligentsia," friendship, marriage, and mortality, among others. The volume ends with a range of impressionistic, but often valuable, readings of Chekhov's individual letters by prominent scholars.

The book's achievement will be measured by the degree to which it stimulates its readers' desire to read Chekhov's letters themselves. The volume productively claims that in the Russian tradition Chekhov stands above most other letter writers, next only to Pushkin. Furthermore, the volume points out that, in contrast to Pushkin's gentry culture, which viewed private letters as public "literary facts," Chekhov's era of industrial print-mediation treated letters as a matter of private record. This distinction may make Chekhov's epistolarium especially attractive to today's readership.

The appeal of Chekhov's letters as a record of private experience for a public audience hinges on a paradox. As the volume emphasizes, Chekhov consistently asked that his letters stay private and resisted yielding them to public posterity. As the volume's authors also note, however, Chekhov was routinely aware that his letters would become part of his oeuvre as a public figure. Indeed, Chekhov made a practice of preserving and cataloging his correspondents' letters to him. It is unfortunate that many letters to Chekhov remain unpublished today. One of the achievements of this book is its suggestion that Chekhov's readers may want to see his correspondents' letters published in their entirety as a contribution to Chekhov's own epistolary art.

Perhaps the most compelling case that the addressee of Chekhov's letters should be his posthumous readership appears in Catherine Tiernan O'Connor's contribution to the volume. O'Connor shows that Chekhov's discrete letters to his brother Mikhail and to Aleksei Suvorin about a harrowing sea journey from Sukhumi to Poti are supremely rich with the kinds of meanings that could not be fully comprehensible to their respective immediate addressees. It takes today's reader—aided by a “super-reader” such as O'Connor—to appreciate the full aesthetic value of Chekhov's epistolary work.

Among the volume's many achievements is its orientation toward an audience comprising the general English-speaking public, as well as beginning students of Chekhov's work. Even as the volume sketches the history of Chekhov's mythologization as a uniquely humane representative of the intelligentsia, however, it tends to contribute to this mythologization by emphasizing the writer's undoubted humanity. Such myth-making is most apparent in an essay alleging that Chekhov's discussions of the “intelligentsia” placed a high value on the concept of *kultura* (culture, 173) in his discussions of the “intelligentsia.” A search of Chekhov's usage would show that he avoided this term in reference to people, preferring, rather, the adjective *vospitannyi* (closer to the English “civilized”). The notion of *kulturnost*, a staple of later discourse, was in fact alien to Chekhov's writing.

Nonetheless, the volume's emphasis on Chekhov's humanity will likely make him appealing to the general reader, who can then proceed to discover the profound ambivalence of Chekhov's writing on his/her own. The volume does feature discussions of the fascinatingly problematic aspects of Chekhov's writing, though these often take second place to its authors' celebration of Chekhov through seemingly unproblematic terms such as “inner world” (xvi), “soul” (53, 122), “sincerity” (55), “real human being” (89), “true self” (93), or “inner ‘I’” (145).

Such notions signal the volume's orientation toward the general public, an orientation that is confirmed by its theoretical reference points. Most prominent among these are Iurii Tynianov and Mikhail Bakhtin, whose value to understanding Chekhov is, to be sure, indubitable. Still, a reader might regret that more widely influential theory originating beyond Russia does not inform the volume's work. How, one might most immediately ask, would theoretical questions extending from Roland Barthes's “The Death of the Author” and Michael Foucault's “The Author Function” enrich the volume's discussions of the profoundly complex relation between Chekhov's écriture, performances, experience, humanity, and self?

Another element of Chekhov's complexity the volume downplays concerns the obscenities that had been excised from the writer's published work until Aleksandr Chudakov's revelations in 1991. The volume's single-minded focus on restoring Chekhov's letters in full distracts attention from the obscenity of Chekhov's public texts, the kind of obscenity that highlights the ambivalence of his writing. For an example, one could turn to Chekhov's reference, in his story “The Grasshopper,” to the main heroine as a *chlen sosete* (member of society; A.P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem*, (1974–83), VIII, 12). Many of Chekhov's contemporaries knew which of Chekhov's friends this obscenity identified. Furthermore, many recognized ambivalence as a pervasive quality of his writing, both private and public.

This volume's value for its intended audience may be enriched by an encouragement to read Donald Rayfield's biography of the writer, which highlights the ambivalence of Chekhov's life and art. Some caveats aside, one very much hopes that the volume does accomplish its undoubtedly laudable goal: to promote Chekhov's private writing, as a fascinating aesthetic object, among an English-language readership.

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