

Frazier, Melissa. *Romantic Encounters: Writers, Readers, and the Library for Reading*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2007. xi, 246 pp. \$55.00

Melissa Frazier's *Romantic Encounters: Writers, Readers, and the Library for Reading* takes as its immediate subject a popular nineteenth-century Russian literary journal, the *Library for Reading*, and its editor, Osip Ivanovich Senkovskii (1800-1858), who contributed frequently to the periodical using various pseudonyms and personas. Senkovskii came from impoverished Polish gentry and rose to prominence in Russia as a brilliant scholar of Turkish and Arabic, only to gain notoriety at the helm of *Library for Reading*, which Senkovskii's contemporaries accused of debasing literature to appeal to and profit from a broader, provincial readership. Indeed, when *Library for Reading* was first published in 1834, its unprecedented subscription numbers and profitability seemingly announced the degradation of Russian letters, once the domain of the Russian elite, and the emergence of a vulgar literary marketplace in its stead.

Originally linked to its publisher's lending library in St. Petersburg, *Library for Reading* was from the start an unapologetically commercial enterprise, with subscriptions for its readers, honoraria for its authors, and a salary for its editor. While scholars tend to view *Library for Reading* as emblematic of an emerging literary marketplace in 1830s Russia, Frazier qualifies these assertions somewhat, suggesting that Russia's literary marketplace was more a subject of debate among Russian writers of the Romantic period than a concrete, recognizable reality. Russia was not quite privy to the same cultural, technological and socioeconomic factors that contributed to literature's democratic transformation across Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The rise of a literary marketplace and even of a proper profession of letters in prerevolutionary Russia was impeded all the more by an especially low literacy rate and thus a readership that was primarily limited to the gentry, by initial copyright laws that only came into effect in 1828 and 1857, by writers' continued need for literary patronage to support themselves, and by the relatively late adoption of the mechanized printing press. Nevertheless, in the pages of *Library for Reading*, Frazier argues, a literary marketplace in Russia began to take shape, as a space both real and imaginary and as a forum in which the interactions between writers and readers produced a form of Romantic literature that was highly self-conscious and self-referential, a literature about literature—in short, literary criticism. The space and nature of these interactions and the character of the participating writers and readers form

the larger concern of Frazier's book, which seeks to theorize these encounters as played out in *Library for Reading* and to situate them within the context of European literary relations in the early nineteenth century.

Writers and readers and their interactions in *Library for Reading* are both real and imaginary, Frazier argues, two sides of the same coin wielded by the all-powerful critic, Senkovskii. While Frazier cites the *Athenaeum*, the short-lived (1798-1800) but influential journal associated with the early German Romantic movement, as a clear antecedent to *Library for Reading*, she also suggests how Senkovskii overturned many of the Romantic ideals put forth by Friedrich Schlegel and his Jena cohorts. Whereas earlier literature was understood as a manifestation of intimate dialogue between a writer and his audience (between, for example, Schlegel and his friends), the later writer, operating in the literary marketplace, wrote to and for a more socially and economically diverse readership. The consequence of this historical distancing between the writer and the writer's public is that the space that opened up between them allowed the Romantic writer to adopt various positions vis-à-vis his or her audience. In Frazier's description, Senkovskii, by appearing in the pages of *Library for Reading* as the loquacious literary critic "Baron Brambeus," the Turkish philosopher "T.-O." (short for Tiutiun'dzhiu-Oglu), the "Three Landowners from Tver," a female critic named "Kritikzada," or even the unexplained "O. O...O!," subverts the notion of Romantic authorship as the authentic expression of the writer's self. Instead, Senkovskii in his various incarnations is unidentifiable. He is the literary critic whose views are never his own and whose mediating presence in the text takes many forms: the editor of another's work, the serendipitous collector or borrower or even plagiarist of interesting tales, or at the very least an enterprising literary capitalist. All of these writerly personas, invested as they are with distinct personal opinions, backgrounds, and lives, proffer a strange admixture of reality and imagination in the pages of *Library for Reading*. These contributors are and are not Senkovskii, but this is the crucial point Frazier is making about *Library for Reading*: Senkovskii functions as the Romantic writer who simulates the critic who enjoys "critical omnipotence" (49) within the text. It follows then that the Romantic reader is no less immune to the critic's power.

For while Senkovskii was certainly writing for real readers, for the five thousand or so subscribers to *Library for Reading*, his periodical is also peopled with invented reader-personas who have no referent beyond the pages of the journal. While the presence of real and imagined readers is typical within Romantic literature, Frazier suggests that Senkovskii takes

this trope to an extreme, endowing his invented readers with such specificity and individuality that these readers detract from their usual Romantic purpose, which is to stand in for the reader and even for the act of reading itself. Writing for a new but less educated audience, Senkovskii seemingly introduces imagined readers into the text in order to model reading for his public. And yet, the result is that Senkovskii usurps, through his invented readers, any possibility for open interpretation of the text. Senkovskii does the reading for all of his readers, both real and imagined, since it is he who shapes their reactions and understandings, which are for all intents and purposes, those of the writer-critic himself.

The “Romantic encounters” Frazier identifies take place not only in *Library for Reading* between writers and readers, but within the Russian Empire between the center and the periphery and, even more broadly, between Russian literature and its Romantic European counterparts. Given Russia’s location on the margins of early nineteenth-century Romantic Europe, its tradition of imitation and borrowing from Western European literature, and its concomitant anxiety regarding the possibilities for an original Russian literature and authentic literary language, Frazier holds up Senkovskii and his *Library for Reading* as a Russian variant of a wider Romantic preoccupation with subjectivity or construction of the self. Frazier’s Romantic encounters suggest examples of selves (writers, readers, texts, nations) that are unstable, incomplete, and ambiguous at best because they are continually created and re-created through interactions with other selves (other writers, readers, texts, nations). Romantic subjectivity is thus best characterized by irony, according to Frazier, since it continually strives for but never achieves its aim of authenticity or originality. Romantic texts, like Romantic nations, are always fragmentary, in the making, and Frazier sees this irony at work in Senkovskii’s *Library for Reading* and, by extension, at the heart of Romanticism itself. Romanticism, whether Russian, German, British or more broadly “European,” has little interest in representation. Rather, as *Romantic Encounters* makes clear, Romanticism can only strive for a version of the simulacrum, for simulation and imitation in place of the real.

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