

The Online Library and the Classic Literary Canon in Post-Soviet Russia: Some Observations on “The Fundamental Electronic Library of Russian Literature and Folklore”

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A couple of years ago, Eugene Gorny—both a historian of the Russian Internet and himself a prominent figure in its history—made the following observation: “Almost any book published in Russian can be found and freely downloaded online” (Gorny 2006, 184). Although the statement is somewhat exaggerated, in particular when it comes to non-fiction, Russian written culture—not only new texts but also those stemming from the pre-digital age—has been digitised to an extent which is truly impressive.

As is the case with the Russian Internet more generally, the online publication of Russian literature began as an individual or private endeavour, and it soon became a characteristic feature of the so-called RuNet, i.e., the Russian-language segment of cyberspace. The most famous example is no doubt Maksim Moshkov’s library (www.lib.ru), which was created in 1994. With its minimalist programmer style it has become something of a cultural symbol of the early RuNet, a marker of cultural identity for Russian Internet users also outside the Russian Federation. This comprehensive online collection of texts has been based on active participation from its users; it is they who continually scan and submit new texts, while Moshkov himself, in his own words, works as a “receptionist” (Schmidt 2009, 5). In this way, the library functions not only as a repository of texts, but also as a social network where its users may share all kinds of literature (new and old, Russian and foreign, fiction and non-fiction).

Although this practice has changed over the last years—the library publishes now either literature whose copyrights are free or contemporary literature whose online publication is accepted by its authors—Moshkov’s project remains an expression of nascent Russian Internet cultural activity, which during the last decade has not only been met with various obstacles, but also been more indirectly challenged, or at least complemented, by other projects of a different character. Here, literature dissemination as social networking has been replaced by one-to-many publishing and projects with a clearer normative, top-down character. This article explores one of the libraries that represent a response and reaction to the dissemination of classic Russian literature on the Internet as it began in the 1990s: The FEB or Fundamental Electronic Library of Russian Literature and Folklore (*Fundamental’naia elektronnaia biblioteka: Russkaia literatura i fol’klor* at www.feb-web.ru). I will in particular address aspects related to the canonicity and historicity of texts as they appear in this library, but also discuss

the project as a continuation of Soviet print culture and its tradition of *kul'turnost'*. I shall begin, however, with an attempt to reconstruct the early days of Russian Internet culture as a background to The Fundamental Electronic Library.

Background: RuNet as Samizdat

The Russian Internet that emerged in the 1990s was, by and large, a grassroots phenomenon emerging from “below” or “outside” official channels. “The development of the Internet in Russia from 1991 to 1998 was the result of mostly private economic and cultural initiatives, as state influence in these years was almost non-existent, due to the rough-and-tumble of the transition period” (Schmidt and Teubener 2006a, 14). Since state control and the hegemony of official culture were weaker in this decade compared to the previous ones, the Internet facilitated the opening up of a new space for new cultural activities. In Russia of the 1990s, thus, the Internet can be said to have represented what Alexei Yurchak has described as a “parallel culture.” A parallel culture is not a counter culture. It does not aim to challenge, oppose, or even resist official culture, and it cannot therefore be sufficiently scrutinised by means of a binary framework.

I use the term “parallel event,” “parallel meaning,” and “parallel culture” to stress their grounding in personal non-involvement in the official sphere. In this respect, it is more accurate to speak of parallel culture than of counterculture or the underground, both of which imply resistance to or subversion of official ideology and culture, and thus an involvement in their official logic (Yurchak 1997, 163).¹

Yurchak developed this concept in connection with his studies of late Soviet cultural practices that took place outside the spheres of the official culture without having the intentions of being critical or oppositional (see also Yurchak 2006). As Yngvar Steinholt has shown, this perspective is well-suited for analysing the now legendary Leningrad rock scene of the 1980s (with bands such as Akvarium, Televizor, and Kino), whose members were not “rocking against the regime.” In the Soviet Union before perestroika, rather, “rock may have been more cynically a-Soviet than rebelliously anti-Soviet (Steinholt 2005, 94). Here, as in so many other spheres in late Soviet society, people were instead distancing themselves from explicit dissident activity.

This situation changed with perestroika, where official ideology became explicitly challenged and the strategy of non-involvement could not remain meaningful in the same way. Correspondingly, the concept of parallel culture may not apply to the post-Soviet context without alterations. Still, the indifference and at times aversion towards dissident activity have not ceased to exist in post-Soviet Russia, and the reluctance to conceive of one's own

¹ One of Yurchak's examples of a “parallel event” with “parallel meanings” is the 1 May Celebration: “The parade itself, being perceived as an unavoidable official event, also became an easygoing, exciting, and happy celebration during which many norms of public behaviour were suspended: one could scream loudly, be drunk in public, and exchange playful remarks with complete strangers, as long as one carried and shouted official slogans” (Yurchak 1997, 164).

cultural practice in terms of “counterculture” remains present.² On the other hand, opposition associated with the late Soviet period has recently been reinterpreted as bearing *cultural* (and not necessarily political) significance. And so despite the prevailing negative opinion of Soviet dissidents even in post-Soviet Russia, the Russian Internet of the 1990s is now frequently understood by means of the cultural model of samizdat. By the same token, it is applied not so much in order to stress an oppositional character, as to emphasise the practice of self-publishing.³ In his lecture at the University of Bergen on 19 March 2009, Roman Leibov analysed the Russian Internet as a “transformation of samizdat,” and this comparison has also been drawn by historians and chroniclers of the Russian Internet such as Gorny and Sergei Kuznetsov. According to Kuznetsov, the late Soviet phenomenon of samizdat provides a suitable model for the RuNet, where the users are both readers and librarians, in contrast to a traditional library with its order, selection, and strict catalogisation. In contrast to the latter, samizdat “presupposes the voluntary participation of those who fill up the depository of texts, i.e., the readers are at the same time librarians” (Kuznetsov 2004, 11).⁴

This attempt to situate Russian Internet practices in a particular cultural, national tradition—where, allegedly, Russian features are emphasised in favour of the cultural globalisation to which the Internet undeniably contributes—has been frequent in the self-reflection of RuNet users and historians. In this context, “samizdat” signifies cultural tradition rather than opposition. And as the neologism RuNet itself suggests, the Russian Internet has for a time now been conceived of as an “ethnically defined, virtual community” (Kratasjuk 2005, 34).⁵ This tendency is marked not least in Gorny’s historiography, where the dissemination of literature on the RuNet is seen as the most recent manifestation of cultural patterns assumed to have a historical tradition:

² Cf. Gorny’s response to the idea that Internet in Russia may have represented a *Gegenöffentlichkeit* or “counter public sphere”: “Honestly, I don’t like both terms [counter public sphere / counter-culture] as they suggest to look at things from the starting point of such constructs as ‘public sphere’ or ‘culture.’ That is more or less the same as to call a woman a counter-man. I.e., it expresses the idea of something secondary, something subordinate.... Furthermore the word ‘counter’ implies the idea of negation and fight (as in ‘counter revolution’), which gives the term a negative connotation. But often there is no fight, but an existence in a kind of ‘other’ space. For example, [the Zhurnal.ru] [this looks strange – check quote; perhaps “the journal Zhurnal.ru” or “Zhurnal.ru” without “the”?] did not fight anyone. People just did what they wanted to because it was natural to them” (quoted from Schmidt and Teubener 2006b, 66). On the other hand, Gorny is decidedly less sceptical than Yurchak of binarisms, and he widely applies oppositions such as official/non-official, public/private, formal/informal, impersonal/personal in order to capture early Russian Internet culture. “The Internet generally and online media in particular have often been understood in Russia in terms of an alternative or opposition to the ‘official’ Russian media system” (Gorny 2006, 188).

³ This was, in fact, how the phenomenon of samizdat began. According to Serguei Oushakine, “copying and disseminating literary work among friends was a major function of samizdat only until the mid-1960s. After that, samizdat became dominated by *political* documents: letters, petitions, commentaries, and transcripts of trials, pamphlets, and so forth” (Oushakine 2001, 194–5). Still, late Soviet samizdat continued to disseminate virtually all kinds of literature, from explicitly oppositional texts to recipes.

⁴ Interestingly, the preference shown in this comparison for this many-to-many dissemination of texts has often been reversed in positive descriptions of the more recent, canon-oriented libraries, as discussed below. Cf.: “In the Russian-language Internet there are numerous electronic libraries, but most of them are, of course, not libraries (*biblioteki*) but collections of files (*sobranie failov*)” (Kostinskii 2005).

⁵ As Kratasjuk points out, this does not demonstrate that the RuNet is “specific and unique”; it may just as well be an expression of a “post-Soviet identity problem.” “The question of whether the RuNet really exists or is a mythologeme cultivated by Russian users and Web researchers to define their ‘otherness,’ remains an open one” (Kratasjuk 2005, 34).

The Russian Internet has virtually managed to realize the hacker ideal of free information, in contrast to the “Western” Internet in which copyright and commercial concerns have severely limited the range of online publications and creative production in general. The proliferation of online libraries in Russia is a result of a specific attitude toward property, especially intellectual property deeply rooted in Russian culture, which tends to disregard private interests for the sake of a common cause (Gorny 2006, 184).

Despite the essentialist dichotomisation inherent in this statement (Russia as opposed to “the West”) and its maintaining of cultural myths (cf. Strukov 2009, 9), it testifies not only to a recurrent pattern in the self-perception of Russian Internet pioneers (and maybe also a wider part of the Russian intelligentsia), but also to the fact that the dissemination of literature through the Russian Internet in its early period was outside regulation and state control, favouring instead active participation and the non-commercial interests of the users. In analyses of this kind, as suggested by Henrike Schmidt, “the reference to the historical tradition of samizdat comes across as a continuation of the struggle for intellectual freedom under the new conditions of capitalism” (Schmidt 2009, 4).

At least until 2004, Moshkov’s library was—by the same token—open to all kinds of texts. Its dissemination of literature was, in other words, made with no reference to a canon (whether the traditional Russian canon or some alternative one). Here, literature has been published on the basis of individual interests and taste. It may be said to have facilitated, in Vlad Strukov’s words, a “destabilisation of the literary canon” and “enabled desacralisation of Russian classical literature” (Strukov 2009, 9). Another example that is relevant to mention in relation to (the absence of) canon is Iakov Krotov’s library (<http://www.krotov.info/>). A liberal Orthodox theologian often associated with the late Aleksandr Men, Krotov publishes not only Christian texts from virtually all confessions, but also a large amount of texts on cultural history, sociology, philosophy, pedagogy etc. Its openness to new texts seems to be unlimited. Although the library is based on a one-to-many relationship, the application of texts is left to the user, in whom the creator Krotov in this way shows huge confidence.

Towards the end of the 1990s, the Russian state began to show greater interest in the Internet (Schmidt and Teubener 2006a, 14), and in particular in the years 2000–2002, several professional Internet media entities were created on state orders and/or by state money (partially or in full), projects that Schmidt and Teubener have described as “state-owned, ‘trustworthy’ content projects” (Schmidt and Teubener 2006b, 60).⁶ As they use it, this concept refers first and foremost to an officially sponsored media sector. A prominent actor in this respect has been the pro-Kremlin “political technologist” Gleb Pavlovskii and his Foundation of Effective Politics, which has contributed to Internet medias such as Lenta.ru, Vesti.ru, and the Russian Journal (Alexander 2003).

The increasing Internet activity of Russian state institutions that was observable in the first years of Vladimir Putin’s presidency materialised itself also in culturally oriented projects such as the Internet portal *The Russian Language* (<http://www.gramota.ru>). Created on the initiative of the Russian Language Council and financially supported by the Federal

⁶ Individual, private projects of the 1990s have also received economic support from the state after 2000, e.g., Moshkov’s library.

Agency for Press and Mass Communication, its services have been concerned with the (re)implementation of language standards and normativity. Representing traditional Russian language ideology, the portal is a top-down, non-interactive facility which gives incontestable answers to questions on language usage and which does not allow for metadiscussions.⁷ In my view, The Fundamental Electronic Library may also be seen as a parallel project in the field of literature and literary scholarship. It was created and is still led by the Gorky Institute at the Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of Communication, and major grants have been given by the Russian Fund for Humanities Research (until 2003, also by the Soros foundation). Funding, still, is only one relevant aspect here; in fact, its editors have complained about an economic disregard by the official sector, which has made it difficult for them to develop the project as rapidly as planned (Peschio *et al.* 2005, 62–63). Equally important in my view is the ideological dimension. Both these projects intend to be “thrust-worthy,” to adopt Schmidt and Teubener’s term, by assuming an academic style and not least by maintaining cultural norms and canons, ambitions that were by and large absent from the Russian Internet culture of the 1990s.

As to online libraries, this new trend is represented not only by The Fundamental Electronic Library but also by The Russian Virtual Library (www.rvb.ru). In the following, I shall concentrate on the former, but briefly mention that what they have in common is not only Eugene Gorny’s active participation—he is the chief editor of the former and a member of the editorial board of the latter—but also the publication of classic Russian literature on the basis of already printed, authoritative scholarly editions, which is reflected in their digitalisation. In other words, they make it possible to read a text online, and quote from it, without revealing that this is actually what you have done. But while The Russian Virtual Library cannot be claimed to be conservative in its selection of texts—it has included for instance a section of twentieth-century poetry labelled “non-official” (and there are other examples as well)—this is an epithet that applies very well to The Fundamental Electronic Library. I explore this “conservatism” further below.

Kul’turnost’ Online

The Fundamental Electronic Library (FEB) was launched on 1 June 2002; its general director at present is Konstantin Vigurskii, while its chief editor is Igor Pil’schikov. Describing itself as a “repository of primary, secondary, and reference texts,” but also an “effective instrument for analysing these texts,” it makes explicit that it is a scholarly library aimed primarily at the professional sphere (scholars, researchers, editors, etc.). It is an ambitious project; according to a 2004 article in *The Moscow Times*, its goal is to “create the world’s most complete and accurate library of Russian literature online” (Osipovich 2004). Thus the epithet “fundamental” in its title:

Our Library was given the name “Fundamental” because it is designed to provide an exhaustive and comprehensive body of materials (*global’nyi okhvat i polnotu predstavleniia materialov*) on Russian literature and folklore. Naturally, this cannot be achieved over-

⁷ Cf. Michael Gorham’s ongoing research on Gramota.ru, as presented for instance on the first Future of Russian conference (Bergen, 17–20 June 2009), see http://www.uib.no/rg/future_r/publications/f1-papers.

night: the FEB is a dynamic system that develops in accordance with the needs of the professional sphere (*potrebnosti professional'noi sfery*) that it serves.⁸

Its *fundamental'nost'* is realised gradually by the continual adding of new texts, with reference to the needs of the scholars. However, the “dynamism” that the FEB is claimed to represent is not unlimited, but instead moderated by its reliance on already existing, printed academic editions. All material found on its pages is rendered in full accordance with these editions, from pagination and orthography to misprints, with one minor and yet significant exception to which I shall return towards the end. Its digitised versions of Russian literature assume the authority, stability, and coherence associated with the printed book (cf. Ensslin 2007). The printed book represents the norm, and this library attempts to recreate not only its capability for preserving information online but also its reliability. It is, in other words, traditional print culture, which in Russia bears particular cultural significance, and here lies the source for the project's attempt to gain “thrust-worthiness.”

Underlying the FEB, we may discern a suspicion towards the practice of disseminating literature that had become common on the Russian Internet up to this point. In contrast to previous online libraries, it assumes an ethos of reliability and confidence, as emphasised in several articles and interviews in the Russian press.⁹ Illustrative is the following talk with *Radio Svoboda*:

Igor Pil'shchikov: [...] To what extent may we have confidence (*doveriat'*) in the information that we receive? We try to prepare the information in such a way that the professional researcher—a philologist, historian, linguist, art historian—may have confidence in it.

Aleksandr Kostinskii [the interviewer]: So that he will not have to go to the library in order to double-check (*pereproveriat'*) (Kostinskii 2005).

The alleged unreliability of previous electronic libraries has been emphasised by several commentators positive of the FEB, such as the anonymous Any Key in *Weekly Journal* (2002). While admitting that the former should be acknowledged for having provided literature free of charge, the author claims that they are all, with rare exceptions, “created by aficionados, by dilettantes.” And he/she continues:

In such libraries there are usually no sufficient collations of the text (*polnotsennaia sverka teksta*) (and it is therefore impossible to rely on its authenticity), there are never different editions of one and the same book, not even in cases where these differ fundamentally from each other, there are no bibliographies, no regular catalogues—in general, you will not find that which distinguishes, let us suppose, a major university library from a comprehensive home library. This may be compared to the way in which the site of a professional mass medium stands out from the best home pages (Any Key 2002).

⁸ This and the previous quotations are taken from the section “About Us”/“About the FEB” (*O proekte/Svedeniia o FEB*): <http://www.feb-web.ru/feb/feb/about1.htm>. An English version is also available (<http://www.feb-web.ru/feben/feb/about.htm>). I have for the most part used this translation, but adjusted it where necessary.

⁹ Most of these have been collected here: <http://www.feb-web.ru/feb/feb/media/index.htm>.

As Kostinskii's interview with the editors reveals, however, the aim of the Fundamental Electronic Library extends beyond pragmatism. The FEB aims not only to make it easier and "safer" to read and make quotations, but also to evoke the values of traditional print culture and to recreate these on the Web. One of the fundamental values traditionally associated with Russian print culture is *cultivation*, and cultivation of text dissemination on the RuNet, which is thus implicitly claimed to be in a "barbaric" state, turns out to be an underlying ambition of the project.

Aleksandr Kostinskii: Today a huge number of young people are using the Internet. Even in Russia, probably, every student will sooner or later have to use the Internet. And it is very important, in my view, although you may disagree, that this has not only to do with concrete information for academics, but also with a culture of text presentation on the Web (*kul'tura predostavleniia teksta v Seti*).

Konstantin Vigurskii: I completely agree with you, but I would like to emphasise one further aspect. The culture of presenting information, of perceiving information on the Internet is only about to come into being, and as such we have no culture of this kind. We have a huge experience of working with information in the traditional print culture. In the interactive sphere, however, such a culture is only about to come into being from the silver screen (Kostinskii 2005).

This evoking of the highly normative notion of *kul'tura* makes, in my view, an implicit reference to the Russian notion and tradition of *kul'turnost'*. In the Soviet Union, *kul'turnost'* came to represent the core of cultural policy from the 1930s onwards, when it was formulated on the background of the rapid industrialisation and urbanisation under Joseph Stalin (Volkov 2000). At this stage, it embraced everything that was assumed to make out a civilised conduct, from clothing and hygiene to consumption, and the aim of this policy was the making of a new cultivated middlebrow culture, applicable to and consumable by the entire Soviet population. It replaced the attempts to create a particular proletarian culture that had preoccupied the Bolshevik regime during the 1920s. In the post-Stalin period, then, an initial strong emphasis on collectivism and the collective significance of individual cultivation came gradually into conflict with an increasing attention to individual self-improvement (Kelly 1999). The inner qualities of the personality, of the "cultured man" (*kul'turnyi chelovek*), now became more important. The initial hygienic associations of *kul'turnost'* were metaphorically projected from physical health onto other domains.

Having become a fundamental value in Soviet society, *kul'turnost'* was not only propagated by the authorities, but also supported by the intelligentsia. In particular in the post-Stalin period, *kul'turnost'* came above all to be seen as manifesting itself in the reading of books, or rather, in Stephen Lovell's words, in the "production, dissemination and consumption of print culture...print culture became the main transmitter and emblem of Soviet *kul'turnost'*" (Lovell 2000, 21). Knowledge of the Russian literary canon was held to be a fundamental tool for achieving *kul'turnost'*, for imposing social skills and binding Soviet society together. By implication, this ideology fostered myths such as the Soviet people being the "best-read people in the world." One effect of the *kul'turnost'* ideology that is still discernible in post-Soviet Russia is a widespread acquaintance and interest among most Russian citizens with what in the West is considered "high culture." As Stephen Hutchings points out,

“high art/mass culture relations in Russia remain different from those in the West, where televisual (and other cultural) output is targeted at clearly differentiated ‘high art,’ middle-brow’ and ‘mass’ markets” (Hutchings 2004, 160). By implication, the values attached to literary culture by means of the notion of *kul’turnost’* have been applicable for fairly wide strata of the Soviet and later Russian population.

The relevance of this *kul’turnost’* tradition to the FEB is seen most explicitly in its ambition of cultivating the treatment of pre-digital written culture on the Internet. However, the meaning *kul’turnost’* in this context extends beyond the question of finding the proper form of digital text dissemination.¹⁰ Its goal is, in my view, not only to contribute to the cultivation of the RuNet, but also to preserve a set of values attributed to traditional print culture in the era of new technology. This implies, furthermore, the preservation of the Soviet past, and it requires the insistence on the existence of a particular literary canon.

Reshaping the Canon

From what has been said above, it follows that not any printed book can form the basis for this library. It is oriented towards a *canon*, a selection of “Russian literature and folklore,” which in Russian written culture during the Soviet period was maintained through scholarly, authoritative editions. Correspondingly, the library is not open to all kinds of texts in the way Moshkov’s library has been. Despite its alleged dynamic character, it is, as it appears at present, a highly predicabile project.

Let us now examine in more detail what this library contains. Its basic unit is a so-called Digital Scholarly Edition (*elektronnoe nauchnoe izdanie*), which may be an author (“Pushkin”), a certain work (*Tale of Igor’s Campaign*), a group of related texts or a genre (fairytales), or a reference work (Ushakov’s four-volume dictionary). In the case of “Pushkin,” a Digital Scholarly Edition consists of a large body of texts—all of Pushkin’s works in numerous editions as well as a vast amount of commentary literature—whereas in the reference section it is usually confined to a single dictionary or encyclopaedia.

Its archive can be entered in the column on the left side of the screen, either through links leading to different periods (eighteenth century, nineteenth century, etc.), or through links below that lead directly to the author (i.e., the Digital Scholarly Edition) who has your interest. Here, under the heading of “Available Editions” (*deistvuiushchie izdaniia*), there is listed a selection of Russian authors from Lomonosov to Sholokhov, as well as ancient Russian literature such as the *Tale of Igor’s Campaign*, Avvakum’s *Life*, and folklore (fairytales, *bylinas*, etc.). Further down, there is a reference section where the user can proceed to dictionaries, encyclopaedias, academic series, etc. In addition to Ushakov’s dictionary (1934–1940), examples include the dictionaries of the language of Pushkin and Griboedov, the Lermontov and the *Tale of Igor’s Campaign* Encyclopaedias, complete editions of academic series such as *Proceedings of the Department of Ancient Russian Literature* (1932–) and *Annals of the Academy of Sciences* (of both the pre-revolutionary, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods). There are also several Histories of Russian Literature (most of which stem from the Soviet period),

¹⁰ Besides, cultivation of text production and dissemination on the Internet has also been discussed in the West (cf. Shillingsburg 2006).

as well as the *History of World Literature* (1983–1994). Again, all texts contained here are digitised versions of previously printed works.

As to individual authors, striking is the absence of Dostoevsky on the first page, though he is present on the “Nineteenth Century” site by means of a currently inactive hyperlink (Turgenev and Leskov, however, are not even included here). Some may also find the selection of twentieth-century literature highly selective, but at least Mandelstam, Blok, and Gorky are promised to ultimately appear. However, the temporary incompleteness as to some previously canonised authors does by no means undermine the project’s programme of representing the classic Russian literary canon.

While the FEB has by now become a comprehensive online collection of Russian literature, it also informs us implicitly about its subsequent publication schedules. Each Digital Scholarly Edition announces a large number of titles that have not yet been made available, marked by a dot (·) instead of a plus (+). In the Digital Scholarly Edition of Pushkin, for instance, we find first a collection of entries for Pushkin taken from encyclopaedias and dictionaries, such as the pre-revolutionary *Encyclopaedic Dictionary* “Brokgauz and Efron,” *The Great Soviet Dictionary*, and the *Literary Encyclopaedia* of the 1930s. What follows is “Pushkin’s Works,” subdivided into “Collected Works” and other editions, as well as letters and manuscripts. Under “Collected Works,” altogether five different editions are announced, of which only two have yet been made available. Next, we have a long list of secondary literature, but while for instance Iurii Lotman’s works on Pushkin are present (+), Viktor Vinogradov’s two monographs *Pushkin’s Style* and *Pushkin’s Language* are not (·).¹¹ Finally, we have sections for serials, bibliographies, dictionaries, where the *Dictionary of Pushkin’s Language* is only announced. Still, the announcement itself informs the user that there is such a dictionary, and, by implication, that it is fundamental to the Puskhinist. In this way, the library provides a list, a national curriculum, of the most important primary, secondary, and reference texts. The list of literature is not only informative, but also normative—it is a canon.

The normative notion of canon (from Greek, “rule,” “measure”) goes back to the principles according to which the Christian Bible was compiled. To quote the definition from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “Canon” is the “collection or list of books of the Bible accepted by the Christian Church as genuine and inspired.” It is thus an authoritative list of texts, i.e., a list that represents a norm. Prior to this, however, lists of authors worthy of imitation, i.e., authors that were considered models or examples had circulated frequently in Alexandria in the Hellenistic period, though these were not mainly referred to as “canons.” The modern concept of canon as a list of valued secular works is indebted to both these traditions, and its origin is attributed to the Dutch-German classical scholar David Ruhnken (1723–1798) and his *Historia critica oratorum Graecorum* (1768) (Asper 1998, 872; Gorak 1997).

The Russian canon that is transmitted and preserved in the FEB was created in late Imperial Russia and was maintained with some adjustments during the Soviet period (for an overview, see Kelly 2001, 32–60). As argued by Jeffrey Brooks, its emergence was tightly connected to quests for a new secular Russian national identity, in which educated Russians such

¹¹ Under “Pushkin,” still, a fairly great amount of texts have been made available, while under “Goncharov,” where the list is almost as long, hardly anything is published (yet).

as Vissarion Belinskii saw nineteenth-century literature as well-suited for drawing the common man into a unified Russian culture. The outcome of this process, in which liberal, enthusiastic schoolteachers played a significant role, was the creation of a canon based on the names of Pushkin and Lermontov, Gogol and Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy. This canon was later taken over by the new Soviet regime. “When the Bolsheviks came to power and sought symbols of national unity independent of the church and the autocracy, they first hesitatingly, and later with great enthusiasm, used Russian culture, and particularly the literature of the nineteenth century” (Brooks 1981, 316).

Canonisation is not only a process of inclusion but also of exclusion, and it is worth considering which texts the FEB includes (at the expense of others). As it turns out, the Soviet tradition is very much present in several ways. While the selection of authors itself has its origin in late Imperial Russia, a main preference is shown for Soviet editions, instead of, for instance, first editions of singular works from the nineteenth century or even the thick journals in which so many of the classic Russian novels were published first. Even more significant is the fact that this library also creates a canon of secondary literature from the Soviet period. Available works from the pre-revolutionary and post-Soviet periods are, in comparison, strikingly few in number. “Foreign,” i.e., non-Russian, scholarship is present in connection with some of the authors, but the selection is highly arbitrary. In the case of Goncharov, there are several titles (even in Italian); of Lomonosov, Griboedov, and Chekhov there are a few; while for Pushkin, Gogol, and Tolstoy, one only find Russian scholarship. Foreign commentary literature in or translated into Russian, which is increasing in post-Soviet Russia (cf., for instance, the series *Contemporary Western Russistics* (*Sovremennaia zapadnaia russistika*)), is totally absent. The principle of completeness has so far resulted in a predominance of Soviet scholarship—this is at least the starting point from which the editors have chosen to build their collection.

The selection of literature on the FEB is claimed to be based on a pragmatic purpose, with reference to the “practical needs” (*prakticheskie nuzhdy*) of scholars (in addition to the existence of printed, reliable editions). Knowledge of these needs is achieved, we are told, on the basis of a “citation index” on the one hand and, on the other hand, the frequency of an author’s inclusion in university syllabi and recommended reading lists.¹² Although the editors do refer to the dynamic nature of their project (“more will come”), it remains unclear how thoroughly these needs are examined and how and if such an index is really consulted at all. Regardless, the library does create the impression that present-day scholars above all “need” secondary literature of Soviet origin. What is noteworthy in this respect, is that in contrast to both pre-revolutionary and not least post-Soviet scholarship Soviet books are, in fact, quite easy to find and access not only in libraries in the Russian Federation and the former Soviet Union, but in other parts of the academic world as well. The inaccessibility of much recent Russian scholarship is due both to the collapse of the distribution of literature that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and to the often extremely low number of copies that is usually produced of an academic book in Russia today. As a result, the most recent literature has tended to become the rarest.¹³

¹² Cf. <http://www.feb-web.ru/feb/feb/about1.htm> (scroll down to section 7).

¹³ The editors are aware of this problem and make it part of the library’s rationale (Peschio *et. al.* 2005, 47–48). While their complaints about the (physical) library holdings and the lack of a properly working distribution sys-

The fact that the FEB nevertheless gives preference to Soviet editions and works is a deliberate choice of its editors, and demonstrates, I would claim, not necessarily prevailing “practical needs,” but rather the reliance on a tacit canon in the professional milieu of Russian scholars. This project is more concerned with preserving and disseminating what is already known and largely available to its main addressees, rather than with making new and unknown literature accessible. In short, it is canon-oriented and canon-preserving. Its explicit pragmatic purposes conceal the implicit normative ones. It maintains a common heritage in a situation that many people have experienced as chaotic—also with respect to digitalisation. The FEB provides past research, the Soviet tradition, with order and clarity and not least with a hegemonic position.

Against this background, the following message from a certain Aleksei, posted in the project’s Guestbook on 21 February 2009, becomes rather odd:

I deeply wish that you would enrich the Fundamental Electronic Library not only with fiction (*khudozhestvennaia literatura*) but also with scholarly literature, making wide use of the books of the publishing house *Nauka* and of the *Academy of Sciences USSR*. It is important to remember that the Soviet scholarly heritage is the highest achievement of our academic thinking (*nauchnaia mysl’*), and we have no right to squander it. Sincerely, Aleksei.

Given the fact that dissemination of Soviet scholarship is very much what the FEB does, it is difficult to understand why such a message has been posted here at all (if it is meant seriously). Rather, it is the post-Soviet period that is neglected and thus would be in need of such support.

Historicism on the Web

In other words, the FEB unites manifest pragmatism with tacit normativity. Although these values/features may seem to be at odds with one another, they are easily interrelated. But there is another principle according to which this online library has been constructed and which is not as easily maintained as the two others: that of historicism. As the third of its “Fundamental Principles,” succeeding those of “meeting the standards of contemporary scholarship [and] satisfying the practical needs” and “completeness,” we find the following: “Historicism (*istorizm*) as the basis (*osnova*) for the compilation of The Fundamental Electronic Library. Its materials are selected with reference to (*s uchetom*) the historical (literary, scholarly and general cultural) context.”¹⁴ This definition contains two components: Texts (i.e., “materials”) and context. The texts are undeniably here, but what about the contexts? How are they evoked?

What this statement refers to more specifically, as becomes clear elsewhere, is the principle that the editors publish material on the basis of printed versions without adding, correcting or changing anything. Herein lies the “historicism” of the project. However, this hardly

tem of books in post-Soviet Russia are certainly justified, however, I cannot see that this has really affected their policy. So far, they have republished materials that are already widely accessible.

¹⁴ <http://feb-web.ru/feb/feb/about1.htm> (section 4).

means that the *context* is “referred to,” as the site’s owners claim. True, as a rule, a minor comment, a “Description of the Publication” (*Opisanie izdaniia*), precedes the cover page of every edition, book, or article, but in most cases the text given here hardly qualifies as a contextualising statement, as the following example taken from the “Description” of the *Literary Encyclopaedia* (*Literaturnaia entsiklopedia*, 1929–39) shows:

The visitors of The Fundamental Electronic Library are here presented with a digital scholarly edition of the *Literary Encyclopaedia* (Moscow 1929–39, vols. 1–11). This most valuable (*tssenneishii*) compendium of reference information, which has never been republished and has for a long time been a bibliographical rarity, has to a considerable degree preserved its scholarly and educational value (*nauchnaia i obshcheobrazovatel'naia tsennost'*) for the reader today.¹⁵

This remark is followed by a list of contributors and types of entries, so this is basically all that is said about its context. Noteworthy is what the description omits: that this dictionary clearly bears the ideological imprint of the Stalinist period. Instead, it attempts to justify the work despite its background, which is passed over in silence. In other words, this comment cannot qualify as “historicist” at all; it does not contextualise the work, but highlights instead “eternal” qualities that are claimed to have sustained its relevance at present. We see the same tendency in the “description” of Ushakov’s dictionary.

As to the correctness of definitions, Ushakov’s dictionary remains to this day the best defining dictionary (*tolkovyi slovar'*) of the Russian language, an irreplaceable reference book for those working with texts from the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth.¹⁶

What is passed over in silence is, again, its context; this dictionary was an important contribution to the new Soviet language policy under Stalin and became a “lexicographical monument of a totalitarian epoch” (Kupina 1995, 4). Symptomatically, when the editors in 2007 found it necessary to clarify the principles behind the project, against the background of several “misunderstandings” in the Guestbook (see below), they limited themselves to the following two examples of contextual impact: the occurrence of the form *shchast'e* in Pushkin and “God” being typed with a small letter in Soviet editions.¹⁷

The reason for this half-hearted historicism, I would claim, is that the project attempts to combine purposes that are mutually excluding one another: historical relativism and the preservation of a canon. According to Aleida and Jan Assmann (1987), the historical-philological approach is fundamentally different from and opposed to the canon-oriented one. While the former thematises temporal distance, the latter ignores it and aims instead at identification and application in the present. The examples just mentioned demonstrate, in my view, that this project is not so much oriented towards the historical context and the historicity of texts

¹⁵ <http://www.feb-web.ru/feb/litenc/encyclp/>.

¹⁶ <http://www.feb-web.ru/feb/ushakov/ush-abc/default.asp>.

¹⁷ <http://feb-web.ru/feb/feb/press/070131.htm> (“Once more about the principles of FEB’s text presentation”).

as it claims, but rather towards the text as part of a canon, of “our heritage,” and as having preserved its actuality at present.

We are confronted here not only with a theoretical problem concerning the “meaning of history”: how we are to make sense of texts belonging to other periods than our own? Furthermore, there is also with a practical one problem: the difficult relationship to the past in a post-totalitarian society. It is precisely the presence of works such as the *Literary Encyclopaedia* that have provoked the most critical responses in the project’s Guestbook.¹⁸ In addition to praise, criticism, corrections, wishes, questions, etc., the Guestbook contains several comments concerning information found in Soviet academic literature. On 5 November 2006, someone calling himself Parator posted a message with a complaint about an entry for Osip Mandelstam from this dictionary, to which he had been led directly from the Web search engine Yandex.

I have read the entry for Mandelstam in the Yandex dictionary. It resembles the article on genetics in the Stalinist *Dictionary of Foreign Words*. At the end there is a postscript saying that the materials are provided by your project. Your article on Akhmatova is equally disgraceful (*pozor v tom zhe dukhe*). I am afraid to look any further...

The editor Pil’schikov calmly replies that the entry is, in fact, taken from a dictionary from the Stalin period—“see the bibliographical description.” A similar reaction was posted on 14 June 2008 by a certain van-Osmos who had consulted the entry for “Cosmopolitanism” in the four-volume *Dictionary of the Russian Language* (1957–1961, main editor Anastasiia Evgen’eva). Here, cosmopolitanism is defined as a “reactionary bourgeois ideology propagandising a rejection of national traditions and culture, patriotism, refuting state and national sovereignty,” etc. Van-Osmos writes: “I was astonished to read this in the dictionary. What about Socrates, Mozart, and other humanists who considered themselves cosmopolitans?” The editors reply by urging the user to consider the year of publication:

Dear van-Osmos,

You might not have been so astonished if you had taken into consideration that the first edition of this dictionary came out in 1957—as the foreword makes clear. One of the main principles of the FEB is to present digital versions of texts that correspond precisely to the typography of the original. We neither alter nor edit the original texts.

In this response, the editors have inserted a link not to their own “Description” but to the original foreword of the dictionary, where the year “1957” figures at the very end. They seem to consider, in other words, that the given material is capable of contextualising itself. In practice, the editors implicitly demand that users acquire sufficient knowledge of the contexts, knowledge which is not provided here, but which could perfectly well have been so, without having dispelled the indisputable advantages of this library (as to searchability, for instance). In a post-totalitarian society, as we see, this may have unforeseen implications.

There are more discussions of this kind in the Guestbook. “Do you consider at all what you are publishing?” Vladimir asks, having read an article of 1952 about the author Lev Gu-

¹⁸ <http://feb-web.ru/feb/feb/gbook/index.htm>.

milevskii, and Vigurskii replies, “We do consider what we publish, but do you understand what you are reading?” He continues,

One may evaluate works written 20 or 50 or 100 years ago differently, but they have been published ages ago in a printed version and represent a cultural and historical fact. It is precisely therefore that they are of interest to literary scholars and aficionados. As is history, so are the facts (*Kakova istoriia, takovy i fakty*).

Another user (Dmitrii) complained on 1 May 2006 about an article on Ukrainian literature, describing it as “Soviet rubbish” (*sovetskaia khren'*), while adding that it looks as if it was written in the 1950s (which it was). “I am leaving your site in fury,” he concludes. Vigurskii responds, “The style of your message brings to mind that of young activists of the 1920s and 30s: ‘This is nothing but pre-revolutionary rubbish! This material is impossible to use and take seriously—a complete counterrevolution!’ We do not subscribe to this point of view.”

The FEB editors are surely right in claiming that Soviet texts are “historical facts.” However, the question remains if the project presents texts in a way that makes them appear as such. At the very least, they are simultaneously introduced as neutral sources of information and made searchable as part and parcel of the “effective instrument for analyses” that this project aspires to be. While the notion of the text as a historical fact does not distinguish between primary and secondary texts, such a distinction is reintroduced both in the making of a user-friendly library and in its tacit defence of what the Assmanns have termed *das kanonische Interesse* (as opposed to *das historische Interesse*). According to them, the canonicity of certain texts presupposes a hierarchisation, where the “great” texts (the canon) are clearly distinguished from the secondary ones (Assmann and Assmann 1987, 14). The FEB’s reliance on conflicting principles, on pragmatism and canon-orientation on the one hand and historicism on the other, thus creates unforeseen tensions that are left to the users to solve.

Moreover, the historicism that this project claims to represent is also obscured by the fact that the principle of historical accuracy in the presentation of texts is not maintained completely. Whereas the original pagination, orthography, and even misprints are preserved, the typography is not. As a rule, all texts are presented in uniform design; they share the same font (Times New Roman) and are made accessible and searchable by means of the same programming language (SGML/XML).¹⁹ Except where pre-revolutionary orthography remains unaltered, all texts from the last 200 years look as if they stem from the same period, where the FEB logo always figures in the upper left corner, and where “Russian literature and folklore” is what catches sight first. Whether you read the *Tale of Igor’s Campaign* or Sholokhov or a fairytale, you read manifestations of the same “Russian literature and folklore.”

Contrary to what the editors seem to suggest, contexts are never immediately present together with the texts themselves, not even with those printed on paper. To evoke a context is always part of the interpretation itself. But where typography and paper quality at least remind the reader of the historicity of a publication (this holds true not least of Soviet editions),

¹⁹ In a few cases (e.g., the 1800 edition of the *Tale of Igor’s Campaign*, or the *Proceedings from the Department of Ancient Russian Literature*), the material has been scanned and presented in PDF format, an alternative solution that, in my view, serves its historicist programme better, but which is less user-friendly, for instance when it comes to searchability (another “main principle” of this project).

this kind of online publication does not. Instead, it makes it too convenient to access a text while ignoring its historical context, as demonstrated by the messages in the Guestbook. If the goal is to reconstruct a text's context, contextualising commentaries are required—of which there are virtually none here. While the commentary literature may contextualise the primary texts, it does not contextualise itself as a “historical fact.”

But it is also a question to what extent this historicist programme is possible in a medium characterised by synchronicity. The spatial organisation and presentation of texts that characterises web portals of this kind inevitably contribute to their decontextualisation. At the same time, they are recontextualised in a synchronic space, where the canonised texts are presented in a spatial dimension with a “user-friendly interface” (*druzhestvennyi interfeis*), without temporal borders. In the FEB, Russian literature may be accessed and read irrespectively of historical linearity and temporality, and its historicity disappears.

Concluding Remarks

The explicit purpose and programme of the FEB are pragmatic and historicist, principles that themselves are difficult to combine. In addition, the project aims at the preservation and dissemination of a canon in a cultivated form in the era of new technology. It is a fundamental question as to what extent the concurrence of all these aspects is possible. In my view, at least, the library has not succeeded on this point. In practice, the historicist ambition yields to the pragmatic, and thus to the implicit purpose of maintaining a canon. The FEB emerges, then, as an attempt to actualise the past in a new situation, in a way that invests the texts with *new* meaning. While canonisation processes intend to create stability, they are inevitably evolutionary in nature (Assmann and Assmann 1987). This library makes the Soviet past present in a new and unforeseen way, in a synchronic, virtual space. Thus, it reveals that digitalisation is capable of influencing the way in which we experience the historicity of texts, and that online reading is different from reading a book—regardless of the intentions of its creators.

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