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РАСКРЫВАЯ ЧЕЛОВЕЧЕСКУЮ ПРИРОДУ: ВЫРАЗИТЕЛЬНЫЙ ЯЗЫК ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ

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Аннотация: В статье упоминается четыре романа, включенных автором статьи в курс современной английской художественной литературы: «Изменение климата» Хилари Мантела, «Карантин» Джима Крейса, «Последние распоряжения» Грэма Свифта и «Алвертон» Адама Торпа. Автор дает подробное описание языка данных произведений, которые объединяет общий мотив «странных аспектов человеческого опыта».

Герои романа Хилари Мантел погружены в исследование своего нравственного сознания, а также спорных вопросов веры и человеческого страдания: это люди, пытающиеся быть рациональными, но постоянно попадающие в неприятности. Носитель языка может оценить диапазон грамматических времен, который автор использует для передачи мыслительного процесса. Джим Крейс в своем романе «Карантин» демонстрирует превосходное умение подбирать точные слова: несмотря на всю кажущуюся «странность» текста, это великолепный образчик повествовательной прозы. Роман Грэма Свифта представляет собой собрание мыслей и воспоминаний семи разных героев: автор использует говор пожилых и малообразованных обитателей юго-восточного Лондона. Роман «Алвертон» Адама Торпа можно считать самым необычным из представленных четырех книг. Он состоит из двенадцати глав, каждая из которых посвящена отдельной истории, произошедшей в период с 1650 по 1689 гг. Каждая глава представлена отдельным литературным жанром (проповедь, любовная переписка, дневник, лекция, сценарий телепередачи и т. д.). Перед автором стояла трудная задача: произведение должно легко восприниматься читателем, одновременно ассоциируясь у него с определенным периодом и жанром. Подводя некий итог, автор определяет литературу как акт коммуникации между писателем и читателем. Разумеется, нельзя утверждать, что литература – единственный вид искусства, позволяющий «человеку оставаться человеком», однако литературное творчество заставляет индивида задумываться о жизни других людей с эффективностью, которой не могут похвастаться какие-либо другие виды человеческой деятельности. Любители британской литературы имеют уникальную возможность познакомиться с современными английскими авторами в библиотеках вузов – участников проекта «Современная английская литература в российских университетах» фонда «Оксфорд-Россия».

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REVEALING HUMANITY: THE FLEXIBLE LANGUAGE OF LITERATURE

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Abstract: The article features the linguistic peculiarities of four novels the author uses in her course on Contemporary English Fiction: Hilary Mantel's A Change of Climate, Jim Crace's Quarantine, Graham Swift's Last Orders, and Adam Thorpe's Ulverton. The novels probe deeply into some of the stranger aspects of human experience. Hilary Mantel writes of people who try to behave as balanced, rational beings, but to whom irrational and terrible things happen that have to be dealt with. The metaphorical language illuminates this philosophical exploration, which would otherwise be dull or unconvincing. The novel might seem strange for English readers, but the language carries the conviction of the true storyteller. J. Crace has a wonderful sense of exact words for an exact rhythm. Graham Swift's novel is written as though it were the thoughts and memories of seven different characters. The language here is the colloquial vernacular, the language of elderly and middle-aged men and women with little education from south-east London. The most extraordinary book of these four is Adam Thorpe's Ulverton. It consists of twelve chapters, which are a chronological set separate 'stories' that happened between 1650 and 1988. Each chapter uses a different literary genre for the story-telling: for example, a simple first-person narrative, a sermon, a journal, letters to a lover, lecture notes, an internal monologue, and – ending the novel – a television script. Thorpe has therefore set himself a colossal task: to render into lively readable English, the concerns and passions of individuals, often illiterate individuals, while retaining a sense of the language appropriate to a particular era and a particular genre.

Literature is an act of communication between writer and reader which does justice to humanity through expressive, imaginative language. Nobody would be so arrogant as to say that reading literature is the only way of 'being human' but more than most activities it forces us to think about people other than ourselves.

Readers who would like to read more have available many other fine examples of contemporary English literature, provided by the Oxford Russia Fund for those taking part in the project on Contemporary English Literature in Russian Universities.

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Recently, as a teacher of adults for Oxford University, I found myself planning a course on contemporary English fiction which included novels by Hilary Mantel *(A Change of Climate)* [1], Jim Crace *(Quarantine)* [2], Graham Swift *(Last Orders)* [3] and Adam Thorpe *(Ulverton)* [4]. The course provoked much discussion among my students about matters of contemporary language and how it is used in literature. This essay explores the issues raised in those discussions and relates them to some aspects of the teaching of English in Russian universities.

The books I selected for the course were chosen because they are novels that probe deeply into some of the stranger aspects of human experience. That 'probing deeply' requires linguistic distinction; thousands of good, thoughtful, intelligent people who have spent long hours struggling to write a novel have failed to find language which is vivid, creative and fully adequate to what they want to say. Somehow their good, thoughtful, intelligent perceptions have turned into banalities on the page. The pleasure of reading and re-reading a great novel is the pleasure of paying attention to the rhythm of the prose, the precision of the idea, the suggestive brilliance of the metaphor, the sympathetic rendering of everyday speech, the complex ironic tones, the ambiguities (they usually are ambiguities) of humour and grief.

Not all critics believe that this is a good time for the English novel – by which I mean novels written by English as opposed to Scots, Irish, American, or Indian

writers, for example. They object that too much English writing is inert. In our class discussions at every point we examined the ways in which language was *used* in these novels and argued among ourselves as to whether it was in fact inert. In English literature, it should be said, colloquial and informal registers easily mingle with more formal and self-consciously metaphorical styles, so that analysis is often a matter of noting incongruities and juxtapositions of words and structures which force the reader to reconsider his presuppositions. That of course is the purpose – to examine human behaviour and human assumptions through fresh and sometimes unorthodox ways of using language.

Our first novel was not, in any obvious way, 'experimental'. Hilary Mantel is a very intelligent writer whose characters, also mostly intelligent, regularly examine their own moral consciousness. In addition Mantel uses exact metaphors to establish place and mood. These two aspects of her writing interact in this scene at the beginning of *A Change of Climate*, where Emma; whose married lover has just died, decides to visit a pilgrim church.

... She was not sure why; her faith, if it still existed, was not something she displayed in public. But when you cannot cope with grief, she reasoned, you can do worse than observe the forms that have helped other people cope with it. At Felix's funeral the minister had said that, even in the depths of misery, the familiar forms of prayer can lift the heart towards Christian joy. Very well, Emma thought grimly, let's try it Something is needed For Ginny [Felix's widow] there were undertakers. There was the question of probate. But for me there is nothing. It is as if I have been told of a death that has taken place in a distant country. It is as if I have no claim on sympathy, because I have heard of the death of a person my friends do not know. There is no body. There is no corpse. Just this absence, this feeling of something unfinished.

Skirting Fakenham, taking the back roads towards the shrine and the sea, she found her car alone on the road. Across the flat fields towers spiked the snow-charged sky, the clouds pregnant and bowed with cold; Norfolk is a land of churches, some open to the sky, their chancels colonised by nettles, their naves by blackthorn and brambles; In those not yet redundant, congregations dwindle; the Samaritans' notices, flapping in the porches, attest to the quality and frequency of rural despair.

I suppose a language teacher could point to the huge range of tenses used as Emma negotiates her own path through her grief. The native speaker will appreciate the precision of thought revealed by this range – and the effect of 'grimly' as an indicator of Emma's strong, unflinching character and her rejection of 'joy' as the reason for her visit to a church. We will also note the move into the past tense when she thinks of Ginny, Felix' widow, a woman whom she does not dislike but whom she *distances* in this way. In the second paragraph readers are told about Norfolk, about ruined churches and rural despair as metaphors 'spiked', 'pregnant' 'colonised' mingle with exact cultural detail, the 'Samaritan's notices, flapping in the porches'. Mantel moves from the 'this absence, this feeling of something unfinished' to the melancholy picture of the 'redundant' (another exact word) churches.

This is a short extract. The novel debates questions of religious belief and human suffering, big questions which are bound to interest enquiring readers. Mantel writes of people who try to behave as balanced, rational beings, but to whom irrational and terrible things happen that have to be dealt with. The metaphorical language illuminates this philosophical exploration which would otherwise be dull or unconvincing. As it is, the language requires readers to stretch their minds to encompass the novel's moral exploration.

Jim Crace is a story-teller of semi-mythical worlds. In *Quarantine* he tells the story of five people who choose to spend a period of forty days fasting in caves in the desert wildernesses, in order to cleanse their spirits and to address any God who might be listening. One of the five is a youth called Jesus.

Unlike the four who had preceded him that afternoon and set up home among the poppies, Jesus did not follow any of the carvings in the rocks which indicated where hermits would easily find caves. He did not mean to leave his imprint softly in the clay. He was looking for much harder ground. He preferred the pious habitats of lunatics and bats where he could live for forty days, hanging by his toes if need be, and not have any excuse for shifting his eyes from heaven for an instant… He set his sights on the remotest and highest of the caves, a key-shaped hole. It had no more than a sloping rock as its yard, hardly bigger than a prayer mat, the perfect perch for eagles. And for angels. But Jesus hesitated. He surely had the right to drink before he embarked on his trials. It was not dusk. There was, as yet, no thin and bending moon to mark the onset of his trials.

The novel is strange for English readers, but the language carries the conviction of the true storyteller. We trust this author with his own tale of Jesus, partly because he hovers on the border between the mysterious and the comic. 'He did not mean to leave his imprint softly in the clay. He was looking for much harder ground' should invoke at least three reactions from the reader. 'He did not mean to…He was looking for..' is a comic, even affectionate comment by the narrator about Jesus' grand plans. We understand that Jesus is very young, very idealistic, and probably ignorant about life. ''leave his imprint softly in the clay' is an original

and mysterious phrase: the adverb 'softly' does not attach itself easily to 'leave', but rather has the force of an adjective attached to 'clay'. This use of an adverb for an adjective, often found in poetry, extends the meaning across the whole phrase, so that we think of people moving gently and tenderly across soft ground, and at the same instant are required to reject them. Jesus wants 'harder ground'. Is this arrogance or humility? By using the phrase 'He did not mean to…' the narrator is standing back, detached, not passing judgement.

Consider 'He preferred the pious habitats of lunatics and bats…'. The dictionary will tell you that 'habitat' is a scientific word for the place where a particular species dwells; 'pious' can refer straightforwardly to religious devotion or can be used critically, even sardonically by non-believers. The two words do not go together – except that they do when two other words are linked 'lunatics' and 'bats'. Bats have a habitat, lunatics may be pious – like this Jesus, it seems. Lunatics could perhaps imitate bats. The idea is absurd and yet profound. In one half sentence we have a new way of seeing things: we make a step towards understanding Jesus' mind, and at the same time keep open our options about whether his experiment will be valuable or disastrous.

Crace also has a wonderful sense of exact words for an exact rhythm. Anyone who wants to hear English in his head could do no better than to read aloud, and repeat the last sentence of this passage.

Graham Swift's novel, *Last Orders*, is written as though it were the thoughts and memories of seven different characters. No omniscient narrator appears, so we have to 'translate' the different voices into a communal story, while at the same time we must listen to the individual's point of view. The language here is the colloquial vernacular, the language of elderly and middle-aged men and women with little education from south-east London. Anyone who is interested in English informal speech should try to read this novel, where dialect is not rigid or prescriptive, but rather the English language as it sounds in the heads of the people of a particular community, modified by the author to make it comprehensible for all readers.

At the novel's opening we learn that Jack who has just died was a butcher on the point of retiring to a nearby seaside town. He died too soon to close his business. A few pages later Ray, his close friend, is sitting by the Thames, talking to Jack's widow, Amy. He watches her and these are his thoughts.

She looks again at the water. 'You know how when Jack had a change of mind, the whole world had to change too. He said, we're going to be new people.' She gives another little snort. 'New people.'

I look away across the garden because I don't want her to see the thought that might be showing in my face: that it's a pretty poor starting-point, all said, for becoming new people, a bungalow in Margate. It's not exactly the promised land.

There's a nurse chomping a sandwich on a bench in the far corner. Pigeons waddling.

Maybe Amy's having the same thought, maybe she's had it. Not the promised land….

'Anyway,' she says, 'I don't think we could've done it. When you totted it all up. When you took away what Jack owed on the shop.' Her face goes just a touch bitter.

'We'd have been a fair bit short.'

The nurse finished her sandwich, brushing down her skirt. The pigeons waddle quicker, pecking. They look like scatterings of ashes, bits of ashes with wings.

I say, 'How much short?'

In fact none of this passage contains any words or expressions which would not be familiar to all English readers. You can look up in a dictionary of colloquial usage phrases such as 'chomping' 'totted it all up', 'just a touch', 'bit short', or the use of 'pretty' as a qualifying adverb, or the use of the comparative adjective for a comparative adverb – 'the pigeons waddle quicker'. What Swift does is to put these normal colloquialisms into the delicate, emotionally cultivated mind of Ray, a clerk who bets on the horses. Ray is anxious that his private criticisms of Jack which *might* be showing in his face should not be seen by Amy. He must also guess what Amy might be thinking in order to continue the conversation, but he must not assume that he is right. He has to watch her intently without seeming to watch her, and to ask the crucial question 'How much short?' which means effectively 'How poor are you going to be?' so that it seems to flow naturally out of the conversation. This is how people who care about other people's feelings talk to each other, while out of the corner of their eyes they observe strangers eating, or birds, or clouds. Some of them, like Ray, see likenesses and significances too. Jack's cremated ashes are to be scattered. The pigeons, waddling, remind him of the ashes in his fire grate. 'Bits of ashes with wings.' Throughout, Swift has, as it were, clarified the colloquial by using it to explore subtle and conflicting emotions.

Swift never mocks the ways in which his characters think and speak. The novel celebrates ordinary, limited and failed human beings through turning their own language into literature.

The most extraordinary book of these four is Adam Thorpe's *Ulverton*. English readers divide themselves into those who think it is linguistically too difficult, and those who are convinced that it is a classic masterpiece. I belong to the second group. The novel is a huge experiment with language, which any Russian who cares about English should at least attempt to read, although it should be said that non-native speakers will certainly find some parts too difficult – as with *Ulysses*.

Ulverton consists of twelve chapters, each a separate 'story', the first set in 1650, the next in 1689, and so on until the last which is set in 1988. Over these three hundred years, we learn the history of the fictional village of Ulverton, through the voices of villagers and the occasional outsider. None of the narrators sets out to describe the village comprehensively, for each of them is preoccupied with his or her own experience and own problems, but since the place and the employment provide continuity, and since one generation's young devil may be the quiet grandfather in a later story, the narratives are thematically and evocatively linked.

Each chapter uses a different literary genre for the story-telling: for example, a simple first-person narrative, a sermon, a journal, letters to a lover, lecture notes, an internal monologue, and – ending the novel – a television script. Thorpe has therefore set himself a colossal task: to render into lively readable English, the concerns and passions of individuals, often illiterate individuals, while retaining a sense of the language appropriate to a particular era and a particular genre.

The first story, for example, is told by an illiterate shepherd who meets a friend, a young man from the village who is returning from Cromwell's wars. The young soldier has been disturbed by what he has seen and done, and now wants to come back to his wife. The old shepherd remembers the scene.

He reached into his breeches and pulled out something I thought was gold but when he oped his hand it was a ball of old ribbons that had long ago been red.

'She were allus [always] dreaming of it,' he said. 'She were allus dreaming of her hair all up in silks. Hair black as a raven and all up in red silks, like a lady. And rings on her fingers! Aye. She were allus dreaming of it!'

Those ribbons looked so tattered and pale and torn it was sad, like he had pulled out his own heart. Even his fierceness was not that of love but, as I think, of anguish.

I paused in my whittling of the yoke (for that's what I was doing) and nodded my head neither knowingly nor as judgement. I could see the heads he had torn the ribbon from and all the fingers he had maybe cut for rings, if he were telling the truth, and prayed without moving my lips. He smiled and put the clump of ribbons back into his breeches carefully as if it was a live thing and not to be hurt. The cocks were hollering from the thatch down there but else all you could hear were the cluckets ringing all over the coomb as the flock grazed. I thought. I thought how quiet we were compared to the noise of soldiering. The business at Newberry [a battle] had set my sheep off in a canter, miles off.

He took my hand all of a sudden, that had a knife in it, so I dropped the yoke and threw the knife down and took his hand. Then we hugged and kissed, as old friends, and I smelt the liquor on his skin that was a deep part of him and not just for jollity, and I wondered to myself how he reconciled this with God's word.

He was crying.

William the shepherd has something of the emotional delicacy of Ray in *Last Orders,* a willingness to listen and a capacity for empathetic pity. But his vocabulary is more extensive, plausibly because William would have heard readings from the Authorized Version of the Bible every Sunday. His aural linguistic imagination easily draws on images of quiet, of friendship, of heartbreak. He uses language for distinguishing between one emotion and another –'his fierceness not that of love but, as I think, of anguish.' His own fear of the young man is eased when the soldier tries to shake his hand, but even at that point he uses imagery to define what he notices. The smell of alcohol is not just on the soldier's breath but 'on his skin that was a deep part of him and not just for jollity'.

We do not know how illiterate shepherds thought and spoke three hundred years ago. It is not Thorpe's purpose to try to give an exact imitation, but instead to suggest the emotions and ideas available to William because he could draw on such language and thinking. (The relationship between language and the capacity for emotion and thought and discrimination is a pervasive theme in this novel).

Thorpe's solution is neither parody nor, simply, pastiche (a clever imitation) because, this being literature, we must hear both the individual voice of a character living in his own present, and the voice of a historical representative. In a later chapter a lawyer from London who is spending months enquiring into the peasant riots of 1830 in Ulverton writes a letter to his beloved Emily whom he hopes to marry.

Indeed – this is a quiet place. I am, I must confess, treated without civility: a kind of contemptuous pall of neglect towards betters hangs over the cotters – who seem alarmingly swarthy, as tho' rubbed in charcoal – O for thy fair curls, thy angel's countenance, my Emily! I ope your Locket with abandon. Here is too grim, for so many men have been taken into custody that there is an effect as after war, when the women folk slouch about in shawls and turn their heads as one passes. I do not know how they will deal with the Rioters, my heart. Lord Melbourne at the Home Office was appointed in the middle of this Trouble, and is more resolute than Peel. I think we shall have some Examples made. But surely not 2000, which is the full number. Melbourne has made Norcoat furious, for Squire Norcoat cannot sit on the bench – local magistrates are perceived too soft for this, tho' some are harder than flint, and clamour for the rope – for all breakers – without reprieve. I do not feel hard, but I had a stone cast at me last week, & I have had a letter, in a very poor

orthography, informing me that my name 'is drawn amongst the Black Harts in the Black Booke', that I am 'a blaggard Enmy of the Peeple', and I must make my Will. Do not fear a moment, my sweet child: these fellows are thoroughly cowed, and this is but the twitch of the dying.

Certain characteristics of an early nineteenth century style are imitated, such as the arbitrary (but sometimes dramatic) use of capital letters. The writer is mixing his registers as good letter-writers do, combining personal meditation, apostrophes to his beloved and topical political gossip. But behind these superficial features we can hear a man divided and distressed by uncertainties and fears that he does not like to examine. The 'contemptuous pall of neglect towards betters' is set against the ingrained dirt of the poor 'as tho' rubbed in charcoal' which makes *them* the neglected pitiful ones. He calls Melbourne 'resolute' – a good word for determination – and the local squires 'harder than flint' – which is resolution interpreted as cruelty. He says that the rebels are 'thoroughly cowed' (a cliché) but 'the twitch of the dying is a painfully vivid phrase. Official language gives way under the pressure of experience.

Insofar as Thorpe succeeds, which I believe he does, each chapter is a fresh re-creation of English for a particular purpose, which works with recurring motifs and images almost like a poem – with one disturbing exception. In the final, 1988 chapter, Thorpe gives us a sustained example of contemporary 'empty' English as it is used in a television documentary about Ulverton. The inhabitants ruminate aloud to the camera. Here is an educated woman, an amateur artist, in 1988 talking about her love for the village.

And I show that, er, that love as best I can, in my art. D'you see? I used to be a teacher, yes, before my late, er, husband grew poorly. Oh the rolling hills and trees and the light here you know, it's very special. I try to…capture its very special er, tea-brown quality. Bracken brown would perhaps be better, yes. A very clear, d'you see, brackeny quality to the light…you see there's nothing really but rolling downs from here, between here and the sea. I- I would take my late husband right up to the top of the hill er, oh yes. Every afternoon, you see. He had such love for the place.

Undoubtedly people do talk like this, using repetitive banal phrases, thus draining the language, and hence their own sentiments, of any meaning. Thorpe is both recording and satirising the impoverishment of English on television – and beyond.

The speaker does select 'tea-brown' and 'bracken brown' to define the quality of light which she is trying to transfer to her painting, but she cannot get beyond these perceptions because she does not have the resources. She should be compared with William, the illiterate shepherd in the first story whose head is full of language and hence of feeling. As readers we are bound to suspect that Mrs Bradman's feelings are also impoverished. And this is a tragic aspect of contemporary life as Thorpe sees it.

Literature is an act of communication between writer and reader which does justice to humanity through expressive, imaginative language. It takes us away from triviality and irrelevance and towards being human in the fullest possibly way. Nobody would be so arrogant as to say that reading literature is the only way of 'being human' but more than most activities it forces us to think about people other than ourselves. Moreover it gives a context to national culture and breaks down the banal stereotypes that still infect too much teaching of English in Russia. Anyone with basic competence in a language is going to understand so much more by becoming 'the reader' who is listening to (and sometimes talking to) 'the writer'. The skill of reading literature has to be learnt, even when we are reading our native writers; inevitably Russian readers of English literature require an extra skill for the strenuous excitement of reading in a foreign language. But how enriching for students and teachers to learn a language through engaging with real literature; how valuable to encounter extraordinary characters, events and ideas which have been brought into life through the vast resources of literary English.

Readers in Kemerovo who would like to read more have available many other fine examples of contemporary English literature, provided by the Oxford Russia Fund for those taking part in the project on Contemporary English Literature in Russian Universities.

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