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# (Review) The Familiar Letter as a Literary Genre in the Age of Pushkin

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## American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages

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The Familiar Letter as a Literary Genre in the Age of Pushkin by William Mills Todd

Review by: Andrea Lanoux

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All those remarks, however, underline the strengths of a book that is a great source of knowledge and creativity. As mentioned above, deep and genuinely research predisposes the appearance of new questions, suggestions, and allusions. To quote Aron Katsenelinboigen's definition of beauty, it must be a "complete incompleteness."

Vera Zubarev, *University of Pennsylvania*

William Mills Todd III. *The Familiar Letter as a Literary Genre in the Age of Pushkin*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999. Studies in Russian Literature and Theory. xii + 230 pp., \$16.95 (paper).

Northwestern University Press has recently reissued one of the most influential works of literary scholarship in the past twenty years. William Todd's *The Familiar Letter as a Literary Genre in the Age of Pushkin* is now available in paper as a reprint of the original text in the series Studies in Russian Literature and Theory. First published in 1976 by Princeton University Press, *The Familiar Letter* still feels surprisingly fresh and in tune with the aesthetic sensibilities of the present moment. Long before the current trend in reality-based entertainment, Todd mapped out the space between private and public, fact and fiction in the correspondence of members of the Arzamas Society of Obscure People (*Arzamasskoe obshchestvo bezvestnykh liudei*) for the period from 1808 to 1825.

Todd opens his impressive scholarly debut by charting the evolution of the epistolary tradition in Russia from Lomonosov to Karamzin, whose Arzamas group (later known as the Pushkin circle) formed in opposition to Shishkov's *Beseda liubitelei russkogo slova*. The Arzamasians' cult of friendship, the increasing role of "taste" (as opposed to conventional rules) in shaping aesthetic norms, and the expansion of literary polemics in both audience and subject matter all contributed to the transformation of epistolary practice into something quasi-public and somehow "literary." Todd argues that familiar letters played an important role in the dissemination and social acceptance of enlightenment ideals, which hold that civility and learning necessarily lead to social progress. One of the most interesting extensions of this thesis, which Todd mentions in a single sentence, is that since such ideals cannot be imposed by governmental decree, it was the friendly relationship between "narrators" that made the proliferation of enlightenment principles possible (54). Touching upon the relationship between narrative and social change, this point brings us into the sphere of literature and society that Todd would continue to explore in later works.

In the middle chapters of the book, Todd examines the finer points of the Arzamasians' letters, such as their stylistic markers, organizing principles, and strategies for fashioning the self. Stylistically, the letters run the gamut from officialese and Church Slavonicisms to foregone words, colloquial expressions, and the decidedly low: "The Arzamasians consistently chose organic metaphors for the creative process that would convey self-deprecation and a sense of the human, vulnerable nature of creation—sweat, excrement, sperm, diarrhea, belching, dirty linen" (130). Todd contends that the unifying principle of the letters is not thematic, but tonal; letters often treat a variety of topics connected by association. Another important feature is their frequent content of "epistolary criticism," which differs from published criticism in that it often pertains to works in progress, thereby giving the author a chance to revise before publication.

The question arises: what is gained by classifying the familiar letter as a separate genre? Todd's treatment of the familiar letter clarifies the specificities of the Arzamas correspondence in two important ways. In the more narrow sense of the term "genre," the familiar letter

is shown to employ certain structures, tropes, and styles (such as allegoric fantasy, parody, satire, and travesty); in the broader, Bakhtinian sense of genre as worldview, the familiar letter reflects at every turn the Arzamasian view of enlightened civility. What is not entirely clear is where Todd stands regarding the role of the familiar letter in the development of Russian artistic prose. On one hand he suggests that the familiar letter represents an important step in Russian literary development as “a playground for young authors to explore the possibilities of language, organize their thoughts, and practice reaching a specific audience” (197). To this end Todd examines a letter from Pushkin to his brother as an example of “practice in rhetorical effect” for a passage in *Eugene Onegin* (144). On the other hand, Todd explicitly states that “the Arzamasians did not consciously use letters as a ‘laboratory’ for developing new forms” (187). Does this mean that their experiments were unconscious? Or that their verbal play should not be called “experiments” at all?

Todd includes two helpful appendices: a list of Arzamas members with short biographical sketches, and an excerpt from Nikolai Grech’s groundbreaking *Textbook of Russian Literature* (*Uchebnaia kniga russkoi slovesnosti*) (1819), in which Grech lays out the salient features of the epistolary form.

The staying power of this book lies in the pleasure it gives the reader, with lusciously long excerpts from some of the best letters written in the Russian language. Todd does not hold back on the material that inquiring minds want to know: Lomonosov’s graphic account of the electrocution of a fellow scientist during an early lightning experiment; Batiushkov’s apprehension of imminent madness; Pushkin’s 1824 letter to Zhukovsky about his father’s abuses; and Pushkin’s 1826 letter to Viazemsky concerning the future of his illegitimate child. In demonstrating that people are ultimately interested in other people’s personal dramas, *The Familiar Letter* remains an important tribute to the Russian Romantic age and a study relevant to our own times.

*Andrea Lanoux, Connecticut College*

Lauren Leighton, ed. *A Bibliography of Alexander Pushkin in English: Studies and Translations*. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999. Studies in Slavic Languages and Literatures, No. 12. xiii + 310 pp., \$99.95 (cloth).

Bibliographies of this type do not receive as much gratitude as they should. In our offices they remain within arm’s reach, but just on the periphery of our field of vision. We favor books, monographs, and articles that dive into the troubled waters specific authors, topics, periods, genres, and theories throw upon our shores. All of us know, however, just how valuable a comprehensive and thorough bibliography is for our research. Lauren Leighton’s bibliography, compiled with June Paschuta Farris, represents as complete a single-language reference as one can find. It spans the period 1820 to 1997, and is being updated continually for future editions.

As J. Thomas Shaw states in the volume’s foreword, the “new Bibliography not only brings the 1937 [Avrahm Yarmolinsky] bibliography up to date . . . , [it] augments existing bibliographies with some 250 new or undiscovered items and adds to, expands, and corrects bibliographic knowledge by providing full data and thorough annotations.” In other words, it makes our work easier.

For ease of access, a virtue not always found in bibliographies, the materials are divided into two parts: Studies (3–183) and Translations (187–310). A successful attempt has been made to give a similar sequence to as many of the subsections of Parts One and Two as possible. Thus, Lyric Poetry, Folk Tales, Narrative Verse, *Eugene Onegin*, Dramatic Works,