

## Literary Museums Today: Definition, Status, Prospects

In the summer of 2014 the State Literary Museum first introduced its Literary Museums of Russia Encyclopedia. There is a certain logic to the fact that it was the State Literary Museum that started compiling the encyclopedia. The State Literary Museum is the biggest field-oriented museum in the Russian Federation. It celebrated its 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2014. More than ten homes of famous Russian authors from Dostoyevsky and Chekhov to Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn are incorporated in the structure of the State Literary Museum. Apart from this, the State Literary Museum's complex includes more than ten facilities that store collections of manuscripts, books, pictorial and graphic arts, audio recordings, arts and crafts and other artefacts connected with the lives and work of Russia's literary figures of different epochs.

The first problem we encountered was the absence of a clear, generally accepted list of literary museums. The reasons for this indefiniteness seem quite apparent, they are diversity of institutions due to varied museum subordination (federal, regional or municipal), significant differences in the positions of state-owned and private museums, absence of distinct difference between independent literary museums and museums within the structure of other institutions both museum-oriented and others (libraries, institutes, companies).

Thus, at the very start of the execution of the project its authors came across the fact that the idea is not only to publish the encyclopedia or, rather, in a wider sense, the project is not only of informational nature. It became evident that for thorough compilation of the encyclopedia of literary museums it is of necessity to come to a certain agreement about terminology, reach a consensus on defining the very notion of a literary museum. Since the first introduction of the project we have hosted more than ten events i.e. presentations, round-table talks, discussions not only in Moscow and St. Petersburg but in other cities and towns such as Omsk and Ufa. Let me introduce you to some of the thoughts and ideas that emerged during the discussion of our project.

## 1. Literary Museums and the History of Literature

There is a most important distinction between literary museums and art galleries. Since the beginning of the history of art in its modern perception, that is, for instance, since the release of Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1550) museum collections have not only been places for public contemplation of world art treasures but at the same time a certain means of separating those from a vast majority of works unable to claim so high a status. It was Vasari who started analyzing schools and trends in art instead of giving technical descriptions of works of art that were of purely 'productive' character and came from different workshops. For a modern person the high artistic value of Ghirlandaio's and Cranach's workshops is as evident as their commercial status was for the masters' contemporaries: they were successful, they produced 'fashionable' products in high demand and they made profits. I would like to point out once again that the inclusion of works of certain artists in prestigious private or public collections for public contemplation directly signified their artistic value. These considerations might sound trivial as any pupil knows that a painting acquired by the Tretyakov Gallery or The Museo del Prado immediately receives a special status and high market value. However, if one goes back to the previously mentioned difference between museums of art and literary museums the speculations mentioned above will no longer sound trite.

Both an art gallery and a big museum dedicated to the work of a writer are considered to be museums. However, unlike art galleries, literary museums are by no means tools of making the history of literature. I want to be more straightforward here: as a rule a literary museum of a writer is founded *post factum*, after the high status of the writer is established. Although here we cannot elaborate on the ways of 'canonizing' writers' works and reputations as well as on the signifiers of the status of a classic, I would like to remind you that in recent years hundreds of papers by literary historians in Russia and other countries have been dedicated to the patterns of building literary canons. For our purpose, let me just enumerate some of the mentioned signifiers: recognition by literary critics, the

number of printed copies and sales results, introduction to school curricula and official state ideological doctrines and so on.

Summing up, art galleries make the history of *art* whereas the history of *literature* is built aside from compiling museum collections. Why does this happen? The reasons seem quite apparent, although until now they have not been reflected sufficiently in scholarly research or legislation. The difference may be explained by the fact that the primary intention of a painting as a form of art coincides with the primary intention of exhibiting art works in museum collections. A painting and an engraving are created for people to carefully contemplate them. The process of natural perception of the work of art is of the same nature as contemplating it in a museum. With literature the situation is completely different; its natural perception has nothing to do with exploring literary museum collections: one's impressions from reading *The Divine Comedy* or *Eugene Onegin* are hardly comparable to the impressions of a museum visitor who sees quill feathers, manuscripts, or pieces of Dante's or Pushkin's attire. There is more to say, if a person has not been impressed by literary works of a certain writer, for him it is no use visiting the writer's museum.

## 2. A Contemporary Literary Museum: the Strategic Trajectory of Development

One of the primary concerns of the contemporary literary museum is that of acquiring expert functions, i.e. the status of a 'collective' tool that will have a direct impact on shaping a historical literary perspective. As a result of such a change, first, the cultural functions of the literary museum will become closer to those of the art museum, and second, the gap between the time of creative work of a writer and the moment of his historico-literary canonization will be narrowed. This canonization implies both a possibility and necessity of museumification of memorial places connected with the writer's life and works as well as of their personal belongings. The acquisition of the expert functions by museums is a real challenge as cases of establishing museums of contemporary writers (either ones who passed away quite recently or living) are quite rare. Talking about Russian

experience, one could probably mention only a few cases that took place quite recently: the establishment of Joseph Brodsky museum in St. Petersburg, the museum of Vasily Belov in Vologda and the department of the State Literary Museum Aleksander Solzhenitsyn Museum in Kislovodsk.

Acquiring the expert status by the literary museum will broaden its speciality. The basic lines of work of the literary museum have traditionally been as follows: the acquisition of new objects for museum collection, the maintaining and preservation of existing objects (including restoration and storage in the proper conditions), displaying them in permanent or temporary exhibitions, conducting research on collection items and, most importantly, hosting cultural and educational events connected with displays of museum objects. The latter gives the museum new powers to become an expert authority to shape the history of literature. This entails not only consistently hosting readings and recitals featuring contemporary poets and writers but also professional discussion among cultural studies specialists, literary scholars and critics who specialize in contemporary literature. This line of work of the State Literary Museum has been developing rather fast, the museum has launched a lot of projects aimed at confirming its status as an experimental venue where literary reputations of contemporary writers are being built and revised.<sup>1</sup>

The extension of the cultural functions of a literary museum will lead to a significant and controversial result. The cohesive and seemingly once and for all built history of literature which has a form of cause-effect successive relations between admittedly established classical writers will become controversial, dynamical, 'living' and involving parallel languages of description (discourses). This being said, it becomes evident that, on the one hand, not a single reputation created in the past is considered to be solid but, on the other hand, today's

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase 'literary reputation' in this case is a term, a traditionally excepted historical literary notion which dates back to the works by I.N. Rosanov and means a canonized resulted of three notional vectors: intentional and sensible efforts of the author himself to build a certain reputation, the critics' reasoned opinions and judgments about the author's works as well as signifiers of canonization established in the history of literature (the number of printed copies and introduction into school curricula)

literature becomes capable of building logical, cause-effect related history. In such case, the very definition of a literary museum is no longer of a steady character.

### 3. Approaches to Contemporary Definition of a 'Literary Museum'

While making a list of future articles of the Literary Museums of Russia Encyclopedia we encountered a great diversity of today's museums that consider themselves literary ones. The difficulty of compiling the encyclopedia lies not so much in different museum subordination or the subdivision of museums into public and private ones as it has been stated earlier nor in the fact that not a single public institution or an aggregation portal gives a final, generally accepted list of country's literary museums. This problem calls for a more sophisticated analysis. In present day it is hardly possible to refer a certain museum to the category of literary museums as the very definition of a literary museum needs to be revised. According to contemporary scholarly standards a museum is a cultural establishment that holds museum objects or collections. As for museum objects, those are defined as items, real estate or territory of a certain cultural and memorial value and, most importantly, of mundane, public or cultural use. For example, a memorial quill of a writer becomes a museum object only after it has stopped performing its primary function i.e. from the moment when it receives a memorial status and is no longer used as a quill to write texts. The same happens with a memorial flat of the writer N.N. which receives its museum status on condition that the premiss in question is occupied neither by the heirs nor by other individuals. It goes without saying that there are exceptions to the rule. For instance, some rare musical instruments (such as violins by Stradivari or Guarneri) may be used according to the intended purpose with the consent of the competent bodies. However, the exception proves the rule. And the rule turns out to be a cultural paradox. On the one hand, an object is valuable to the museum because of the cultural functions it performs (i.e. it was used by a famous writer). On the other hand, having become the property of a museum, the object no longer performs the intended function; it is forever withdrawn from the natural course of time and is found to be in some sort of cultural vacuum.

Contemporary museum theory developed and became relevant at the end of the XIXth century when positivism in philosophy and science predominated. At that time scholars systematically renounced 'metaphysical', teleological cultural theory; it was believed that objects, events and phenomena could forever be equal to themselves and deprived of a chance to meaningful development be that in scholarly reception or cultural practices.

Shall we say that today a great number of experts, museum societies and establishments agree upon the fact that museology is a fairly conservative branch of science and has not taken into account any particular developments which have taken place in different branches of science? Russell's neopositivism, Wittgenstein's analytic philosophy, M.Block, Febvre and Braudel's *Annales* School, Saussure's study of langue and parole, semiotics from Peirce to Lotman, the theory of structuralism from Lévi-Strauss to Barthes, Benjamin's and Althusser's Neo-Marxism... This list of scholarly traditions of the XXth century whose history should be applied in museology is to be continued. The ideas and approaches of Russian scholars Nikolai Fyodorov and Nikolai should be mentioned here too.

But let us turn from high and abstract theory to the practice of contemporary literary museums, or rather, to the difficulties we encountered compiling the list of museums for the encyclopedia. There turned out to be two types of establishments that claim themselves to be literary museums: traditional museums once founded by the government to store and exhibit memorial objects and premises, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, establishments that do not have items listed as memorial objects or collections but tend to be called literary museums. Those are diverse institutions that focus not so much on displaying collections and building traditional expositions but on events and cultural projects that involve modern media technologies. If we are committed to traditional views and definitions the second type of the establishments in question cannot be included in Literary Museums of Russia Encyclopedia. Still, there is no doubt that such establishments are of great interest to visitors and are always able to set up interesting projects.

However, they do not hold authentic memorial objects hence should be referred to as no more than initiatives of commercial nature that stand aside from scholarly principles and are not capable of performing museum functions. The establishments in question are transitory, they focus on iconic literary characters and mainstream ideas about the lives of different writers and, for that matter, not so much on culture but, rather, on dreams about culture. Let us try and set aside all the formality of museum positivism. If we have a closer look it will become clear that traditional, conservative literary museums work not with objects and facts of solid cultural status in the first place but with 'transitory' mental structures, a set of canonized ideas about lives of writers.

Take the famous Russian writer Maxim Gorky whose 150th anniversary is to be celebrated in 2018 for example. Today there exist several versions of his biography and literary reputation. During soviet times when everything was named after Gorky – the city, streets, institutions, and organizations – a certain canon of Gorky's biography was formed. Maxim Gorky was a proletarian writer who came from the underclass of Nizhny Novgorod and described the lives of vagabonds in his earlier works. Yet, at the same time, Gorky was the author of the 'quite timely' (according to Lenin) socialist novel *Mother*, the great Ilyich's companion, the pioneer of the first Soviet Writers' Congress, the founder of the USSR Union of Writers, the creator of socialist realism method in soviet literature. There is hardly any space left here for other facts that might help to build an alternative, hidden biography as opposed to the official one. According to the former Gorky is a Nietzschean, a writer who is well-known in Europe, a political refugee, Lenin's opponent, the advocate of the 'old-school' writers who nearly managed to save Gumilev from execution and, the last but not the least, the author of a series of articles *Untimely Thoughts* (1918) that were never published during the soviet period and were only available in samizdat versions. The question is how does one approach and recreate the true image of Maxim Gorky on the verge of the author's anniversary and if it is even possible to bring the two alternative biographies together. It becomes obvious that this issue is vital, and yet, impossible to approach

if we only rely on memorial objects and straightforward facts based on positivist ideas.

I would like to make an assumption that a contemporary literary museum should be able to work with dynamic, constantly changing ideas about writers and their works, which has long been done in practice, instead of mechanical rendering ready-made ideas, clichés and interpretations based on memorial objects in a familiar setting and admittedly outstanding (important, brilliant) works.

Roughly speaking, the traditional definition of a literary museum based on positivist ideas that has long become obsolete is incorrect twice:

First, it stems from an erroneous idea that the high status of a certain writer, his reputation as a classic writer are earned objectively and immediately as a result of solely the admitted brilliance of the writer's works. The algorithms and mechanisms of canonization mentioned above – publishing and editing practices, interpretations by critics, being involved in ideological political bodies, inclusion into state curricula, and, lastly, the establishment of museums – are not taken into consideration here.

Secondly, a canonized idea about a writer that once emerged and is made solid becomes of purely historic interest for researches and if it is withdrawn from up-to-date cultural context or if it is still being modified, the changes are serious but hidden.

Of course it would be not right to consider the two points that show that the traditional definition does not agree with contemporary scholarly beliefs are utterly wrong. In scientific terms, the two principles mentioned are necessary but insufficient for giving the appropriate definition to a literary museum.

A contemporary literary museum that claims its collections and expositions to be a relevant part of the cultural whole and to make real contact with people of different social statuses and age groups ought to work not only with static cultural signs and ideas found in museum objects and expositions but with dynamic processes where new senses emerge and the canonization (or decanonization) in the course of the future development takes place. A remarkable example of such a

literary museum is Schiller National Museum in Marbach am Neckar in Baden-Württemberg, Germany. The museum is based in a memorial house where the writer was born. The collection is built in quite a minimalistic manner due to the limited amount of preserved memorial objects. This is basically the kind of museum that appeals not for museum objects but the history of the image of the writer. According to the works of Thomas Schmidt, the curator of the museum and one of the heads of German Literature Archive, there may not be a 'ready-made' cultural identity of a writer for the museum to render. According to Thomas Schmidt one can only speak about the so-called 'staged' identity while the nature and character of a museum's work solely depends on a certain variant of this identity.

Thus, while working on the Literary Museums of Russia Encyclopedia we encountered a number of serious issues. The basic one is the fact that the generally accepted definition of a literary museum doesn't agree with the level of development of the present-day Arts. The first discussion about the possibility of working out a new definition took place in October 2015 in Tbilisi in the course of the session of International Committee for Literary Museums (ICLM).

Today the discussion is continued and, perhaps, the time has come to address ICOM's official bodies and stress the importance of correcting the key definition considering the theses introduced in the given paper.

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