



# ‘The Care of the Self’ in the 21st century: sex, love and family in Russian *Harry Potter* fan fiction

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**Abstract:** The article examines Russian *Harry Potter* fan fiction as an anthropological source. The analysis focuses on fan fiction as a cultural practice, on Russian online communities devoted to the continuation of *Harry Potter* stories and their common values, reading strategies and practices of writing. Given that Russian *Harry Potter* fan fiction writers and readers are mostly women, the author pays attention to gender norms as they are represented in fan fiction texts and reading practices. The article explores the central role that individual choice plays in fan fiction axiology, the representations of sex and corresponding problems of the language, the images of family which are produced and discussed in the community and the possibilities that slash as a fictional frame provides for the manifestation of the community’s essential values.

**Keywords:** Social anthropology, online communities, Russian digital media, fan fiction, slash fiction, *Harry Potter*.

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These days, the truly global international phenomenon of *Harry Potter* is no longer limited to the bestselling book and a highly successful cinematic franchise.<sup>1</sup> Judging by the number of internet texts devoted to the magical world of the series, its characters and settings, and by the variety of events dedicated to producing and adjudicating such texts (competitions, literary games, specialized websites, etc.), the *Harry Potter* fan fiction has at some point become and will likely remain one of the most popular, diversified and multilingual spheres of amateur literary production on the internet. The quantity of online fan fiction in general keeps growing, and so does the quantity of its potential readers and writers: every

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single popular TV series or a successful screen adaptation of some cultural source (such as *Sherlock Holmes* or *The Hobbit*, taking the most recent examples) generates new devotees of this literary exercise. That said, *Harry Potter* still manages to remain one of the wide-spread starting points for online fan creativity.

### **Fantasy world but real values: A necessary introduction to the phenomenon**

The reasons for this seem to be complex. To begin with, there is the universal character and omnipresence of the source itself, and the wide availability of the equally popular textual and cinematographic versions of this imaginary world. In the past 15 years one could hardly escape an acquaintance with this canon<sup>2</sup> in one form or another, and the world of the *Harry Potter* fan fiction is easily accessible to residents of any country and speakers of any language. Secondly, there is the sheer quality of this source, which presents a ‘completely furnished world’, to use the words of Umberto Eco in reference to the ‘cult movies’ phenomenon (Eco 1984: 198). This is an original, highly detailed, multifaceted imaginary world with a large number of characters in complex, often conflicting relationships, — and with just as many gaps and omissions urging to fill them in. ‘Mass culture’ ‘consumer’ has long strived for independence, yearned to take control over favorite media texts and fill in the gaps, give the plot a makeover, correct mistakes, teach the characters to feel what they were not allowed to on screen or in the book, and so on. This is amply illustrated by the rich history of fan fiction and fandom before the advent of the internet that has already been explored by various scholars (e.g., Jenkins 1992; Coppa 2006). The fans’ ability to create ‘participatory culture’ is also well established, for example, by the studies of the cult movies phenomenon, aimed at creating alternative viewers’ reception strategies and at forming cult communities (Corrigan 1991; Jenkins 2008; Samutina 2008). The *Harry Potter* fandom was, however, especially fortunate in that the book came out when there existed yet another essential condition for a powerful boost to readers’/viewers’ creativity. Not only did the original source — a story developing over the course of ten years, like a TV series — provide a convenient framework for alternative versions and endings, but at the same time there also appeared an ideal medium for readers’ and viewers’ communication: the internet. The third reason for the *Harry Potter* fan fiction popularity is the digital medium itself. No other form of communication can rival the internet in bringing readers and writers together. The demands it poses are minimal: researchers in the field of fan studies are well aware of the difference between being a fan in the age of the internet and being one thirty years ago — these are two fundamentally different kinds of ‘commitment’. The internet has made geographic, social and demographic scope of those who practice fan fiction unprecedented.

This is also certainly due to J. K. Rowling’s book’s flexibility as far as the target audience’s age is concerned: it is well known that the story begins as a children’s tale of exciting adventures at the school of witchcraft and wizardry, but later develops into an adult narrative of self-sacrifice, trust, and forgiveness in the form of a coming-of-age novel. This has created

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<sup>2</sup> By “canon” fans usually imply the original source: in *Harry Potter* these are J. K. Rowling’s books and the official film series by Warner Bros. Pictures.

numerous ‘access points’ to the magic world of Hogwarts and its surroundings for the readers and the fan fiction authors of all ages. Today’s *Harry Potter* online fan fiction has an equal measure of various age groups and age-related approaches. First of all, there are romantic narratives or general adventures stories by young female authors trying on the role of Hogwarts students. Incidentally, these young girls successfully defended the amateurs’ right of writing ‘on the margins’ of a popular book in the first clashes with copyright holders (Jenkins 2008). Then, there are much more sophisticated and explicit descriptions of school crushes and love catastrophes by the older authors: they explore that aspect of life at Hogwarts that is mostly passed over in silence in Rowling’s texts (these omissions may partially be justified by the conventions of the genre but are hardly tenable when applied to contemporary teenagers and their needs). As Catherine Tosenberger rightly remarks: ‘In an era when representations of adolescent sexuality are both exploited and policed, Potter fandom is an arena in which fans of all ages, genders and sexual orientations can tell stories to satisfy their own desires...’ (Tosenberger 2008: 202). Finally, numerous texts do not appeal to the teenage experience at all: instead, they focus on the adult life and grown-up problems of the Potter characters. Stories of the ‘post-Hogwarts’ category (narrating events happening after the end of Rowling’s epic and, accordingly, after the characters’ graduation) or texts describing motivations and the mental world of various adult characters from *Harry Potter* are composed by writers of all ages who feel affection for the world and the characters of the book, regardless of the childhood discourse. The world of *Harry Potter* becomes an instrument of conceptualizing and conveying one’s experience by means of interpreting the canon, or playing upon its meaning and making conjectures, or satisfying one’s very adult sensual needs and phantasies in the frame of the same imaginary world, by no means children’s any more.

International fan fiction, in all its diversity, is studied today from many different points of view: from the peculiarities of how contemporary interpretive communities function to generic or linguistic features of this type of texts. In my article I would primarily like to point out the immense potential fan fiction has as a socio-anthropological source. This potential is typical of fan fiction on the whole — as a space and a practice with which people all over the world get to participate in a meaningful communication about values and norms: not only of literature and writing, but also of social reality, gender conventions, ways to conceptualize a biography, ideas about duty and responsibility, normative ways of solving conflicts, ways of expression and satisfaction of sexual desires, etc. While communicating in the gratuitous frameworks of online interpretive communities, people discuss and express their values ‘directly’, in the course of fandom discussions, or ‘indirectly’ — via textual elements and ways of reading of fan fiction texts. Fan fiction’s function as a means of conceptualizing experience and testing normative models is facilitated by its general setup as ‘writing in the community’, so that the writer receives immediate feedback for her text, and all the norms of writing and reading, and well as the axiological characteristics of the presented imaginary worlds, are tested, approved or rejected.

Pieces and morsels, or even carcasses of ‘formulaic constructions’, such as romance, adventure, crime story, fantasy, dystopia, play a significant role here and help fan fiction writers speak directly about the desired values and constructions of the world — though they do not constitute the whole of fan fiction literary discourse (Samutina, 2013), but are used only

to facilitate the desirable ‘projective’ function of writing, which the formulaic constructions have always had at their core (Cawelti, 1976: 36)<sup>3</sup>. Then, there are also fan fiction’s linguistic norms: a ‘transparent’ language; there is no need to complicate linguistic reality to the detriment of the narrative. In extreme cases there are attempts to reproduce easily recognizable stylistic models with recognizable connotations, as in, e.g., styling one’s text ‘after Salinger’. Fandom — not only as a certain practice, but also as a corpus of texts and the rules of reading them — can tell us a lot about modern writers and readers, or about a certain part of modern women, for in many fandoms fan fiction remains predominantly women’s practice. Even in the course of her scrupulous study of women’s reading of romance literature, Janice Radway was obliged to address the limitations of her conclusions: ‘the people who read romance novels are not attending to stories they themselves have created to interpret their own experiences. Because the shift to professional production has reduced self-storytelling substantially, there is no sure way to know whether the narratives consumed by an anonymous public are in any way congruent with those they would have created for themselves and their peers had they not been able to buy them’. (Radway, 1984: 49). With fan fiction we find ourselves in a much more privileged position as observers and researchers with anthropological questions. With the question so posed, one cannot overestimate perspectives of studying local versions of global fandoms, such as the *Harry Potter* fan fiction in the Russian language. Comparing Russian fandom to its more widespread English-language counterpart, one clearly sees common points and commonly accepted and shared values. Just as easily discernible, however, are regional socio-cultural peculiarities: these become apparent in everything, from ways of communicating online and the role which digital media play in Russia to the preferred manner of telling a story and specific linguistic problems. The degree to which fan fiction practices are popular in one or another locality, or the degree to which the non-English fandom correlates with its English counterpart (depending on the knowledge of English, quality of translations, types of borrowings from the English sources, preferred genre models, etc.) may be representative in this respect. Contemporary fan fiction research, especially its ‘second wave’ (Hellekson, Busse 2006), focusing on the online communities, on the variety of genres and types of amateur literature on the internet, as well as on the opportunities fan fiction creates for constructing identities, is turning towards this approach.<sup>4</sup> Russian fan fiction has not yet been studied in this context and from this point of view. This paper aims to open the discussion of the Russian-language *Harry Potter* fan fiction, and to start it off with one of the central problems of this type of literary communication, where women tell stories to women: gender values, norms, and practices.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘... literary formulas assist in the process of assimilating changes in values to traditional imaginative constructs’.

<sup>4</sup> As an example let me refer to The European Fandom & Fan Studies Conference at the University of Amsterdam, which took place on November 10, 2012. Local European versions of global fandoms were the objects of special attention at this meeting.

## The ‘Russian *Harry Potter*’: vital records

### *Sources: texts and communities*

Let me begin with some introductory remarks pertaining to the sources of this study and to the general features of the Russian-language *Harry Potter* fan fiction and the communities which produce it. Conclusions and generalizations made in this article are based on two years of continuous participant observation in the Russian fan fiction community: I kept a reader’s blog<sup>5</sup> on the main Russian resource for a communication of fan fiction authors: [www.diary.ru](http://www.diary.ru); I followed all major fandom competitions and events; I listened to the fandom radio interviews with popular authors. I have also become acquainted and communicated with a number of fan fiction authors, both online and in person, and attended a multifandom slash<sup>6</sup> convention in Moscow. My ‘corpus of readings’ comprises over 700 texts in Russian of all possible sizes and genres, and includes fandom ‘classics’ as well as the works by less known authors. In this article I strive to quote mainly from the popular fan fiction stories, ‘approved’ by the readers’ community and with a high ‘citation index’ on the internal fandom reference lists.<sup>7</sup> So, I worked within the community as an ethnographer, but complemented the findings about how people read, write and communicate in general with textual analysis in the framework of sociology of culture and genre theory (Radway and Cawelty being my primary inspiration).

As far as the topics and the fictional frames are concerned, the corpus of sources leans heavily towards slash, for two main reasons. Firstly, slash is extremely popular among the Russian *Harry Potter* authors and is represented by a considerably higher number of quality examples: complaints of a meagre quantity of quality ‘gen’ and ‘het’ stories<sup>8</sup> are a constant feature of the Russian fandom conversations. Secondly, the phenomenon of slash itself, as well as the practices of reading it and ways of ‘decoding’ its meanings are extremely important in the discussion of gender problems in fan fiction. But I am also quite familiar with the examples of general adventure and fantasy stories, well-respected in the Russian *Harry Potter* fan fiction communities, and count them as sources as well — though not always quoting from them.

In addition to that, in December 2012 I conducted an online survey of the prolific bilingual participants of the Russian fandom: authors, readers, and translators well acquainted

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<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, ethical considerations do not allow quoting from locked private blogs, so the information derived from these sources is just summoned up in this paper.

<sup>6</sup> Slash is a popular type of fan fiction describing love relationships of male characters from the original story (the canon). Slash derives its name from the sign which usually divides the names of the characters of the romantic pairing, e.g. Harry Potter / Draco Malfoy. Slash convent (“slashcon”) is a big offline meeting of slash readers and writers.

<sup>7</sup> Blogs dedicated to finding fanfics, as well as popular authors, often receive requests to recommend ‘the best’ or ‘classical’ texts for one or another kind. The list of texts recommended in such cases allows to make conclusions about the deemed ‘center’ of this large source field, all differences in taste, readers’ age, etc. notwithstanding.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Gen’ (general) and ‘het’ (heterosexual) are two other popular types of fan fiction stories: ‘gen’ does not have love relationships at the forefront of the narrative, and ‘het’ is dedicated to the traditional male/female relationships, e.g. Harry Potter / Hermione Granger.

both with the Russian and the English *Harry Potter* fandoms. A snowball sample was used; 11 respondents out of 17 returned detailed questionnaires. All of them are female, all are or have recently been active readers of the *Harry Potter* fan fiction, all are famous in the Russian *Harry Potter* fandom as people who read or translate English texts and can recommend a proper story for a translation or for an individual reading. Among them, there are professional translators and philologists; there are those who write in English and are equally active participants in both the English and the Russian-language fandom; one person just reads English fan fiction with the help of PROMT translator. Gender issues were not asked about in the questionnaire explicitly, but were camouflaged by questions about the language of sexual scenes and the representation of the authors' social experience in fan fiction. Apart from general questions about the respondents' reading range and foreign language knowledge, the questionnaire contained questions on comparative features of the English and the Russian *Harry Potter* fan fiction, on the problems of the translation from English into Russian and on communication within online communities. Summarized results of the survey are used in the present article: respondents' answers are marked as 'Survey, 2012', with the degree of anonymity chosen by the respondents themselves.

These days, there is a full-fledged and well-developed *Harry Potter* fandom in Russian, even though it obviously cannot compare to the boundless global English-language fandom. Still, it has produced a substantial quantity of texts, both original and translated from other languages, mostly from English. Statistics from popular websites gives us some idea about the quantity of the Russian Potter-themed fan fiction: according to the August 2013 data, the pre-moderated site of 'high quality fan fiction' called 'Tales Told by Potions Master Severus Snape Before Going to Sleep' contained over 12,500 texts related to *Harry Potter*; the site has more than 10,000 author accounts<sup>9</sup>. A moderated archive 'fanfics.ru' contains over 7,000 fan fiction texts and lists 1,800 authors and translators. This archive requires registration and lists about 107.000 readers: a lot of them actively comment on texts and participate in their production and editing. A moderated archive 'HogwartsNet' hosts over 6,000 Potter-related texts; a comparatively 'lower quality fan fiction' site Ficbook.net — over 11,000.

Even with inevitable repeats removed from the list, one would have to add to these notable numbers the immeasurable contents of such popular forums as 'The Astronomy Tower', 'SlashWorld' or 'Slytherin forum' (the last one counts 30,000 participants), as well as fan fiction texts published exclusively in personal blogs on 'diary.ru'. Some popular texts are quite impressive as far as their size is concerned: *A Player* [Igrok] by Rakugan is a Russian-classic sized historical novel about Tom Riddle's early years; *Elysium, or In the Land of Lost Dreams* [Elysium, ili v Strane Poteryannykh Snov] by Dver-v-zimu is a voluminous post-Hogwarts fantasy in four parts; adventurous gen *Burglars' trip* about professor Snape as a heir of a vampire family comes close in size to Rowling's epic. Some authors write series of stories based on a single plotline: e.g., *The Quidditch Trilogy* [Kviddichnaya trilogiya] by Doc Rebecca, a series *On the Other Side* [Po druguyu storonu] by Friyana, a series *Not Your Child's Stories* [Nedetskiye istorii] by Toma-km. Some writers' and translators' projects go on for years. But drabbles (around-100-words stories) are quite popular as well: they are the

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<sup>9</sup> It must be noted, however, that not all of these authors write about *Harry Potter*, or write about it exclusively. It is rather customary for an author to participate in several fandoms at once.

usual material of literary games. As for the pairings, in slash stories the world-wide most popular 'drarry' (Draco/Harry) and 'snarry' (professor Snape/Harry) lead the pack; in the 'het' category, a victory belongs to 'snager' (Severus Snape/ Hermione Granger). Professor Snape remains the most discussed, the best loved and the most hated character of the *Harry Potter* canon among the Russian female readership.

Needless to say, the 'Potter in Russian' is not just texts, but also a large online community where people exchange these texts, share their writing experiences and opinions on readings, become friends and sometimes help each other in a way that goes far beyond the reading and writing only. Within this community, there is an internal peer-reviewing system and established ways to select and evaluate texts, there are literary competitions whose structure may occasionally be rather complex, there are reputations to build or to lose, there are conflicts and scandals, etc. Dozens of smaller- or larger-scale competitions per year take place in the Russian-speaking *Harry Potter* fandom: winners are decided by polling either the general readership or select experts. Writers frequently engage in such forms of collaboration as joint authorship or team play, translators band together to work on foreign texts. At times, the most active fandom participants come together for various events, most often in Moscow or Saint-Petersburg, although, thanks to internet participation, life in the community does not depend on geography, and a fandom participant in Russia, just like elsewhere in the world, is free to choose the format and the extent of her involvement in fandom practices. This involvement may vary, from mere silent reading and online lurking to personal acquaintance with other fans and, finally, to the engagement in off-line events and activities. Many of the participants of the Russian *Harry Potter* fandom acknowledged in personal conversations that they had started as shy lurkers and only later turned into authors in their own right, and eventually went all the way to a much greater involvement in the community's practices.

As a matter of fact, reading and writing are hardly separable in fan fiction at any level: all authors are also passionate readers, and all fandom participants, with no exceptions, are keen interpreters of Joanne Rowling's epic, even if this manifests itself in blog comments only. Fandom has a history and develops dynamically: many 'classical authors' of the mid-2000s have already given up writing or moved on to a different fandom. However, thanks to the 'canon's' qualities described above, the Russian *Harry Potter* fandom is regularly joined by new and eager participants. At the last huge creative game – the multi-fandom battle of 200 teams of different fandoms in Russian - which took place in summer and autumn 2013, the extremely prolific *Harry Potter* team produced more than 1000 works and took the third place. One of the long-time fandom participants noticed, to the cheers of her fandom companions-in-arms, that *Harry Potter* fandom had become a kind of Roman Empire for the Russian fandom activities in general: a first step to fan fiction for many readers and writers, a big archive of texts of high quality and great diversity, an influential fandom community and a source of creative authors for other fandoms.

In Russia, like in many other countries, women constitute the predominant majority of the *Harry Potter* fan fiction authors. Quite a significant percentage of them are heterosexual, married, have children: in their personal blogs, the Russian *Harry Potter* writers and readers sometimes publish texts about a passionate love affair between Harry and professor Snape in between stories about their own children and questions on how to medicate a sick family

member. What seems rather essential to me is that many women do not hide their unorthodox hobby from their families: in their blogs writers regularly joke about their husbands' comments on slash fan fiction, or complain of a mother-in-law's disapproval of an obscene and unprofitable preoccupation of the mother of the family. Many Russian fan fiction authors' ability to build such a hobby into the structure of family life and to explain its importance to their husbands bespeaks a rather trusting relationship within these families: this is remarkable, considering how many fan fiction authors worldwide strive to put a hat on their hobby. And I have never at all encountered any mention of hiding one's hobby from a lesbian partner (and a significant percentage of Russian fan fiction authors, especially slash writers, are lesbian). However, Russian young women most often keep their attraction to fan fiction, and especially slash, a secret from their parents. And nearly everyone keeps her hobby a secret in the professional context and in other social relations.

Just like in the English fan fiction community, the age of the participants ranges between 17 and 50 years old, and the paths of the opposite age groups don't often cross. Those writers, whose texts are best known and most often recommended for reading in the Russian *Harry Potter* community, belong to the 30-40 y.o. group: they have a higher education, high professional qualifications or even a position directly related to reading and writing (editors, translators, journalists, librarians). Some of the authors have a PhD; their stories may take place in libraries or research institutes and at times they even mention citation indices, grant applications and the fact that Lord Voldemort had never published anything in a prestigious peer-reviewed journal '*Magic*'! (*This train does not stop at Volkshalle* [U Folkshalle poezd ne ostanavlivayetsia], by Taisin). This group treats teenagers' creative attempts with sarcasm: they refer to them as 'chicks' [deffachki] and make fun of their poor literacy and use of cliché. Naturally, teenagers counteract this attitude by creating their own online hangouts and forming their own peer support groups. Female students, yet another active fandom subgroup (20-25 y.o.) join one or another fraction of the community depending on their literary skills and sociability. Social standing of some Russian fan fiction authors can be aptly described with a succinct definition, given to contemporary fans by Henry Jenkins: 'Fans are often people who are overeducated for their jobs, whose intellectual skills are not challenged by their professional lives' (Jenkins 1992, 288). At the same time, Russia's present-day instability in general and the vagaries of professional, spatial, and personal life of the citizens of former Soviet Union produce a great diversity of combinations, and this diversity is fully represented in the Russian *Harry Potter* fandom.

### *Digital fandoms and the (not-so-fast) changing society*

The definition of the social and media context is fundamental for a discussion of Russian fan fiction. Beyond the boundaries of several metropolitan cities, and sometimes even within their boundaries, post-Soviet space remains a zone of serious social and cultural conflicts, painful breaks and contrasts between the 'West-oriented' liberal society models and the norms of Soviet lifestyle, embodied in the construct of 'a simple Soviet person' [sovetskij prostoi chelovek] (Levada 1993). Nowhere else does the small towns' conservatism, their residents' adherence to 'traditional values' shine through as vividly as in regards to gender



issues. In Russia, this factor has recently been additionally aggravated by a sharp conservative turn in politics and in practice of government agencies of all levels. The ‘tightening of the screws’ has touched all forms of citizen activism; the public space has shrunk dramatically. Traditional mass media have lost all independence and thus also lowered their standards: television no longer targets educated public, and this fact certainly has an impact on the content and style of all programming, including family talk shows and entertainment. Sexual intolerance is encouraged via adopting discriminatory laws forbidding ‘propaganda of homosexuality amongst minors’, and so forth. Internet has thus become the only means to access free information, as well as the only communication ground for the active and educated Russian citizens. This situation is made distinctly clear by researchers of the Russian mass media. Vera Zvereva writes: ‘In the situation of a communicative boom and the turn towards pauseless production, consumption, spreading of information and digital communication, internet in modern Russia has become a medium to fill substantial gaps in the offline culture – a space for freedom of political and ideological expression, civic communication, communities of like-minded persons, a de-monopolized cultural sphere, etc.’ (Zvereva 2012: 238).

In this context, when answering the question posed by the editors of this special issue of the *Digital Icons* journal: ‘Are fandoms in the region the rich participatory and democratizing world of Jenkins’ vision?’, — one cannot help but reply emphatically and unequivocally: ‘Yes, they definitely are’. The deterioration of the political and legal climate in Russia has had a certain impact on interaction within online fandoms: communication has tended to move into ‘hidden’, ‘locked’ zones, invisible to the outside snoopers. However, the literary space of fan fiction, as well as discussions in fan fiction communities about texts and the values of their authors have remained much more relaxed and tolerant, much more creative and meaningful, than the outside reality and even than the comparable online communicative spaces, for example, on the specialized online women’s forums. The very form of fan fiction practices presupposes freedom of speaking about sexual relations and needs and about a variety of gender strategies; it also stipulates freedom of personal life and one’s right to hobbies and passions, however weird they may seem to the outsiders. From the very outset, fan fiction has been a space for practicing *something else*, an opportunity for being different. Slash as a form of fan fiction excludes homophobia and other forms of sexual intolerance. Personal blogs of Russian fan fiction writers often describe their owner’s conflicts with those around them on the grounds of homophobia; they also discuss homophobia in texts and in corresponding texts. Fan fiction communities often support petitions and protest actions against homophobic laws, and so on.

A peculiar position of fan fiction on the borderline between private (unpaid creativity on one’s own time, pseudonym protection) and public (a visible community on the internet, a lot of texts in open access), as well as a certain protection by its fictional framework and unclear cultural status, allows it to keep up a significant level of freedom of personal expression. What is especially important to stress is that fan fiction practice is a space of communal law-making, where rules and norms are established collectively, where community as a whole works out ‘civilizational’ communicative and reading skills: the English fandom does, to an extent, serve as an example here, but only in part. Norms and values are not ‘installed’ in readers’ brains; rather, they are a result of a time- and effort-consuming collaboration of the

entire community. Perhaps, this circumstance is responsible for the heightened proneness to conflict in Russian fandom, noted by many participants of my online survey, for example:

English fandom shows less negative criticism. People more often write just what they think, regardless of the readers' reaction. This freedom produces stunning results: there are fabulous storylines and ideas. Alas, in the Russian fandom everything is much more rigid, on both the authors' and the readers' part. (Survey, 2012, author b.)

Overall, an English reader is more benevolent and politically correct (both in the bad and the good sense of the term). A Russian reader is way more emotional and demanding, more inclined to talk about the text and to take things personally. (Survey, 2012, anon.)

This collective elaboration of communicative skills can be illustrated on many levels. But I will only take one example: the strategies of reading. One of the key points shaping freedom in fan fiction is the establishment of reading rules: these are supposed to keep up the long-standing tradition of variety and tolerance that is obvious in the fan fiction content on the plotline level. At the same time, these rules are meant to ensure 'quality control', according to the high demands of Russian readers who see fan fiction textual practices as a means of self-development, in the wider context of the literature in general. A broader question about fan fiction as a type of literature is beyond the scope of the present article, but let me give an example of a fandom discussion which demonstrates a very typical degree of freedom in articulating one's needs and rights and in the explicitness of argumentation which concerns the basic idea of difference. Simultaneously, this also shows how a researcher's interpretation of a fan fiction text's content requires taking into consideration a certain mode of reading, a set of shifting conventions, constructed within the community.

In the course of one of the latest fandom events — a maxi-sized texts contest entitled '*Harry Potter* Big Bang' on the 'Astronomy Tower' forum, NikMac and berenica posted a translation of an English piece of fan fiction called *Invisible*, by carolinelamb. The story revolves around *Harry Potter*'s unexpected affection for professor Snape who survived the snake's bite in the last battle. Poison makes the professor freeze, and so Snape is compelled to accept young sexy man's courtship for the sake of his warming magic. However, Snape is so disconcerted and so hates himself for this weakness that he demands that Harry use a cloak of invisibility during sex. After a certain number of pornographic scenes of passion and plot twists, Harry manages to not only warm up the body, but also melt the heart of the 'evil' Snape, and the cloak of invisibility is discarded. By Russian fandom standards, this sensual piece of fan fiction does not even begin to be shocking. Nevertheless, perhaps due to the size of the narrative, more appropriate for a traditional romance than the PWP genre<sup>10</sup>, and due to the generally mellow context of this writing contest, a number of readers questioned the 'credibility' of characters and the general 'realistic quality' of this text. The flame war started around the question of reading strategies and expectations from fan fiction texts. Advocating

<sup>10</sup> An abbreviation designating pornographic fan fiction, usually, short-sized stories. Stands simultaneously for 'Porn Without Plot' and 'Plot? What Plot?'

some fandom conventions and reading rules applicable to this and other texts of that type, the translator of the piece, NikMac, formulated a kind of a manifesto of ‘kink’ reading:

Kink texts, such as this one, are not written in order to construct a grand in-canon storyline, to teach the reader what’s sensible, good, and eternal, or to crown morals, ethics, and logic. They are composed for pleasure of a different sort. Simplification and even certain perversion of the characters and of the original story, of the world view on the whole are used here in order to remove the passion and sensual emotions as far away as possible from the dull and well-behaved reality. A comment like ‘Harry would never’, as applied to a kink text, reflects the wrong approach to reading this piece, rather than the author’s problems. ‘Don’t like – don’t read’ – this primarily applies to kink things, for they are written for one purpose only: to please those who like this kind of thing. It is strange to even argue whether Snape or Harry are here as they should be. They are not, by default, and neither are reality, psychology, ethics, and morals – this is exactly what makes this fanfic good (within its own niche of hot kink texts).

The right to choose a strategy for playing with the canon, the openly declared and actually practiced by the community’s members right to read as explicit a text as one wishes (there are, e.g., kink-fests, where authors meet readers’ most mind-blowing challenges<sup>11</sup>) speaks volumes about the extent of liberation of this space. At the same time, the multitude of established writing and reading strategies within the fandom framework imposes great demands on ‘fandom literacy’ both of the reader-interpretor and the researcher. Some of the popular fictional modes do not allow for literal semantic interpretation at all; for example, the story describing a forced marriage or enslavement of one of the characters (it would be ridiculous to suggest that writers and readers could seriously treat slavery as a form of social relations). At times, no other interpretation is possible but a pragmatic one: an illustration is the case with extreme fantasies classified in the Russian fandom as ‘weed’. The chief objective of the ‘weed’ is to have fun and to impress the reader with the author’s unbridled imagination, where there is no need to correlate anything with anything else. Besides, atypical strategies of reading and groupings of rarely combined elements (as in, e.g., an unexpected blending of mockery and seriousness) may serve as a source of innovations, may generate heated discussions among fandom readers. This all means that even though we cannot use kink storylines to judge gender norms, we can, however, analyze them as a source on pragmatics within the framework of the given cultural practice. Fortunately, the number of fan fiction reading modes, although large, is not infinite, and, with some experience, one can rather clearly determine the levels of symbolism used therein<sup>12</sup>.

Let me stress again, that in the Russian literature-centric culture, with its traditional canon of ‘the great authors’, with rigid norms of textual interpretation formed throughout school

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<sup>11</sup> Kink fest is a literary game popular among the Russian *Harry Potter* slash writers and readers, very explicit in content. Pornographic “kink” requests are left anonymously on the special community blog, and short texts are written anonymously, responding to these requests. The predominant majority of these texts is pornographic in content.

<sup>12</sup> As an example of a quality reflection on these levels as applied to gender problems in the genre of ‘gender swap’ see an article by Kristina Busse and Alexis Lothian ‘Bending Gender: Feminist and (Trans)Gender Discourses in the Changing Bodies of Fan Fiction’ (Busse and Lothian 2009).

and college years, with its relatively short experience of mass genres, the very possibility of this kind of approach to a piece of fiction creates a new, and significant, space of freedom. An ability to read and compose fiction pragmatically, while solving certain communicative problems, an ability to treat alternative reading/writing strategies with respect and understanding makes its way in the Russian fan fiction community slowly and not without resistance. Acknowledgment of the other's right to read and write differently is forever in the centre of heated disputes. Several respondents noted this particular problem of the Russian fan fiction as compared to the English one:

A Russian cannot admit even to herself that she likes something derivative or second-rate. ... A Russian would always try to make her hobby look noble or exclusive. Fan fiction is not a definite genre of literature. Many do not consider it literature at all. But only in the Russian fandom will you find, in comments to a kink-fest, a complaint about lack of proofs or even an attempt at textual criticism. (Survey, 2012, anon.)

In my opinion, English-speaking authors have greater freedom both in picking a topic, and in creating a storyline ... it is much easier for them to completely deviate from the canon, or they explicitly use fan fiction to solve entirely different problems altogether. At some point I was stunned to read one author's commentary to a fanfic: 'I was interested in the issue of unwanted pregnancies among youths, and that is why I composed this piece'. I cannot imagine something like this in the Russian fandom. (Survey, 2012, author Burnaia voda)

Nevertheless, an outlet for writers' and readers' creativity, as constructed by the Russian-speaking female readership of *Harry Potter*, demonstrates a sharp contrast to the surrounding media- and social environment. At present, this space represents a live and dynamic field for acquiring new reading and writing practices, communicative practices, attitudes to 'the other', as well as practices of conceptualizing relevant and often painful issues. In the next few paragraphs I will outline the anthropology of gender values within this space, summarizing my own reading experience and research.

### **'I chose it for myself': axiology of the Russian *Harry Potter* fan fiction**

#### *A true meaning of a true partner*

One of the most popular pieces of the Russian slash fan fiction, a realistic post-Hogwarts drarry *The Quidditch trilogy* [Kviddichnaia trilogia] by Doc Rebecca, begins with a little prologue. Ron Weasley, the best friend of Harry Potter — a forty-year-old national hero, an exemplary family man, father of three, — accidentally becomes witness to a passionate sexual scene in the empty locker room of a sports club. Ron is horrified when he recognizes Harry's partner: it is the no-longer-young Draco Malfoy, their eternal enemy ever since school years. Shaken by what he saw, Ron is almost relieved to agree to Harry's erasing his memory; however, he begs to first explain to him how this all came about: the match seems

unbelievable, whichever way you look at it. Harry's explanation is symbolical enough that it can be used to begin a discussion of Russian fan fiction's gender values. Harry's biography, as depicted in *The Quidditch Trilogy*, reflects an understanding shared by many readers of this and similar texts:

You know, after all these years I see it all somewhat differently. What did I actually have in life? They wanted – they stuffed me into a cupboard under the stairs for ten years. They decided – they put me on a wild beast and said: fly, Harry, just make sure you don't fuck up. They thought it necessary – they sent me to die, never mind that I went out of my own volition, still it had all been decided for me... All of that was not me, was not mine, you see, Ron. This – this is just mine, you understand? This is what I chose for myself. And this is what I'll tell you: no one will ever take this away from me, don't you even try<sup>13</sup>.

Of course, the story that follows makes it clear that Harry's choice is not a mere whim: the two locker room lovers have very deep feelings for each other, even if they are not immediately aware of them. It is their growing awareness of the significance of these sentiments, their uneasy movement towards each other, their defense — before themselves and the society — of their right to live their own lives, their search for dignity in an adverse situation and their battle for their choice that constitute the central storyline of this protracted family saga. Draco Malfoy, in his new persona of an accomplished adult who has rethought his past, turns out to be an ideal candidate for Potter's permanent partner and beloved: the values of this pairing have been demonstrated in detail both in the Russian and the non-Russian Post-Hogwarts fan fiction. These are: the meaning of forgiveness, the possibility to make amends for the once-made mistakes, the importance of equality in any kind of relationship, from hostility to love, and triumph over the philistine stereotypes of societal behavior, as well as the belief that true passion overcomes any obstacles. In hundreds of stories composed by women all over the world, Harry Potter does eventually, years later, shake the hand of his former foe, thus transforming one of the key moments of the canonical source. 'Get down from your footstool, Draco', says Harry in the fanfic *Malfoy into the Rib* [Malfoi v rebro] by Sanya, recalling a childhood episode in Madam Malkin's 'Robes for All Occasions', thus symbolically bringing two long-time grown-ups on par with each other, allowing for love.

Draco Malfoy's importance as Potter's worthy partner-rival notwithstanding, the situation of having to choose between finding one's own way and realizing 'what I am' and what has been imposed from above, turns out to be rather more universal and applies also to the majority of other pairings. This is valid not only for Harry, but also for virtually any protagonist in any personal relationship story: in other words, this is valid for the majority of fan fiction stories. Fundamental for the Russian *Harry Potter* fan fiction's axiology is a model of reflected choice, where the highest value is ascribed to an extreme individualism. The characters defend their right to exist in the society as an independent individuality with all ensuing needs. Human ingenuity and the right to self-actualization, primarily in a relationship with

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<sup>13</sup> All the translations from Russian fanfics have been done especially for this article; the list of the original sources one can find at the end of the text.

another, loved, person, are acknowledged as the ‘golden standard’. Indeed, the major bulk of fan fiction is devoted to the twists of personal relationships or at least to the intimate interactions between humans. Friendship or self-assessment in the eyes of the relevant person can be at stake in gen fanfics, as in *Burglars’ trip* by valley, with its complicated set of relationships among Snape, Lucius Malfoy, Dumbledore and new fictional character Klaus Kaesid – or a victory over antagonist via the realization of one’s true needs and core intentions, as in *Tabiya* by Tupak Yupanki. Accordingly, the characters’ need to choose their true gender scenario and full realization of their emotional and sexual sentiments and needs, however contradictory those may be to external norms and expectations, are an almost mandatory element of the Russian fan fiction.

A rational awareness of what is best for oneself (a true partner or, on the contrary, solitude, as in the case with the independent Snape in Toma-km’s series *Not Your Child’s Stories* [Nedetskie istorii]) comes to the characters in situations, which are specially constructed so as to steadily lead the protagonists towards such an outcome, in spite of the catastrophic start. Any seeming imperfection, any deviation from a norm is legitimized by the free choice and love as a quintessence of free agency. This motif shows up in a variety of situations and on different levels, ‘plugging’ pathos into a plot twist, as, e.g., in Svengaly’s fantastic story *Don’t Know Yet* [Poka ne znayu] in the description of the first intercourse between Harry and Snape:

He wasn’t tender: he didn’t know how, and I didn’t need that. And he certainly was right: many people in the world are more handsome (it isn’t difficult to beat Snape at beauty). But there are moments in love when your body turns into a wonderful musical instrument, with nerves instead of strings, and every touch causes a moan, a sigh, or a scream; they only happen when you are with someone you really need, otherwise it won’t work, it will be a pure physiology ... so there – Snape and I, we sounded in accord.

In spite of the great variety of plotlines, genres, formulas and other parameters of the contemporary Russian fan fiction, the characters’ choice of the right way in their relationships, or their tragic experiences after a choice made badly are the most frequent and the most value-loaded constructions. This passionate preaching of individualism and personal independence is of essence in the Russian context; it implicitly or sometimes explicitly stands against the unifying pressure of ‘traditional’ social values. It becomes all the more important in view of the complexity of the world as depicted in the Russian fan fiction. The world’s diversity is included into the construction of choice in a great variety of texts and may be seen as an opposition to the simplified formulas and genre masks of the romance<sup>14</sup> and the commercial mass culture. It is important to stress that, unlike the universal English-speaking fandom, the Russian fan fiction communities still consider romance with ambiguity.

<sup>14</sup> By ‘romance’ I imply a mass literature genre conventions as they are outlined in John Cawelti’s book on formulaic literature (Cawelti 1976: 41-42), and then analyzed at length in Janice Radway’s classical study *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy, and popular literature* (Radway 1984).

### A struggle with genre

On the one hand, fan fiction writing is full of fragmented romance structures and clichés. In some cases, it concurs with classical formulas of mass love literature: there is a utopia of the ‘true love’, the not-so-infrequent images of ideal romantic heroes, so dear to the women’s imagination, clichés like the ‘taming’, by an innocent and mild character, of his/her unbridled partner; a frequent happy ending, coinciding with the union of a couple, among other examples. A number of fan fiction researchers even tend to overestimate romance’s influence on the fan fiction’s narratives and to define the generic form of a large portion of this literary field as an inevitable combination of porn and romance: ‘I would argue that while much fan fiction is explicitly romance and/or porn, all fan fiction is implicitly both. ... Looking at the slip and fit of romance and pornography in fan fiction suggests that pornography is structured in relation to the conventions of romance, and romance fiction is sustained by porn’s ecstatic relationship to exposure’ (Driscoll 2006: 91, 95).

However, my experience of researching Russian fan fiction warns against such unequivocal conclusions. Of course, Russian translations of popular English-language fanfics written in the formulaic tradition of romance (such as *Kiss a Boy in London Town* by Femme) enjoy great success among Russian readership. Russian fandom also produces a lot of stories composed according to the romance formulas: a very popular, especially among younger female readers, fan fiction story *Harry Potter and a Secret Sin* [Harry Potter i tainyi grekh] by Magenta is a humorously conveyed story of a young innocent sectarian Harry turning into an adept of a much more sensual, worldly lifestyle as represented by Snape — an ingenious surgeon who lives in a Notting Hill mansion, drives a Bentley, wears silk garments, but gives up his trademark cynicism for the sake of the miserly preacher’s beautiful green eyes. However, in the Russian *Harry Potter* fan fiction romance formulas are far from omnipresent. Even if they are present, they are quite often parodied in the vaudeville spirit, like in the humorous Svengaly’s fanfic *A Glass of Water* [Stakan vody] or in a funny mixture between *Harry Potter* and *Bridget Jones’ Diary*, called *Harry Potter’s Diary* [Dnevnik Harry Pottera] by Treggi Di. Quite often shameless use of formulas is met with a storm of mocking readers’ comments, especially from the older fandom members: this is exactly what happened to the *Chimera* [Khimera] by Moeri — a highly formulaic romantic story about a shy yet exceedingly virtuous Draco Malfoy and an unsettled macho Harry Potter. Alternatively, the formulas take on the mode of explicit convention, as in kink texts, such are the stories of a ‘magical marriage of necessity’ of a strong, wise, and brave Snape to a helpless and innocent Harry.

Quite often a Russian fan fiction reader encounters a multifaceted reality, twisted relationships, a convolution of impending choices and renunciations. Protagonists’ complexity, unpredictability of their actions, and the richness of psychological characteristics constitute, as has already been pointed out earlier, one of the best features of a text for a Russian reader. Conventions of Russian-speaking *Harry Potter* fan fiction presuppose the creation of a multidimensional fictional world (created in a realistic tradition, no matter how modernized), sometimes with the utilization of genre elements other than romance; for example, a social drama, or a dystopia, or by introducing different perspectives on the story, including those of persons outside of the love affair. One text may contain numerous viewpoints, as, e.g., in a

large fanfic *July at the Grimmauld Place* [Iyul' na ploschadi Grimmauld] by Treggi Di, which includes detailed perspectives of 13 characters. What is even more remarkable, these kinds of texts, often published chapter by chapter, as the author writes them, are eagerly discussed by the readers in the process. Characters' actions are weighed, criticized or approved of, various further developments are suggested, readers try to influence the author in one or another way, thank or scold her. As for the authors, they often admit in their responses that they have not yet decided for themselves how the collision is going to be resolved. In these fervent discussions, one does not just build castles in the sky as far as different constructions of reading, literature, human being are concerned, but also sets up a general model of the world as something complex, twisted, and in need of reading, understanding and forgiving. Being a place to test many different scenarios —of acceptance, explanation and justification of unequivocal decisions, unexpected connections, consequences of passion and facing the results of weakness — is another important function of the fan fiction universe. It is as if its creators were testing the limits of the acceptable, trying to tie divergent strings together, looking for all possible combinations —and for the right choice in the end.

### **Slash as a critical instrument**

In the local context of the Russian *Harry Potter* slash becomes an instrument that helps readers and writers create and support such a model of human reality. It is slash fandom that is best developed in Russia, and this is not surprising considering what slash is for contemporary fan fiction on the whole: 'a space for savvy, subversive women, engaging in creative – and very adult – ways with media texts' (Tosenberger 2008: 189). Studies of fan fiction have singled out slash first: for several decades it has been an object of interpretation, and in this context it would be appropriate to mention two points regarding slash, which are of particular importance for my approach. Firstly, slash, as noted already by Henry Jenkins, overturns the usual gender roles and allows to introduce into the world of a story those scenarios of actions and emotions which are negated or insufficiently reflected in the traditional social concepts and media representations of the male and the female: 'Slash confronts the most repressive forms of sexual identity and provides Utopian alternatives to current configurations of gender' (Jenkins 1992: 195). Secondly, slash, as it has first been observed by Sara Gwenllian Jones, who analyzed the reception of the TV series which later gained cult status, represents a rebellion against the traditional heterosocial order, against ordinariness as expressed not only in traditionally sanctioned sexual relationships, but also in sanctioned behavior in life in general. 'Heterosexuality's narrative form is, arguably, the most embedded and pervasive foundational structure of ordinary reality.... As social practice, heterosexuality is antithetical to the exoticism and adventure that characterize the fictional worlds of cult television series' (Jones 2002: 87). It is obvious that readers and writers who turn to the fantasy and heroic world of *Harry Potter* inter alia, because it is so far removed from the ordinary reality, conceive of ways to struggle with ordinariness by means of such a long-legitimated (within fan fiction communities) literary device as slash. But in the context of the conflicted and many way repressive Russian society the slash construct takes on additional explicit critical func-



tions in relation to the world it opposes. Some of the Russian fan fiction writers are absolutely aware of what they are doing in that respect:

We live in a palpably idiotic reality. In the world, where it is easy to demonstrate hostility and so much harder a real affection. ... Where love is always formatted to suit the current trend: mechanical and picture-perfect sex, marriage, same-sex union, patriotism, altruism, and god knows what else. We live in a world where one never stays alone, because in your head, there is always someone watching you, and one can only ever be happy if, and as long as this does not hurt anyone's religious or aesthetic feelings. Are you still surprised slash exists? I am not. One has to give all that an outlet.

A good slash is almost always painful. Because, I believe, slash grows from the darkness and accumulates instincts suffocating in a tightly shut cellar. ... From the outset, slash has implied a breakage, even if the world in the text does not in any way oppose homosexuality. The writer isn't in this world, and the reader isn't either. On the contrary, from birth, from early children's tales one inhabits a totally different reality. And so you read it – and subconsciously prepare for a catastrophe, and this sensation is topped with the fanfic's storyline and the skill of the storyteller. As a result, slash with a happy ending still hits you so forcefully, that a het can only achieve a similar effect after torturously killing off every single character one by one. (A private blog post, quoted with author's permission)

Slash construction in fan fiction, as is rightly remarked by this participant of the Russian *Harry Potter* fandom who chose to remain anonymous, happens to be an incredibly rich instrument, both to produce meanings, including the critical ones, and to increase the emotional impact the text has on the reader. The framework of slash allows one to construct characters' relationships in terms of fantasy, to build into these relationships one's real values, from the general right to choose your partner freely to the right of being emotional, and to achieve a heightened sense of contact with the reader, who most often either shares with the writer both her ideas of ordinariness and her concept of right and wrong, or is ready to fight her on these grounds (severe discussions about slash, with passionate haters as well as passionate advocates, are not rare in the Russian fandoms). It is true that 'slash romance ... becomes a hope for the sexual community in a hostile, homophobic, transphobic world' in general (Busse, Lothian 2009: 122). But it is just as true that in the Russian context this opposition to hostility is sensed and experienced with additional force and becomes a frame for an expression of personal rights in the situation of political repression of the private sphere. Slash contributes to the production of an underground emotional community within the very practice of reading and writing.

Excessive passion is a usual feature of fandom communication; a typical expression of one's excitement of the text and a typical compliment to the author states: 'Stayed up reading all night, wept, couldn't fall asleep, am re-reading it again'. This heightened emotional state, this desire to be 'hit', which accompanies participation in fan fiction practices, is also certainly the result of a conscious choice by the participants. On the level of fan fiction as practice, Harry Potter's and other characters' right to personal life and to independence in general, eagerly defended in hundreds of texts, is furthermore equivalent to the right of female au-

thors and readers of these texts to a personal space for reading and writing, and to an unhindered expression of their emotions. Every fandom participant exercises her choice in the very practice of reading and writing fan fiction: this practice is time-consuming, lies entirely outside the sphere of economic gratification, and in some contexts even brings on a social stigma. However, it is also emotionally and, for the lack of a better word, existentially rewarding. It is quite understandable then that slash, the most emotionally fulfilling, the most transgressive and the most oppositional fictional frame, has become so popular in the Russian *Harry Potter* fandom.

For many Russian women, contemporary fan fiction has become a cultural space and a language with which they think of themselves. They also share their thoughts with others, form communities, declare their personal needs and fulfill them, learn to defend what they like in disputes with others and in inner debates with themselves, to stand up for their choice and to bear responsibility for it. That is to say, they ‘take care of themselves’ (this is an obvious reference to the title of Michel Foucault’s book on sexuality in the ancient world), both in their attitude towards all aspects of life, including sexuality, and in their fan fictional expressions. Already in 1984 Janice Radway managed to demonstrate how this function of securing one’s own space amid daily routine, the function of self-improvement and self-teaching, is realized through readers’ dealing even with most commercialized, most formalized mass literature genres (Radway 1984). Digital fan fiction in this respect represents a giant step forward, both in forming a competent creative community (Radway noted in her study the slowing effect of the lack of communication between female readers on the development of the progressive potential of romance literature’ reception), and in providing an unlimited choice of options for reading and writing.

Just as Radway suggested all these years ago, as soon as they had a real choice, many women chose that which mass culture was not going to give them. A very large portion of fan fiction practices is directly linked to fulfilling one’s sexual desires (on the level of reading pragmatics) and to conceptualizing gender norms and conventions of the modern world (on the level of content, as well as in frequent discussions of problematic texts). Representing in this sense a borderline zone, one might even say imperative, individualism (‘get to know what is important for you personally and do it in the imaginary literary space’), fan fiction simultaneously offers room for conceptualizing and discussing consequences of any choice, thus becoming a large sandbox for experiments on oneself, for self-cognition and self-development. Contemporary Russian public culture lacks such zones in general, and the world of Russian women, stuck between patriarchal traditionalism and mass culture consumerism, lacks them even more. So, under the guise of private blogs, under the protective spells of internet pseudonyms, the quantity of fan fiction readers and writers constantly grow.

**‘As if my heart had an erection’: the discourse of body and soul***Diversity of forms, permanence of Utopia*

It is just as wrong to define all fan fiction as pornography as it is impossible to equate it all with romance: not only does a substantial bulk of texts in the gen category not focus on sexual relations, but these narratives may not even mention sex, instead drawing on other sources to capture readers’ interest and to keep up suspense. Nevertheless, sex takes a place of honor in fan fiction, both on the representational level, and as regards textual pragmatics: there are special genres and categories of writings dedicated primarily to sex (PWP, kink, slave-fic), options for including sex into narratives and writing conventions and reading strategies for sex scenes of different kind. An evolved porn scene may take center stage in a coming-of-age novel or a crime story; before publishing a chapter online, an author may warn readers about ‘raising the rating’ and suggest that those, who do not wish to read this, just skip this installment. In fandom, it is quite acceptable to admit to reading pornography, to discuss one’s preferences in this respect, to compliment authors for well-written hot scenes. The Russian kink-fest event on Diary.ru, an explicit porn literary game, counts at the moment (2013) more than 3.200 members. Unlike readers of romance novels polled by Janis Radway in the early 1980s, contemporary female readers and writers of fan fiction openly admit to their piqued interest in sexual liberty in the text, and eagerly use fan fiction as a means to develop their sexuality, to expand their existential experience limited to rigid gender roles. Russian fandom participants frequently confess in blogs that reading fan fiction has taught them a lot about various forms of sexuality; the change often begins with overcoming homophobia after having read the first successful slash texts. Fan fiction serves to build, play out, and discuss multiple versions of sexual relations. In the *Harry Potter* fan fiction, an additional boost to this development of sexual fantasies comes from the fantasy elements of the magical world that are used in representations of bodily experiences (for example, protagonists’ sexual prowess may be reinforced thanks to the legacy of various magical creatures, or bodily functions may be magically transformed, etc.)

Fan fiction as a means of communication and a fictional framework has clearly demonstrated that traditional romance literature does not reflect sensual experiences of women in modern western societies. It does not reflect either their degree of sexual awareness, or their need for sexually-oriented texts<sup>15</sup>. This is true for Russian women also. In spite of the fact that Russian mass media and pop-culture are overflowing with sexual clichés and that sex is propagated as part of the ‘success story’ construct, the society’s attitude towards sexual practices ‘in reality’ is very gendered and remains conservative and oppressive as far as women’s rights and opportunities are concerned. Nevertheless, the Russian *Harry Potter* fan fiction does not differ in this respect from its western counterparts. On the level of representation, there are no differences whatsoever: in Russia, just like elsewhere, protagonists’ sex life is of existential importance. Sex is seen as an integral part of the basic positive values of a rela-

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<sup>15</sup> This has been directly confirmed by an incredible commercial success of the romance *50 Shades of Grey* by E. L. James (2011), which is nothing but a somewhat reworked and ‘smoothed’ sexually-oriented fan fiction story.

tionship construct (love, means to overcome unnecessary boundaries, way to establish understanding, etc.). Establishing an ideal harmony between the sensual and the emotional, achieving wholesomeness of sexual and spiritual communication is a desirable outcome of an emerging relationship and a popular convention of fan fiction – in this notion of love Utopia, fan fiction fully concurs with basic forms of melodrama. A phrase about the heart erection, used for the title of this section — a quotation from Treggi Di (fanfic *A Heart of Glass* [Stekliannoe serdce], a soulful first sexual scene between Harry and Snape) — describes unerringly the unity of the soul and body that fan fiction stipulates.

In order to express meanings related to sexuality one uses various accepted generic constructs: that of the traditional romance – for example, Harry and Snape in their forced marriage take a long time getting closer until, finally, the novel ends with scenes of voluntary wholesome sex, as in NicMac's text *Right Wingers* [Konzervatory]; intimatopia<sup>16</sup> — for example, adventures of two lovers, Harry and Draco, in a fantastic country called Somnia in *Elysium, or In The Land of Lost Dreams* [Elysium, ili v Strane Poteryannykh Snov] by Dver\_v\_zimu; soap opera and drama – for example, various 'love triangles' and other situations of difficult choice, in which true features and consequences of different types of sexual attractions, from infatuation to unrequited passion, come to the fore (*The Sphere of Destruction* [Sfera razrushenia] by Fly, *Not Your Child's Stories* [Nedetskie istorii] by Toma-km). Russian *Harry Potter* fan fiction writers are quite tolerant when analyzing troubles caused by sexual desires: for instance, writer E-light finds understanding and forgiveness for all the afflicted members of the love triangle Harry/ Draco/ Draco's son Scorpius in her fanfic *Delirium* and in its sequel. A number of stories focus on diverse sexual transgressions: practices of reading these narratives as well as attitudes towards extreme expressions of sexuality are discussed in the community, but one cannot doubt that the literary imagination of Russian writers needs them, and that their mere existence makes the norm all the better defined.

It is worth noting that Russian fandom's ambiguity towards romance literature as a mass genre is palpable all across this field: fan fiction writers are always ready to mock the language and clichés of romance novels ('His shirt burst, the buttons flew away and banged on the floor, like in romance pulp fiction' — Doc Rebecca, *The Quidditch Trilogy* [Kviddichnaya trilogia]). One of the essential strategies of representing sexuality is to defy readers' expectations when dealing with constructs typical of traditional female literary genres. A good example in this respect is a trilogy *On the Other Side...* [Po druguiu storonu...] by Friyana, one of the well-known pieces of slash writing in the Russian *Harry Potter* fandom. The first part, *On the Other Side of Warmth* [Po druguiu storonu tepla], is organized like a traditional romance with a high degree of sensual tension, but the finale includes a dramatic element that is usually inadmissible for this genre: the formation of an ideal couple Harry/Draco is suddenly interrupted by the death of one of the pair. Readers were taken aback by this ending: comments on the text speak of tears, despair, poems composed after finishing the novel, and assurances that, their grief notwithstanding, readers do not regret having had this experience. In the second part, *On the Other Side of Hope* [Po druguiu storony nadezhdy], the author resurrected the untimely 'deceased' Harry, but, unexpectedly for most readers, started intro-

<sup>16</sup> This particularly apt term denoting a popular sub-genre of fan fiction belongs to Elizabeth Woledge (Woledge, 2006).

ducing female characters into the picture. She insisted on the need of varied sexual experiences. She argued that for a couple to have a meaningful existence, it is imperative that they have significant others around. Disputes about the texts became ever more emotional: some angered readers gave up reading this fanfic as they could not accept such a breach of conventions; others openly supported the author, not only by interpreting her text, but also praising her ‘bravery’ in general. Ceaseless arguments over the past five years, regarding love and sexuality as construed in this trilogy, display fan fiction’s potential in conceptualizing gender norms and love scenarios.

On the level of textual pragmatics, the Russian fan fiction does not immediately seem to have any peculiarities: extended and highly detailed sexual scenes rated NC-17 fulfill a pornographic function — one of several key functions of fan fiction as a type of literature (Samutina 2013). Most Russian authors follow English-speaking fandom standards of depicting sexual scenes in fan fiction, as they have well proven their efficiency for female readers’ communities. These scenes may be quite lengthy, may present different viewpoints in turn (although this is not mandatory), may and almost must combine a detailed description of characters’ actions with just as detailed an account of their physiological and emotional sensations. Apart from that, one must not forget about cross-referencing the plot: sexual scenes often occur at the peak of narrative tension, and the success of sex as a means of communication between protagonists sometimes determines their fate afterwards. This is especially important for stories about love-hate relationships: it is nothing but sex that often allows Harry and Draco, or the Quidditch captains of Slytherin and Gryffindor, Flint and Wood, to ‘reach an agreement’. The same device is often used in short pornographic texts of the PWP genre: a real or an artificial conflict is resolved by means of a drawn-out sexual scene.

### **The invention of language**

It is hard to overestimate the challenge that these fan fiction standards presented to Russian-speaking writers and translators. Not only is Russian ‘professional literature’ rather short on quality examples of detailed descriptions of sex (and at any rate, these examples, even when they are present, are built into the plot differently and usually serve a different, non-pornographic function), the Russian language also has a problem in that it misses an appropriate vocabulary. This is due to the stringent separation of obscene and normative speech in the Russian language, as well as to the comparatively recent introduction to the post-Soviet readers of mass literature which somehow treats diverse types of sexual scenes in its various genres (though the problem of euphemisms remains). Also to blame is the strict gender appropriation of this field: most descriptions of sex in the Russian literature are composed by men and from the point of view of a man. All of my survey respondents, with no exceptions, agreed that this presents problems both in translation and in writing. Let me quote three active translators of the Russian fandom:

As for sexual scenes, the Russian language is hardly suited to writing erotica, at least in the same form in which it exists in English. For us these genres are so distant that even the vocabulary describing human anatomy is drastically different ..... That is why, strict-

ly speaking, when translating erotic scenes one has to re-create them from scratch for them to be any good and not sound like an anatomy textbook mixed with schoolboys' jargon and obscenities. (Survey, 2012, author M.)

Concerning the actual language of high-rated scenes, as a translator I encounter this problem a lot. Its root is in the specifics of the Russian and the English languages. English is better equipped to convey intimate scenes, their respective vocabulary is richer to begin with and, on the other hand, seems not as rude. As for the fanfics originally written in Russian, the bad Russian fanfics, just like the English ones, would have a lot of clichés in this part, whereas in the good ones it all depends on the author's talent ... On the other hand, I write and like to read fanfics where love scenes are rendered metaphorically, not through pure physiology. In this case a Russian author does not have any more difficulties than an English one. (Survey, 2012, author kasmunaut)

In my opinion, bed scenes are described very differently: English-speaking authors often focus on the mechanics of the process, while Russians are more into depicting emotions, sensations and so forth. Also, English-speaking authors almost never use that 'baby talk' which is so typical of our fandom: all these diminutives, 'my sweet boy' and so on. (Survey, 2012, author lilith20godrich).

Russian authors and fan fiction translators have literally found themselves facing a task of inventing a language, and they took it up with enthusiasm and bravery. Erotic writing in Russian still poses a lot of problems, but the fan fiction community has developed a number of rules which must be followed, and pointed out possible traps to steer clear of. There exists a growing list of ostracized clichés. 'Gryffindors' and 'blonds' in bed scenes, 'peas of nipples' and a 'quiver of pleasure' all are moving from the center into the deep periphery of writing standards. A significant neutral vocabulary has been assembled, along with fresh ways to describe typical actions (the latter is clearly due to the influence of the English examples). Metaphors, mentioned by kasmunaut, become an option, rather than the only way to somehow describe characters' actions. A community of writers, translators and fandom critics works on the existing problem and has achieved great results in developing the language and norms applied to describing sexual relations: nevertheless, discontent with these descriptions remains a permanent feature of fandom communication and encourages authors to keep improving their resources. As a Russian reader who began her acquaintance with fan fiction with the English-speaking examples and was afraid to even try reading sexual scenes in her native tongue, given the situation in the 'official' literature, I was truly amazed by the progress made by fan fiction authors in this sphere. In a great number of Russian *Harry Potter* fanfics, prolonged and detailed sexual scenes do not in any way differ, in style and in the modality of speech, from the language reality of the rest of the text: their quality is just as good. Having made up their mind to speak about sex explicitly, women writers and readers have independently worked out a language for this conversation, and this is just the kind of language they need for their pleasure and preservation of dignity.

**‘Mister Potter with Spouse’: family values**

— You know what I’ve been thinking lately? — in his turn Harry inquired. — That fifteen years ago we, you and I, got ahead of ourselves. We were so grateful to the Weasley family that we took a mere attachment to be the love of our lives. Only this was a mirage, which eventually disappeared, and a dull gray routine replaced a bright illusion.

For a while heavy silence enveloped the Chief Auror’s office. Both Harry and Hermione pondered about how their lives could have unfolded if only then, after the victory, they had not been in such a rush to get married.

Shellar and Mrs Julia. *Eternal Love* [Vechnaia liubov].

The door opens with a light creak, and a disturbed little girl frowns funnily without opening her eyes, then cuddles closer to the thin body, so familiar to Harry. Even in its sleep this body embraces the child carefully, like a crystal ornament. These two have intertwined like two thin tree branches, like links of an expensive fancy necklace, and, while adjusting a pillow, Harry feels that it is still wet from fallen tears.

He falls to his knees before the bed, laughs silently and cries, not daring to disturb, with even a slightest touch, those who are his greatest treasure in the world: his family.

Lady\_jane. *Alice and Looking Glasses* [Zerkala i Alisa].

*An imaginary contradiction*

The above quoted texts speaking explicitly about the issue of family belong to fairly young authors (comparison with an expensive fancy necklace tells a lot). These fragments’ notions about family seem to stand in contradiction, but in fact they are identical: only in the latter case this family consists of Harry, Draco, and their adopted daughter Alice, which manifests free choice of a partner and a family, while in the former Harry speaks about his traditional, ‘imposed’ marriage with Ginny Weasley, whom he would eventually leave to form a new stable pairing. In spite of all the variety of textual types and genres, family models and notions about family prevailing in the Russian *Harry Potter* fan fiction are surprisingly unified. A family is criticized and supported from a single position, although more experienced authors are certainly able to clothe their arguments into a more credible form.

Criticism of family is based primarily on the original source, but is additionally supported by the opportunities provided by slash. On the one hand, in Joanne Rowling’s book family values are endowed with great significance. Harry is an orphan and does not wish for anything more than to have a ‘regular’ family. And he finally forms it, as we see in the epilogue, on whose importance the writer insisted in interviews after being criticized for the ordinariness of the adult image of the main character. She chose for adult Harry a traditional family with three children and, according to her, his ability to create such a family and to lead a ‘normal life’ after all he has experienced speaks more for Harry’s strength of spirit and human qualities than a continuation of heroic deeds could. At the same time, the book offers enough examples of problematic families. These are a satirically depicted Dursley family, an

embodiment of triteness and doltishness of the middle class. The Weasley family is presented warmly, and their financial struggles are mentioned with compassion; nevertheless, Molly Weasley, with her obtrusive and expansive attitude towards her children, does not escape criticism even from Rowling herself. Needless to say, in fan fiction geared at adventures, at developing the magic world of the original story, at poetics of unique sexual and amorous relationships, the dullness and humdrum of the traditional family world find no sympathy. Slash with its rejection of the heteronormative order becomes here a powerful instrument of protesting against this 'hero's being doomed to the everyday', against ordinariness and routine as such. In addition to that, there is the protest against the 'lack of choice' for Harry, in keeping with a key role freedom of choice plays in the axiology of the character as described above.

Accordingly, the Russian *Harry Potter* fan fiction turns the carriers of heteronormativity into major negative figures: these are the 'canonic' spouse of the hero, Ginny, her mother Molly Weasley and the Weasley family in general, Tonks who aspired to bind down Remus Lupin (whose place should be next to the 'romantic singletons' Snape or Sirius Black), as well as the 'feeble-minded and envious' Ron who married a smart and quite heroic Hermione. Ginny and Molly Weasley become the object of all major negative characteristics: according to fan fiction authors, it is these features that are responsible for all the unacceptable elements of family life, with which many women of the post-Soviet space have to deal in practice. In the Russian fan fiction Molly and Ginny are pushy; they do not respect other people's personal space; they are greedy and use others to their own benefit; they are vain and appreciate public opinion, using the social capital of the 'national hero' to improve their own standing in the society. What is worse, they are ready to manipulate Harry, they try to map out his life with an eye to their own interests. Here is a typical comment on one of the fanfics on 'The Astronomy Tower': 'I feel pity for Potter. Primarily because he allowed himself to be taken for a ride, to proceed along all the stations planned for him by the public opinion and the Weasley family: the Aurore Department, Ginny, the kids'. Sooner or later, Harry reacts to this turn of events by escaping and pairing up with someone else who is radically different from the Weasleys and does not carry associations of triviality, for example, with the single, double agent Snape, with former enemy Draco Malfoy, or even with Lucius Malfoy (the greater it shocks society, the better). In this he can be helped (or replaced) by other characters who are not affected by heteronormative routine; for example, by Charlie Weasley who is drastically different from the rest of his family in that he is independent and has an exotic job in a Rumanian dragon preserve. In the het version, Harry may rethink his friendship with his 'peer', an independent Hermione, or find himself an exotic partner who guarantees that he will not die of boredom, as in Figvaiza's fic *An Older Woman* [Zhenschina postarshe], where Harry marries a famous 'serial widow' Mrs Zabini and ensures a really 'fun life' both for himself and those around him.

This criticism does not, however, mean that authors reject family values and a traditional family makeup. On the contrary, the space of fan fiction is filled with admiration for these values and panegyrics to the rightly organized, 'not dull' family life, as well as with lovingly and humorously crafted images of children (the age and marital status of the majority of the Russian *Harry Potter* fan fiction writers allows them to draw on the material, so to speak, 'at



hand’). One of the most surprising for an ‘outsider’, but perfectly customary and easily explained in the given context of fan fiction’s generic devices is that of ‘male pregnancy’ (MPREG). An extremely popular fantasy of MPREG serves primarily to describe, in the slash framework, that element of happiness that is derived from expecting and giving birth to a child: authors are unwilling to leave it out of the Utopian ideal relationship. Harry’s emotions caused by Draco’s pregnancy, reading fairy tales at bedtime, happy parents’ pride for their children’s accomplishments — fan fiction is full of such imagery. Having provided Harry with necessary conditions: giving him a true passion and the freedom of choice, and protecting him from boredom of normativity by means of a symbolic construct of a homosexual relationship with an outstanding partner, fandom writers are happy to dwell on the pleasurable, ideal Utopian state best expressed in the genre of fluff<sup>17</sup>. The ideology of marriage in Russian fan fiction is indeed rather traditional in its essence: it reflects, simultaneously, women’s discomfort with current models of watered-down family relations, and their dreams of a family as a space of unconditional mutuality and meaningful creativity, a place where relationships are being invented rather than accepted ready-made, and where the everyday and its problems magically fade away.

This moment, of ‘inventing a new everyday world’ together with another, dissimilar person, gets a lot of attention in various types of fanfics. One of the most colorful generic forms used for this are stories of forced marriage or simply stories of marriages between canonically antagonistic characters. The vagaries of Harry’s and Snape’s, Neville Longbottom’s and Snape’s, Lupin’s and Black’s, Snape’s and Black’s lives together, despite all their dissimilarities and/or prior history of mutual hostility, produce, perhaps, the tenderest examples of fluff, which endows everyday actions and the everyday on the whole with an entirely new meaning.

And then summer goes; and a new fall comes, with new students, and old concerns. And the non-existent wind beating the non-existent underground windows, and a headache, and the annual plans, and first-year kids who got lost in the school halls, and linden tea from big cups.

They’ve been together for so long – not long if compared to the huge span of years when they were apart, but very long by Neville’s heart’s clock. So long that there is almost no difference between them, like there is no space between Severus’ eyebrows when he frowns. So long that Neville knows that Severus is hungry even if he himself does not yet realize that, deeply entrenched in his book. So long that Severus does not distinguish between himself and Neville. He says: ‘One should boil a kettle’, or ‘It’s hot’, without clarifying who needs to boil a kettle or who feels it is hot, because both feel it, and both want tea.

Treggi Di. *Perhaps* [Vozmozhno].

Truth be told, Ginny, the ‘official’ mother and wife, also occasionally speaks up and what she expresses is not only hatred towards ‘robbers from the outside’ and destroyers of the he-

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<sup>17</sup> ‘Fluff’ is a fan fiction sub-genre, characterized by two main features: a presence of a happy couple and no conflict whatsoever.

ro's 'ideal family'. For example, in Sanya's fanfic *Malfoy into the Rib* [Malfoi v rebro] Ginny launches into a long feminist 'emancipatory speech' about the meaninglessness of their protracted marriage, in which hundreds of Russian women can recognize their daily reality:

I decided that it is time for us to split. Darling, for all these fifteen years you have been married exclusively to your work. We are just an appendix to it, as in 'Mister Potter with spouse' and 'what wonderful children does the Chief Auror have'. You need us only for your image. You diligently play the role of a caring father during those two days every season that you spend at home. The rest of the time nappies, colds, fevers, school, activities, scraped knees, offences and fights are all mine. I cook, I launder, I clean up, I heal, I wipe noses, renew children's wardrobes, talk to teachers and take measures. ... I think I deserve some rest and idleness, — and she again started pacing the room while sending the last items into the suitcase with a swing of her wand.

As a result this 'mutinous' Ginny leaves Harry herself. But the story develops further in keeping with the slash-construct framework: Harry 'lives for himself', working and having fun with different partners, meets Malfoy, falls in love with him without first realizing what was happening, and eventually pairs up with him. The fantastic distance of the magical world and the slash storytellers' strife to take a man's position in their texts, to self-identify not with 'nappies and colds', but with adventures or, in the very least, a Utopia of understanding and rest (elves will do all the chores) mask an emerging contradiction. This is why Ginny 'gets the floor' rather rarely, and the more conscientious, thinking authors stumble over her image. Not knowing what to do with this obstacle on Harry's path to happiness in his new homosocial reality, they urgently marry off Ginny to someone else or simply 'accidentally' murder her.

In his exemplary study of formulas and of the socio-anthropological functions of one type of mass literature of the 1990s, the so-called Russian action-gangster novel, Boris Dubin pointed out a significant 'semantic, cultural, civilizational' deficit in the Soviet and post-Soviet cultural space, which begins to be filled by mass culture with its individualistic values ('personal honor, entrepreneurship, responsibility, daring to learn and to self-actualize'), with its typical mechanisms of engaging readers and of readers' self-identification, with new types of 'pragmatics of textual impact', and so on. According to Dubin, mass culture 'takes upon itself in these circumstances, as well as in history in general, the function of helping adapt to changes occurring with the society and in the society' (Dubin 1996: 240-241). When planning this preliminary foray, to a great extent limited to the gender aspects, into the anthropology of the Russian-speaking *Harry Potter* fan fiction, I wished primarily to initiate a discussion on the Russian fan fiction in a similar perspective. Fan fiction does not just inherit these values and qualities from mass culture: to my mind, the participatory culture of fan fiction even supersedes mass culture in the democratizing potential, due to its organization as described earlier. Thanks to the internet and the selfless labor of fan fiction readers and writers, fan fiction has become a sophisticated means of communication, an open and developing way to work out and test meanings, constructs, and manners of pragmatic textual impact, that is used to translate established and shared — in a particular cultural space — norms and values, to experiment and attempt to induce changes into the given cultural field. Going back to

the paper's title again, one can state that fan fiction presupposes a high level of 'taking care of the self'. Researchers must learn to treat fan fiction differently: not according to its cultural status in the shadow of the 'official literature', but in keeping with its potential in creating meanings and influencing people's lives.

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