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Jane Austen and Russian Chat

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In what I hope is an appropriately roundabout route into my topic, I would like to say a few words about how I embarked on this project and where I am with it at this point in time—for this is very much a work in progress.¹ Some years ago, I became fascinated with the idea that Pushkin might have read Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* before writing *Eugene Onegin*—or at least that the plot parallels between the two works were compelling enough to warrant further examination. This led to a commission to write an article on Jane Austen's reception in Russia, which (Pushkin aside) rather startlingly only begins in 1967, with the first translation into Russian of *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen's reception in Russia, moreover, remained largely in the realm of scholars and literary critics until relatively recently. This set the Soviet Union and later Russia apart from and untouched by the popular culture phenomenon of "Janemania," which has manifested itself in the United States, the UK, and other western European countries for some decades and which may be traced back to the appearance of "Janeites" at the beginning of the twentieth century.

¹This text was originally the basis of a presentation delivered at a roundtable on popular culture at the 2007 AAASS conference in New Orleans. It has been published here in a form that reflects its origins in academia's oral culture.

In the West, what we might term the "paraliterary Jane Austen"—nourished by the almost unparalleled appeal of Austen's novels (largely to female readers) across the divide between high culture and low culture, academic and popular reading fare—has both grown with and may serve as a gauge of the radical transformation in the way literature (or at least what began as literature) is consumed and processed in an age of increasingly diverse and complexly inter-related

telecommunications media and information technologies, which have led to the transposition of Austen's life and works from bestseller lists, to movie and television screens and even to the merchandising of such improbable products as Jane Austen T-shirts, mugs, and even action figures.² Most recently, the Austen boom has manifested itself on the internet, in a proliferation of often intricate websites,³ sometimes incorporating discussion groups and fanfiction. And while, like Austen's literary works, "Janemania" came late to Russia, in the twenty-first century Austen's multimedia presence in the Russian

² A Jane Austen action figure is available, for example, from the "Writer's Store" at <http://www.writersstore.com/product.php?products_id=2816>.

³ The online community *Lord of Pemberley* <www.pemberley.com> spun off of the AUSTEN-L discussion list in 1996. It claims its membership is at least 92% women, and according to Wikipedia, had a average of 8 to 10 million hits per month in 2007.

cultural consciousness is amply reflected on the internet.

In this context, the particular topic I will pursue today harks back to where I started, to Pushkin's *Evgeny Onegin*. This may make more sense when we recall the extent to which Pushkin's master text puts forward the practice of reading, particularly reading foreign novels, as a powerful means, in his time, of modeling Russian identity. I claim here that the Russian internet response to the western "Jane Austen" boom presents us with an analogous, albeit particularly contemporary challenge and opportunity. As I suggested in my description of western "Janeism" above, the various and sundry manifestations of the popular culture obsession with Jane Austen pose an excellent opportunity and challenge to explore radical changes effected by internet technology not only in means of (self)expression, but in reading praxis as a site of identity formation. The fact that internet "Janeism" came to Russia from a foreign land and a foreign language (for, after all, imaginary geographies of East and West remain powerful even in cyberspace), but belatedly and at a moment of intense social transformation and consequent self-(re)fashioning renders the topic all the richer—especially when considered in terms of how

virtual communities are formed and function and how individual users present themselves as “citizens” of virtual communities.

Let me proceed then with a brief, although a bit digressive and not necessarily comprehensive history of “Jane Austen chat” in Russia. My account is heavily dependent on an article in Russian posted by the blogger “kate-kapella”, author of an article on her blog about Russian Austen fandom. The article traces the explosion of what she terms “фикрайтерство” (the phenomenon of fanfiction) in the West to the airing in 1995 of *Pride and Prejudice* in televised serial form (with Colin Firth and Jennifer Ely in the roles of Darcy and Elizabeth) (“Гордость и предубеждение”, история русскоязычного фандома”). The serial was shown in Russia for the first time in 1996. I will return below to the issue of fanfiction—which, while not by any means an exclusively internet phenomenon, has become an important and interesting manifestation of the popular culture obsession with Austen on the web in the West, and more recently in Russia. Here let me merely pause for a moment to draw your attention to the peculiar “русско-English” creole exemplified by the word “фикрайтерство” (the writing of fan fiction) and the related “фанфики” (fan fictions). These linguistic hybrids are characteristic of the argot of internet chat, and from the point of view of internet communication as a tool of identity construction, it is important to recognize from the outset that, especially in the context of Austen discussion forums, the use of this jargon appears to presuppose a willingness, first, to subordinate Russian to English and, second, to seek a sense of belonging to a community by learning a language which is comprehensible only to habitual participants in the virtual communities formed around shared interests, and therefore is simultaneously exclusionary of those who do not comprehend or accept these linguistic in/con/ventions.

To return to my list of historical milestones, the first Russian-language internet discussion forums seem to have appeared in 2003. “Viola” lists the appearance of a page devoted

to Austen on the site <www.axinia.narod.ru> (a site which is apparently no longer active or accessible) and the opening of a section devoted to Austen on the site <www.apropospage.ru> (a site that has expanded its Austen resources in the intervening years) as the landmark events of 2003. I myself would highlight the initiation of the Русскоязычное собрание читателей Джейн Остин, hosted on Livejournal (www.livejournal.com), a U.S. domain popularly used by Russians living in Russia. The first posting in this Austen “community” was made by “selezneva” on August 7, 2003. “Selezneva” remains today one of the list moderators, and the discussion forum currently lists 226 readers and 252 observers. Aside from discussions forums, the first translation from English into Russian of a “fanfiction” based on *Pride and Prejudice* appeared in 2006 and this year Russian “fanfictions” have begun to appear, notably on the [apropospage.ru](http://www.apropospage.ru) site. I should note here that “fanfictions” (that is, fictions based on the novels of Jane Austen by reconfiguring and/or updating her characters and their relationships) have predecessors not only in more traditional sequels to literary works (here, among English-language manifestations, we could cite *The Diary of Bridget Jones* and numerous print novels based on Austen, including a mystery series with Jane Austen herself cast as the detective), but also, in Russia, in earlier examples of internet “samizdat,” notably series of novels based on popular “Shtirlitz” anecdotes cast with characters from the Soviet TV miniseries *17 Moments in Spring*. This overview of the evolution of Austen on the Russian internet, while necessarily incomplete, should give us some sense of the diverse forms and flexible structure of the medium.

In this regard, I must admit that as soon as I began to examine more closely (with liberal use of the search engines <www.google.ru> and <www.yandex.ru> especially) Jane Austen sightings on the web, I realized that I was up against the world wide web’s resistance to linear narrative and comprehensive cataloguing, a resistance inherent in its dynamic, continually changing content and structure of links, which force us to

“read” the texts of the web in multiple, loosely directed, but not predetermined orders. Having found myself in a disorienting new world where links led me into seemingly impenetrable threads of obscure, often telegraphic texts and images which not uncommonly jumbled Austen up with Star Wars and anime, I decided that my best strategy for “mapping” this virtual space and for focusing my remarks on Russian identity today would be to concentrate on a single virtual community—and, even more tightly, on a limited time span. Therefore I have adopted as my core object of analysis “Русскоязычное собрание читателей Джейн Остин” (Russian-language Gathering of Readers of Jane Austen), hosted on Livejournal, particularly the postings to that discussion forum in roughly the past month. My goal here is to describe a virtual community, the official language of which is Russian and the stated geographical location of which is Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation, and which takes as its principle of incorporation as a community a shared interest in Jane Austen. I situate myself as an outside observer who has never actively participated in the group, but has only “eavesdropped” on postings—if metaphors of surveillance have any validity in a medium where public expression is arguably the primary means of simultaneously constructing a virtual self and a virtual community.

My primary object of study then is how words and images can simulate human social interaction and, more specifically, how the individual voices in this virtual conversation stage themselves as identities interacting in a social environment. I think that the Russian Jane Austen discussion group offers a particularly rich field of exploration in this connection precisely because, as I noted above, this community of Russian-speakers takes as its foundation stone a foreign, English-language author and, moreover, because that author is very much a product and even emblem of a pre-technological age, and finally because the subject of discussion, which serves as the community’s origin and *raison d’être* is inescapably gendered. The community thus in a sense has two paradoxes as a birthright: on the one hand, it

relies on the foreign to bring together and define the native and, on the other hand, it relies on discussion of the highly stylized (viewed through a literary lens) moeurs of the past to fashion social bonds in the virtual world of the present.

The Russian Austen society identifies its location as being in Saint Petersburg. As I already noted, the first post, declaring the “Society” (Общество) open was logged on August 7, 2003 by username “Selezneva,” whose LiveJournal blog gives her (and I must use gender designations provisionally throughout this talk, as I will discuss below) as “Fay Wind.” On October 15, 2007 “Selezneva” was still listed as one of the two list maintainers, and the number of members was given as 226, while 252 people were listed under “watched by.” Under “about” the society cites a Russian translation of the famous opening lines of *Pride and Prejudice* and, under it, gives a detailed list of the “Rules of the Society” (Правила сообщества). The rules are prefaced by a disclaimer that suggests that the founders believed that the shared interest of those who would self select to join the society vouchsafed a certain knowledge of polite behavior: “Несложные, но нужные. Писались с учетом опыта общения в данном сообществе, который показал, что сообщники - люди воспитанные и сами прекрасно знают, как поступать нехорошо:)” Perhaps the most telling of the ground rules given is: “Фанфикшен - не наш формат! Поверьте, в сети и без этого сообщества достаточно мест, где можно обсудить фанфики, в т.ч. и по произведениям Остин.”

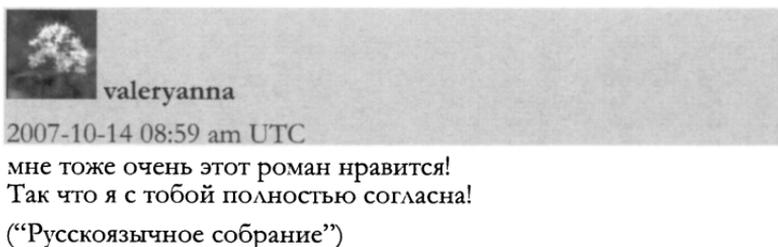
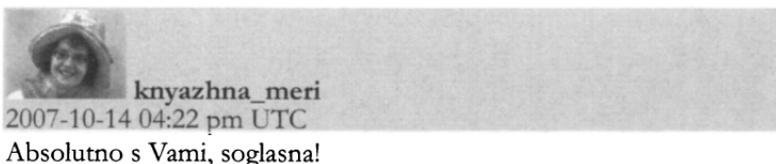
So, then, who belongs to this community and, beyond the rules outlined by the moderators, what linguistic and graphic behaviors define the workings of this virtual community? As to the first question, one general assumption appears to be that for all intents and purposes, all the participants in the discussion are female. Those who begin postings with salutations, tend to use «Дорогие сообщницы» or «Дорогие сообщницы (и сообщники, если таковые имеются)». The usernames tend to back up this assumption, since there is a predominance of usernames with feminine endings or usernames based on

female literary or period characters: including “miss_jane_eyre,” “knyazhna_meri” (interestingly the one Russian period character is based in New York), “damasked_rose,” “lizzy333,” “jeannygrey,” and “jenya_octina”—choosing from among the most active posters during the period I examined. Interestingly, while commentators on the ways of the internet have pointed to the flexibility afforded by “userpictures” or “avatars” (the visuals posters can use as tags) and other modes of self-identification (or self-fashioning or even masking) available to internet posters, there seems to be a fundamental assumption on the part of the participants in this particular list (perhaps allied to assumptions about the topic itself being self-selecting, that is, presupposing shared values and predispositions emerging from an interest, not to say obsession with Jane Austen) that the usernames are revelatory rather than deliberately deceptive. Nonetheless, the choice of names does suggest that a certain amount of role playing is involved here, and this goes along with the preoccupations of the postings on the list. For instance, in one case, one poster suggests that “miss_jane_eyre” likes the character Fanny Price from Austen’s novel *Mansfield Park* precisely because she resembles Jane Eyre (a contention with which “miss_jane_eyre” herself takes issue).

There is, nonetheless, a more or less seamless relationship, it would seem, between the sort of role-playing exemplified by choices made about user personae and behaviors and preoccupations in the discussions. In my earlier dabbings in reading Jane Austen “chat” on the Russian internet, I had been particularly struck by its repetitive, almost iconic character. We see a hint of this in an exchange on Austen’s novel *Persuasion*:



Мне очень нравится этот роман, даже больше, чем “Эмма”, например. Во всяком случае, чаще возникает желание его перечитать.



However, at least in the month of postings I examined closely, the rather ritual urge to repeat “accepted truths” (rather than to make original or strikingly novel observations) as a means of confirming one’s belonging in the community appeared less pronounced. Rather three points in particular struck me about the implicit ground rules of the discussion, and therefore membership in the community.

First, there is the assumption, repeatedly voiced by participants (as we saw in the exchange above) that those posting to the forum have read and reread Austen’s novels—and often viewed and re-viewed the TV and film adaptations of the novels. The relationship here between film and novels is interesting. For the most part, Austen’s novels and their cinematic renditions are treated as continuous texts. For instance, a poster from same the thread cited above appears gratified that her beloved literary texts have been embodied in film: “Теперь я спокойна: три любимых романа экранизованы, лучше не бывает”.

Second, I was struck by the politeness and the length of the postings. Posters, as we have seen above, are quick to register agreement with the opinions expressed by other posters and, when disagreeing, tend to be apologetic or to soften their responses by adopting alibis of the sort: it is just my subjective opinion. (“Не обижайся, пожалуйста, это все исключительно

субъективное,” from October 10.) Perhaps, as far as the pronounced linguistic civility of the exchanges is concerned, it should not be considered surprising given that, looking back to the original postings in August 2003, the discussion group all but began in 2003 with a virtual invitation to tea. In this context, the rules of the group specify that no “offtops” (off topic postings) are allowed unless they relate to the moeurs of Austen’s period:

Оффтоп в рамках сообщества не запрещен. Т.е. если вы соберетесь попить виртуальный чай, вообразив себя во времена ДО, обсудить нравы той эпохи, моду, литературу и т.п., то это оффтопом считать не будет.
 (“Русскоязычное собрание”)

As far as length is concerned, in the limited sample I examined for this paper, postings relating to film appeared to be shorter than those focused primarily Austen novels, which may be related to my next point.

Third, and most importantly, the primary subject of discussion is whether Austen characters arouse sympathy—as well as why or why not. Among the postings I examined, two of the lengthiest threads (that is, engaging a significant number of participants) were generated by a lengthy statement by “miss_jane_eyre” posted on October 10 defending Fanny Price, the central character of *Mansfield Park*, which followed and was clearly inspired by a posting on October 9 by “knyazhna_meri” which opened: “А есть ли какая-нибудь героиня, которая бы Вам не нравилась?” As should be evident, these positions, reflecting the general preoccupation with characters in the discussion forum, gave participants ample scope for judging why they sympathized or admired certain characters and found others negative and/or unappealing. While at least one poster was careful to recall that we can find literary works satisfying even if we do not find them virtuous, and that we should not confuse literature and reality, nonetheless, the impulse to use literary characters to define self in relation to a value system (occasionally

acknowledged as) coming from a different time clearly remains appealing. In other words, Jane Austen's characters clearly serve as sounding boards against which participants in the discussion can indulge in a form of self-expression that is simultaneously a form of self-construction and realization. In this context, repeated statements of self-identification with Austen characters are particularly telling. Consider, for instance, the following "clips" from the October 9 discussion:

Damasked_rose: Мне Фанни не нравится. Какая-то она слишком... хорошая. Прямо до приторности. Очень сложно с ней себе идентифицировать.

В общем, Фанни - не та героиня, с которой мне хотелось бы попить чаю и поговорить. По-своему она, может, и хороша, но не для меня.

Agnesss: Мне тоже Эмма не шибко нравится, но я в ней вижу себя, к сожалению, а поэтому отношусь к ней с терпимостью, пытаюсь учиться на ее ошибках.

("Русскоязычное собрание")

This brings us back to the role of reading in identity formation. The discussions of Austen's characters clearly serve as a forum, perhaps even a self-help group of sorts, promoting self-awareness and defining role models and values.

To conclude, I would argue that this discussion brings us back to the function of reading in Pushkin, that is, reading as a means of formation of self. Through Jane Austen, however, women, in a sense, take back the text, appropriate it, rather than being framed by it, rendering their role as readers not passive submission to a set frame, but active participation in the interpretative production of texts, becoming writers themselves. Such an ever more radical form of self-fashioning is the future in Russia, as it spreads to larger segments of the population

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