

Karamzin Returns to France

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Review of: *Nikolai Karamzin, Lettres d'un voyageur russe*. Introduction, translation, notes and commentary by Rodolphe Baudin. Paris, Institut d'Études Slaves, 2022. 783 p. ISBN: 978-235597-056-6.

The most recent demonstration of Rodolphe Baudin's expertise on Nikolai Karamzin is his translation into French of the well-known *Letters of a Russian Traveler* (*Pis'ma russkikh puteshestvennika*, 1799-1801). This thick volume, containing the very text upon which Karamzin's place in the literary canon is primarily founded, complements Baudin's numerous other investigations of Karamzin. Elsewhere, he has often focused on particular episodes or themes found in the *Letters*: Karamzin and the "foodways" of the cultures he explores, for example, or Karamzin and the urban stroll in Paris (a "flâneur' avant l'heure," 32), or his commentary on art, his role as a cultural "influencer," the political implications of his encounter with a Parisian mob and a hot-air balloon, and so on. In these examples, Baudin generally hones in on a detail, then explores the surrounding historical context – often illuminating both what Karamzin addresses explicitly and what he passes over in silence – and then moves still further outwards, so that his reading connects the original passage to conclusions about Karamzin's life and experiences, the political conditions of his writing and publishing, the significance of his travels as cultural exchange, Russia's relationship with Europe and Europe's relationship with Russia. A book-length example of this approach may be found in his wonderful 2011 volume on the surprisingly eventful "two nights and one full day" that Karamzin spent in the city of Strasbourg, *Nikolai Karamzine à Strasbourg: Un écrivain russe dans l'Alsace révolutionnaire (1789)*, in which Baudin meticulously ties him to the history of that city in a very specific historical moment.

Aimed at the non-specialist reader, this new translation of *Letters* – comprising nearly 600 pages of fictionalized epistolography – will make Karamzin's text and, more generally, his central role in Russian literary tradition familiar to new audiences. It will increase the number of eighteenth-century Russian texts available to readers of French and help Karamzin regain a foothold in university curricula. Scholars will find the volume useful as well. The cogent introduction, an updated version of that found in *Karamzine à Strasbourg* with several important new features, touches on a wide variety of issues relating to the genesis and interpretation of Karamzin's letters and is accompanied by extensive footnotes that provide key sources for further reading. Topics addressed begin with the place of *Letters* in the evolution of Russian prose: Karamzin's text arrived on the scene, Baudin argues, just when Russian-language attempts at novel writing had failed to produce anything capable of fully engaging their public. The reaction of bilingual readers to these early experiments was particularly telling: unimpressed with the Russian novel, they simply reached for French books instead. *Letters of a Russian Traveler* offered a way to move forward with literary prose via a very different genre, one that "authorized great structural and thematic liberty" and permitted Karamzin "to tackle all sorts of topics and to infinitely vary his narrative material" (30-31).

In a brief and illuminating biography of Karamzin's life prior to his departure for foreign climes, Baudin highlights his connection with Aleksandr Petrov and Nikolai Novikov, as writers who were of particular influence, and outlines Karamzin's early translations and literary texts.

The discussion of Karamzin's fifteen-month trip abroad (from May 1789 to July 1790) is contextualized in an examination of the Russian practice of the grand tour and accounts thereof, which touches upon Karamzin's literary and generic sources and his innovations with respect to these. Some of the writers that he so admired are described in the *Letters* as welcoming "the Russian traveler" into their homes, a phenomenon that occurs more often in Germany than in France, where calling on well-known men of letters, Baudin explains, was not common practice.

The *Letters* themselves are divided into four distinct sections treating Germany, Switzerland, France and England, sections that often feature different stylistic tonalities as well. Among these diverse parts, the figure of the traveler serves as "narrative cement" (31). Baudin underlines the invented quality of Karamzin's narrator: this is "autofiction" (25), in which the experiences and character of the traveler do not align perfectly with those of the author. While the traveler, paraphrasing Lotman, "is an exalted young man, sometimes a bit naïve," the writer is "a man of more conviction determined to make a career in the field of literature" (25). One possible motivation for directing the traveler along a slightly different route was to blur meetings that Karamzin may have had with masonic associates abroad, *personae non gratae* for the Russian state. Also relevant is the temporal coincidence of his journey with the French Revolution, anathema in Russia, a circumstance that both shaped his letters on France and constrained their publication: they appeared only in 1801, when Alexander took the throne.

Exemplifying a "cult of sensibility and of the heart" (33), Karamzin's text served as one of the primary models for the sentimentalist current, was widely imitated by other writers, and retained its popularity until the mid 1820s. The author's bold assertion to have been the very first Russian to "travel with pen in hand" (27) was something of a publicity stunt. Nonetheless, given the importance of his *Letters*, this claim now almost seems true. As Baudin notes, however, it also helped to obscure the travel account that Ekaterina Dashkova had published 16 years earlier in 1775 (27n). It is likely, of course, that Karamzin, who was at that time a nine-year-old boy in Simbirsk, was unfamiliar with Dashkova's account, and perhaps he had not encountered the now classic travel letters of Denis Fonvizin, especially those regarding his trip to France (1777-1778), which were unpublished in Karamzin's day and circulated in manuscript among layers of the elite to which young Karamzin had no access.

Baudin's introduction includes fascinating new material on the history of Karamzin's translation into French, beginning with his exciting discovery of one translation that predates those known previously: Joseph-Golven Tuault de la Bouvrie's *Extraits des voyages du Docteur Karamsin, médecin de Moscou* (1815). This curious booklet, based on an 1803 English translation of Karamzin, features only the letters on England, adding still more modifications and omissions to those already found in the English source text. Displaying notable "paratextual creativity" (38), Tuault de la Bouvrie even "Frenchified" two recounted narratives found in Karamzin's English letters by transposing them into verse and into the setting of "his native Brittany" (39). Here and elsewhere, Baudin draws a very convincing portrait of how translation can serve as political gesture: Tuault de la Bouvrie's choice to translate the letters on England in this precise period suggests a rejection of the Anglophobia that was widespread in Napoleonic France, for example, and "demonstrates marked political sympathies in an era when the Bourbons were regaining their throne thanks to the combined efforts of England and Russia" (41).

Baudin then considers the translations of Karamzin's *Letters* by Viktor Poroshin (1867) and Arsène Lagrelle (1885), situating each firmly in political and cultural history. Poroshin's "elegantly translated," but excised and incomplete *Lettres d'un voyageur russe en France, en Allemagne et en Suisse* (1789-1790), appeared in a climate of French hostility towards Russia

after the brutal suppression of the Polish uprising of 1861-1863 (43). Poroshin looked to Karamzin (on the occasion of the centennial of his birthday in 1866), and to his “protagonist embodying an ideal of the Europeanized Russian, perfectly at ease in the space and culture” of the continent (42), as a means to counteract French Russophobia. Lagrelle’s stylistically sophisticated *Lettres* is also incomplete, limited to Karamzin’s letters on France, which he presents as valuable historical documentation regarding the French Revolution. Lagrelle’s interest in Russia was reshaped as a result of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, which turned him against Prussia and encouraged him to read his own political convictions into Karamzin’s text, including both Prussophobia and Anglophobia, as is evident in his introduction.

As for his own translation, Baudin explicitly sets forth the choices that he has made, well-considered decisions that will be of interest to specialists. These include avoiding words not current in eighteenth-century French, reining in Karamzin’s extensive use of the dash, updating his now antiquated spelling of the French imperfective, and leaving his literary misquotations uncorrected. As far as this reader is able to determine, the result is a quite smooth and readable text, as befits Nikolai Karamzin. The edition is also visually appealing: a handsome paperback with book flaps, complete with an attractive and useful bookmark, it is also peppered with engravings and drawings from Karamzin’s era, supporting Baudin’s “conviction [...] that Karamzin ‘consumed’ Europe as much by images as by texts” and also “taught Russian readers how to see” (50).

Scholars will also enjoy the many gems found among Baudin’s footnotes, which can be read separately on their own merits. Wherever possible, he has identified persons met or mentioned in Karamzin’s text, an ambitious project that has brought to light many names that were formerly obscure. Characteristically, Baudin also provides details on the “historical, political or literary context at the origin of this or that judgment of Karamzin” (50); his notes contain treats such as information on the “*danse macabre* painted on panels between the windows of the Augustin convent in Erfürt” (663) or on the state of Lyon’s Roman aqueducts when Karamzin passed through (692). Baudin’s translation is an important and welcome addition to existing scholarship on this renowned writer and his renowned text.