

BESMIRCHING "BEZHIN MEADOW": IVAN BUNIN'S "NIGHT CONVERSATION"

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I

In the aftermath of the Revolution of 1905, reporters, journalists and writers focused attention on the situation of the Russian peasant. The quarrels and questions that surrounded the peasant had changed little over the years. With the events of 1905, however, there were new variations on traditional themes. Publicists now asserted that the peasant was undergoing a "revolutionary awakening" in his world view. A new generation of "village" writers was championing "peasants of the new formation."¹ In works as, for instance, Gusev-Orenburgskii's "Land of Our Fathers" ("Strana otsov," 1905), Skitalets' "Cinders" ("Ogarki," 1915), Pod'iachev's "The Forgotten Ones" ("Zabytye," 1909), Kasatkin's "The Mikul'skoe Village" ("Selo Mikul'skoe," 1911), and Vol'nov's "The Story of the Days of My Life" ("Povest' o dniakh moei zhizni," 1912), *muzhiki*, influenced by political outsiders, reject their lot in life and encourage their brothers to do likewise. Gor'kii's trilogy, *Summer (Leto, 1909)*, *The Little Town of Okurov (Gorodok Okurov, 1909-1910)*, and *The Life of Matvei Kozhemiakin (Zhizn' Matveia Kozhemiakina, 1910-1911)*, caused a particular sensation. In these works, Gor'kii posited that the village, blighted by *Stolypinshchina*, *meshchanstvo*, and *kulachestvo*, nonetheless nourished the seedlings for Russia's future and that the peasants, at long last, had abandoned their purported metaphysical values to pursue purely materialistic (read: revolutionary) ones. Since, however, no one could promise an immediate or significant change, the plight of the Russian peasant remained, in the words of one critic, the most contemporary of the "damned questions" tormenting Russia.²

The theme of revolution and reality, to which many of the "village" writers adhered, was unpalatable to many Russians and, in particular, to the intelligentsia. The reason for this was simple: despite all evidence to the contrary, these readers held to the portraits of the peasantry set forth in much of nineteenth-century Russian literature, for instance, Turgenev's "Notes of a Huntsman" ("Zapiski okhotnika," 1852) and Tolstoi's *War and Peace* (*Voina i mir*, 1865-1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1875-1877). Incredibly, many of the intelligentsia clung to fantasies that the village was unspoiled and Eden-like, inhabited by kind "masters" and even kinder "men." Reviewers frequently chided the public for such views. Between the years 1905 and 1907, warnings concerning "bookish romances" in attitudes towards the peasantry flourished in Russian literary criticism.³ For instance, in 1911 I. Popov complained in the newspaper *Capital Talk* (*Stolichnaia molva*) that readers still preferred "to see Karamzin's Liza, Grigorovich's Anton Goremyka, the children of Bezhin Meadow, Khor and Kalynych, and, in general, that village which was sung by Nekrasov, described by Turgenev, and ennobled by Zlatovratskii."⁴ V. Brusianin turned the focus of these complaints from "peasants" to "lords" in the journal *New Land* (*Novaia zemlia*): in a review of *The Village* (*Derevnia*, 1910) he noted that Bunin showed "what had happened to the village where Onegin was bored, where the 'Knight for an Hour' repented, where Bazarov studied the sciences, where Hamlet of the Shchigrovskii district tortured himself with reflections, and where Agarin from Nekrasov's poem 'Sasha' and Rakitkin from Turgenev's 'A Month in the Country' spent time in conversation."⁵ Whatever the focus, such nostalgia was seen by critics as futile. Popov, for instance, noted that "for the intelligentsia, the Russian folk has become an even greater sphinx than twenty or twenty-five years ago."⁶

Ivan Bunin particularly fretted over the chasm separating the intelligentsia from the folk. The aftermath of 1905 left Bunin with few illusions concerning the peasant. His family estate had suffered greatly in the provincial uprisings, and he continually feared new outbreaks of violence and anarchy. In his "Autobiographical Notes," published in 1915, he complained that intellectuals knew peasants only from books and that they considered as *muzhiki* only the street cabbies and yardkeepers who chimed: "So it is, your excellency!"⁷ He often quoted the saying: "The folk are like a tree; from it come both the icon and the club."⁸ Thus, it was with a sense of urgency that

Bunin expressed his views on the "peasant" question in his writings. His first novel, *The Village*, merely amplified the pessimism of his earlier stories on the provinces.⁹ Still, it enjoyed a *succès de scandale* and made Bunin the subject of controversy. Hurt but defiant, Bunin wrote to N. D. Khlestov concerning the reaction to his portrayal of the peasant in *The Village*: "So they will upbraid me, will they? Well, what of it? I have never chased after their praises. The abuse of hacks and ignoramuses does not move me. They should talk about my depiction of the people! Why, they have a greater understanding of papooses than they do of the people, of Russia!"¹⁰ Until the Revolution of 1917, Bunin continued to address himself to the "peasant" question, hammering away at the intellectual's idealization of the peasant as well as at the *muzhik*-prototypes of Turgenev, Grigovich, and Tolstoi. In an interview with the newspaper, *The Odessa Tablet* (*Odesskii listok*), dated March 1, 1912, Bunin lamented: "Very little which is sober has been written about the village in our country. Repentant noblemen and the déclassé have brought to Russian literature all the embellishments of Anton Goremyka. . . . I put forth that the time when one idealized the peasant, or felt compelled to do so, has long since passed."¹¹

II

Bunin again captured national attention with his short story, "Night Conversation" ("Nochnoi razgovor"), which he published in 1912, thereby bringing to a head the issues of "peasant" and "literature," which had surrounded him for several years.¹² Bunin shrewdly realized that if the "peasant" question were to be discussed intelligently, it would have to be divorced from the biases of that fiction that had idealized the folk and that had so gripped the minds of the Russian reading public. Bunin thus directed "Night Conversation" to three ends. First, he polemicized against a prototype of the Russian literature championing the peasant, namely, Ivan Turgenev's sketch, "Bezhin Meadow" ("Bezhin lug"), which had appeared in 1851. Second, in so doing he sought to discredit that hagiographic aura that had surrounded the peasant in fiction and, in particular, through the images and motifs of early Russian realism and the Natural School.

Finally, Bunin gave credibility to critics who had sensed his modernist proclivity to undermine much of the Realistic prose of the nineteenth century and to replace it with the avant-garde experimentation of the twentieth.¹³ Like the Russian Symbolists and Decadents, Bunin invested the idealized peasant-heroes of another era with the passion and psyche of modern man. The peasants in "Night Conversation" are not simplistic extensions of folk-types committed to God and the soil; rather, they are prophets of an impending apocalypse that threatens to destroy mankind.

Initially, Bunin parallels the schema of "Night Conversation" with that of "Bezhin Meadow." Both feature an anonymous nobleman troubled by questions of life and a collective peasantry which, at least in Russian literary tradition, proffer a solution. Furthermore, Bunin structures "Night Conversation" as an *ocherk* (or "sketch") steeped in the poetics of the Natural School. That is, the narrative of "Night Conversation" uses elements of investigative reporting. Its portraits approach daguerrotype and type and its plot fleshes out the structural bareness of anecdote with the details of gesture, mimicry, and *skaz*.¹⁴ What is more important, the notebook-etchings of "Night Conversation" and "Bezhin Meadow" suggest similar goals. Both use the routine and mores of "little men" to dramatize the national psyche as well as to reflect upon the "damned questions" tormenting society. Employing the techniques of *ocherk*, both Bunin and Turgenev assume the guise of scientists who have observed their subjects carefully and who now proffer analyses that are concise, cogent, and clear. The radical difference occurs in their conclusions about their world, since each scientist has entered the laboratory with a different hypothesis in mind. Turgenev observes "Bezhin Meadow" through a microscope, looking upon his peasants as healthy organisms from which the new Russian will spring. In "Night Conversation," however, Bunin cruelly distorts the Turgenev ideal of the archetypal *muzhiki*,¹⁵ and achieves phantasmogoria in three key aspects of the work: portrait, conversation and setting.¹⁶

Bunin's passage from "scientist" to "sorcerer" strongly affects his techniques of characterization. At first, the peasant-heroes of "Night Conversation" embody the aspirations of intellectuals yearning for a prosperous, but docile *narod*. They are first seen as models of peace and contentment, untouched by the evils of their land and unconcerned by the issues of the day. Their lethargy bespeaks abundance, not deprivation. In the opening scene, for example,

Bunin's peasants are surfeited with food and tobacco, and they have heavy coats and piles of grain and fresh straw. From the outset, then, Bunin implies two things: first, whatever problems the peasantry may have arise from spiritual rather than from material causes; and second, his appeal to the dreams of intellectuals has been ironic, the lull that signals the storm.

The names of Bunin's heroes are clues which underlie his portraiture. Whereas Turgenev gave the peasants in "Bezhin Meadow" typical names such as Fedia, Kostia, and Iliushka, Bunin creates "tags" that convey a metaphysical bleakness and exhaustion with life, e.g., Khomut or "Horse Collar," Postnii or "Lenten," and Rogoikin or "Made of Matting." By using such names, Bunin implicitly denies bodily substance, just as he does when he presents the peasants of "Night Conversation" most often under oversized hats and billowing coats which, lacking belts, folds, and seams, conceal bodily and facial features and impart a uniform formlessness to the peasant.¹⁷ Throughout "Night Conversation" foreheads are covered over with caps, hands are tucked under sleeves, and feet are wrapped thickly in footcloths and bast shoes. In this respect "Night Conversation" differs markedly from "Bezhin Meadow." Turgenev spotlighted engaging peasant-youths among what could have been thought of as a faceless and lackluster *narod*. Bunin, by contrast, amalgamates *muzhiki* of different regions, blurring stature and age into a colorless and non-descript whole.¹⁸ These peasants bear the ravages of a cruel and chaotic world. *Muzhiki* of a contemporary mold, they are not the hale and hearty fellows of another era. Rather, Bunin likens them in their positions of repose to the decaying remains of a civilization (and a literary tradition) which has long departed from this earth. For instance, footcloths take on a somber, even macabre function: they now serve as death wrappings which, "hardened, bent, and blackened at the heel and sole" (p. 272), enshroud the peasant's rotting and twisted flesh, specifically, "a *muzhik's* bare foot, dead-white, enormous, flat, with a monstrously grown great toe crooked on top of the others" (p. 272).¹⁹ Stripped of their outer wear, the peasants of "Night Conversation" seem to be more essence than substance. Their bodies are replaced by spirits, and their actions are reduced to words. In their pastoral primitiveness, Bunin does not advance the physical or psychological well-being of the children of "Bezhin Meadow." Rather, he unmask a metaphysical horror in which peasants, "grey, huge, and dreadful in their Mongolian calmness" (p. 276), submit

their identities to corporate evil, and, assuming a Scythian cast, become agents for inevitable destruction and death.²⁰

Bunin uses such an image as a springboard for describing the *muzhik's* body and face, giving his "peasant" portraits an affinity with the iconography of the modernist mode. That is, like Belyi and Zamiatin, Bunin rejects the representational details of nineteenth-century realism and opts instead for the sparse but suggestive pen-strokes of the modernist style. Peasant-bodies are drawn with flat torsos and have a two-dimensional effect. Limbs are truncated, twisted, or arched in various positions to evoke physical angularity. Facial and body skin is stretched, yellowed, and sheathed around protruding bones and vertebrae in order to dramatize advanced decomposition and decline. The peasant Khomut, for instance, sits "low upon his flabby thighs—his back to the wind, bare-headed, stripped to the waist. He, senilely emaciated, yellow of body, with his shoulders elevated at a slant, with his twisted prominent backbone glistening in the light of the stars, was sitting with his big tousled head, ruffled by the wind, looking down, bending his neck which was already scrawny and all in coarse wrinkles" (p. 277).²¹

The faces in "Night Conversation" bear a similar iconographic stamp. Most often, they appear "indistinct in the light of the stars" (p. 266). At other times, however, they manifest bleak resignation and the despairing tension to which such resignation gives rise. These sparse contours and slate-grey tones do not dominate Bunin's portraits as much as they interact with restless eyes, twitching lips, and bared teeth, clenched firmly about cigarettes and pipes. For instance, the peasant Ivan "always narrows his morosely-ironic little eyes, and purses his thin lips, never letting the pipe out of his teeth" (p. 260). Similarly, the *muzhik* Postnii displays a face that is "calm, but devoid of expression, large, ashen-grey, wrinkled, with sparse moustaches, always wet with the slaverling caused by his pipe . . . [and with] whitish, weather-beaten lips turned considerably outward" (p. 262). Taken together, such physical descriptions of the peasants of "Night Conversation" contradict the portraits of the boys in "Bezhin Meadow."²² As an *ocherkist* of the early 1850s, Turgenev presented the folk empirically, and with a certain physical and spiritual amplitude. As an *ocherkist* some sixty years later, Bunin seeks only to compound the inscrutability of the Russian Sphinx.²³

Complementing his portraits of the peasantry, Bunin mirrors the situation in "Bezhin Meadow" by introducing a sensitive outsider

into the scene. A master's son seeks the opportunity to live and learn among the *narod*. As befits the *ocherk*—and more complex forms of Russian realism—Bunin's fledgling is the archetypal seeker, a disoriented nobleman who hungers for the wisdom and confidence of the rural "little man." As such, he displays the problems and potential typical of his caste. He is inquisitive but directionless, open but uninformed, passionate but passive. He seeks truth more in situation than in system, knowledge more in experience than in education, and conclusions that will leave him more reshaped than reassured. Almost immediately, however, Bunin moves his seeker out of the realist mold by blurring the distinction between "master" and "man" and by having his "lord" with his "peasant"-mentors. Just as he had reduced the formerly integrative *muzhik* to a mass of incongruous detail, Bunin creates a *dvorianin* who is caricatured and grotesque. Like the peasants, the master's son also bears a revealing "tag": Veretenkin or "Spindly-Shanked." Veretenkin's body, when not concealed under a coat, lacks healthy color, composition, and human appeal. In Bunin's words, the "master" in "Night Conversation" is "a thin awkward stripling with an unusually soft coloring—his face was so white that even sunburn had no effect on it. He was blue-eyed, with outrageously big hands and feet, and with a huge Adam's apple" (p. 258). Bunin's portrait emphasizes Veretenkin's arrested development. Veretenkin is a student. In Bunin's portrayal, however, he is a homeless freak of nature who, paradoxically, typifies Russia's landowning class. Veretenkin's "childishly white" flesh as well as his locks, "soft and curling like a girl's" (p. 258), for example, imply that despite his education and age he has sidestepped the tests and trials of manhood. His angular stance, his lumbering gait and the large vertebrae bulging beneath his skin mirror the torsos of the peasants and give the impression of monster-like entities whose physical development has been unattended by mental or spiritual growth.²⁴

Instead of being innocent in some wholesome way, Veretenkin's personality is stunted and psychotic. That is, Bunin's "lord," unable to move beyond the hedonism of childhood, carries the vacuity of the "superfluous man" to a new extreme. Although a student, Veretenkin eats linden blossoms and the gum of cherry trees, kills sparrows with a slingshot, and plays "Redskins" with family and friends. Consistent with his own artistic aims, Bunin has Veretenkin harbor a spirit that is unwilling and a flesh that is weak. He dreams of study and travel, of passion and self-sacrifice, but only within the "sweet black darkness

of sleep" (p. 259). His virginal attraction for a first love ends ignominiously in a romp with a village wench. Veretenkin's failures at self-development recall another "superfluous man": Tolstoi's youthful Konstantin Levin. Levin, however, is of another era. He is able to mature and experience peace and understanding in harvesting with the peasants. Veretenkin by contrast is in the "modernist" stamp and finds such activities wearisome and dispiriting. Thus, whereas the *barin* of *Anna Karenina* attains inner harmony in labor and sweat, for Veretenkin, harvesting only hastens his besmirchment and disintegration. Bunin writes: "He [Veretenkin] passed his nights now on the threshing floor, now in the horse stable; he did not change for weeks at a time, nor would he take off his tarred boots; he raised blood-blisters on his feet, unaccustomed as he was to coarse footcloths; he lost all the buttons on his summer uniform overcoat, which had been soiled by wheels and manure; and, he had broken the letters and the little silver leaves on his uniform cap" (p. 258).²⁵

Further in contrast to the "master" in "Bezhin Meadow," Veretenkin is not the teller of the tale. The heroes of the "realistic" *ocherk* had monitored events. Veretenkin, however, is subsumed into them. Without Veretenkin (or a suitable persona) as a reliable narrative voice, Bunin foregoes the stability of an impartial narrator-witness and sets the stage for *mnogogolos'e*: the "voice-polyphony" of peasants eager to confess their crimes.²⁶ The "documentation" of "Night Conversation" is not, as in "Bezhin Meadow," the data of a conscientious scientist or of an investigative reporter. Rather, it is the crude response of senses steeped in violence, hatred, and blood. Like his counterpart in "Bezhin Meadow," Veretenkin remains a wide-eyed witness of events: he observes intently, listens carefully, and speaks sparingly. He makes little sense of what he perceives, however, and functions merely as a barometer, his emotions rising and falling with the pressures surrounding him.²⁷

By portraying the interaction between "master" and "man" as superficial and demeaning, Bunin strikes both targets of his attack: an intelligentsia infatuated with the *narod* and a gentry devoid of values and beliefs. Veretenkin injudiciously apes his mentors, smoking their tobacco, imitating their speech, and coveting their wenches. Unfamiliar with the *muzhiki* "in books" (p. 259), he readily accepts their values in life: "their unexpected, absurd, but unshakeable conclusions, the uniformity of their ready wisdom, their coarse indifference, their capacity for work, but dislike of same" (p. 260).

This feeling is not reciprocal, however. The peasants look upon their charge condescendingly and distrustfully. Interaction between the classes, therefore, is somewhat cordial, but mostly cautious and strained. Bunin uses details such as *borzoi*-hounds nipping at Veretenkin's heels and fleas biting his arms and back to dramatize the relationship. Such annoyances are innocuous for the moment, but signal trouble ahead.²⁸

III

In structure, "Night Conversation" closely follows the key events of "Bezhin Meadow": a nobleman comes upon peasants swapping tales of wonder and caprice. In time, however, Bunin adds a modernist's twist. Whereas the ghosts and goblins of "Bezhin Meadow" are products of folk fantasy and, as such, suffuse *ocherk*-realism with a gothic glow, the specters of "Night Conversation" are serfs themselves, whose tales charge reality with an apocalyptic flare. Bunin's peasants pervert the *skaz*, the oral "performance" of a "little man" who embellishes events by means of folk dialect, imagery, and humor. The peasants of "Night Conversation" are masters of the *skaz* form. Their narratives are personalized monologs in which events are inconsistent, lyricism is paradoxical, and irony, blatant. Thus in "Night Conversation," the rollicking form of the *skaz* is at variance with its traditional content: peasants do not tell of ghosts but relate the murders of a prisoner and a goat.

On first glance, Pasha's story of his killing of a domesticated goat and Postnii's tale of his murder of a Georgian convict seem neither related nor particularly troublesome in a land prone to anarchy and violence. As rendered by *skaz*, however, both victims become heroes, proponents of freedom and dignity who rebel against the tethers and shackles of existence. Their deaths, then, are seen by Bunin not as random acts of violence conflated with centuries of blood and wrongdoing but as a "modernist" denouement of a metaphysical drama in which good inevitably loses to evil.

Postnii's story of the goat subsumes the tale of the prisoner and provides a more graphic illustration of Bunin's idea. Bunin was clever to use a goat as a "positive hero." As an animal it is devoid of the

reason that makes life restrictive, but full of the vibrant impulse that makes it worthwhile. More specifically, the fact that the goat is female recalls the qualities of many Russian realist heroines: it is beautiful and fertile, lively and carefree. It is in perpetual motion, bounding, leaping and flying from one place to another. It is proud, bold, and even feisty, intimidating bulls and peasants alike. What is most important, Bunin's goat has an insatiable appetite for life. It strips bare the corn from stalks and the bark from trees, and it invariably seeks the highest vantage points from which to look upon life below. There is a Russian's cherished love of freedom here as the goat capers with Postnii in an engaging contest of captivity and escape.

The decisive confrontation between peasant and beast is brutal and quick: the goat's final (and greatest) leap to freedom is halted in mid-air by Postnii's brick. The goat falls, crashing to the earth below. It is rendered grotesque and immobile, an untimely victim of peasant brutality and death. Postnii relates unfeelingly: "She was just lying there, her tongue jerking in the dirt. She'd take a breath and then rattle, take a breath and rattle again. Till the dust rose up near her nose. And her tongue was long, just like a snake. Well, of course, after half an hour or so, she croaked" (p. 272). Not surprisingly, the prisoner in Pasha's story meets a similar end. An abortive escape leaves only a body pierced by Pasha's bayonet and reshackled with the very chains from which the prisoner had sought release.

In their appeal to *skaz*, the peasants only compound the horror, since they acknowledge their crimes with frivolity and naiveté. The "confessions" in "Night Conversation," then, are devoid of the catharsis crucial to the mind of the typical realist. No system is righted, no sinner reconciled. Instead, when talking of their sins, the peasants resurrect only the immediacy and relish of their wrongdoing at the same time they reveal their obliviousness to moral law. Furthermore, in their use of *skaz*, Bunin's peasants see their tales of brutality and woe not as social treatises but as light-hearted entertainment. Postnii and Pasha render their *skaz* with almost vaudevillian aplomb, their "performance" being for them an important means of distancing themselves from the facelessness of their caste and the tedium of their milieu. In realism, sinners often seek return to society and the universe; in modernism, criminals stand apart from both. Postnii and Pasha attain identity and esteem, however briefly, in their *skaz*. For the first time in their lives, they hold both center stage and the rapt attention of their peers.

In their "routines," Postnii and Pasha celebrate humor not suffering, revenge not mercy, the status-quo not renewal. Each man builds his *skaz* around a strategic principle. Postnii and Pasha each use an anecdote, a key feature of both the oral and *ocherk* traditions. Under the rubric of this anecdote, each disguises the moral nature of his crime. Digressions and subplots, detail, and emotions ranging from childlike simplicity to childish *braggadocio* interlace their tales of cruelty and murder. Apart from these elaborations Postnii and Pasha care only for the credibility of their actions. They log their crimes with scrupulous regard for time and space. For instance, Pasha's testimony, "Bust my eyes if I'm lyin'!" (p. 262), has been preceded by significant detail: his murder of the Georgian took place exactly one year before, on the evening of the Assumption. It occurs "in the Caucasus, in the Zukhdens" (p. 262), at a place verified by Postnii. It involves an accomplice, one Kozlov "from the Eletskaia province" (p. 262). Finally, it is documented in newspapers and his capture of the Georgian is rewarded by a ruble and a full-dress review. The peasants in "Night Conversation" laugh with approval at such stories, on one hand, or show total indifference and a desire to sleep, on the other. Morality aside, they assess the deeds of their colleagues according to the standards of *muzhik*-etiquette. They approve the crimes of Postnii and Pasha with shouts of "good work!" and "right you were!" (pp. 264, 267). However, they object when they learn that such doings did not follow formal rules and regulations. For instance, the peasant Ivan does not censure Pasha's murder of the Georgian. He protests strenuously, however, when he learns that a guard has not been stationed to watch the body and that a messenger has not been sent to the officer in charge.²⁹

Unlike the peasant-members of the audience, Bunin's student is only a passive witness to events. He reacts more than acts, a "modernist" type of a mute and and dying class. His experiences with a peasant-group further distance him from his counterpart in "Bezhin Meadow." Turgenev's "master" had stumbled onto children-*muzhiki*, expecting nothing, but had come away uplifted by the encounter. Bunin's student, however, purposely seeks membership in the groups but departs sickened and shattered. The student's goals are initially more defined than those of Turgenev's "master" but hardly honorable: he had wished only to ignite his own sexual fantasies with Pasha's tales of marital bliss. What is more revealing, Turgenev's nobleman is a sensitive reporter of events. He aptly

projects *muzhik*-docility upon a warm and receptive milieu. Bunin's hero, by contrast, gives only knee-jerk responses to any and all stimuli. Except for an occasional question, he only quakes, shivers, and trembles at tales of wrongdoing and seeks to suppress "fits of nervous laughter" (p. 262). Whereas Turgenev's master is warmed by the simplicity of his world, Bunin's hero has only frigid hands and a flaming face, a fitting fire-and-ice response to a universe out of control.³⁰

The events of "Night Conversation" make clear the fact that Bunin subscribes to a modernist's idea of wrongdoing. That is, Bunin shows that evil is not rooted in social, cultural, or psychological motives, but that it is an entity unto itself, without spatial or temporal reference. Evil in "Night Conversation" strikes with sickening fatality. In a relatively short time, the crimes that the peasants commit seem as appropriate as the consumptive wheezes and rasping voices with which they are told. To Bunin, sin has no cause, only consequences. Therefore, Postnii enters into his crime more in perplexity than in guilt. He says: "A sin like that [the murder of the goat] came about through nothing at all" (p. 266). Bunin's ethics also lack the tenet of personal responsibility for sin. For instance, Postnii's skill at *skaz*, coupled with folk notions of right and wrong, creates a moral dilemma all its own. Wrongdoing is not so much a matter of ethical relativity as it is a phenomenon ignored altogether in the narrative tone and stance. In Bunin's hands, Postnii's "confession" works to his advantage, skirting all responsibility and inspiring confidence. Bunin, as omniscient narrator, writes: "Postnii's tone had become so simple, so sincere, so filled with the tone of domestic grief, that it never would have entered anybody's head that he was a murderer, confessing his sin" (p. 268). Furthermore, Bunin forecloses all meaningful appeal to a higher moral authority. The Almighty is invoked only in exclamations of amazement and anger, suppliants pleading for mercy and deliverance from evil. What is more perverse, the events of "Night Conversation" take place on the feast of the Assumption. Theologically this is the liturgical celebration of the bodily ascension of the Mother of God. In Bunin's representation, however, it becomes a pagan commemoration of bodies murdered and left sprawling in the dust.³¹

The absence of moral responsibility and appeal in "Night Conversation" allows Bunin to develop still further themes of violence and anarchy. The prolonged tales of Postnii and Pasha are

followed by fleeting portraits of human degradation and despair. Unlike the still-life quality of "Bezhin Meadow," the final pages of "Night Conversation" are a series of quick-paced scenes designed to overwhelm (and exhaust) the senses with the poverty of life. More specifically, Bunin employs the montage to integrate his work. His use of the technique follows closely that of Eisenstein in film and of Belyi and Zamiatin in fiction. That is, each "frame" is measured for effect and then interlocked with other snippets to produce a "strip" of unrelieved anxiety and fear. The "frames" of "Night Conversation" reinforce and amplify the crimes of Postnii and Pasha. More than that, they project evil as a way of life. For instance, in the final pages of "Night Conversation," a live bull is stripped of its hide, a peasant vomits poisonous mushrooms, a woman wrestles with a pig in a manure-covered yard and a grand piano is hurled into a slime-covered pond. Again in keeping with the modernists, Bunin calculates his montage in terms of its shock value. For instance, distrustful of religion in general and of the doctrine of the Assumption in particular, he draws an avant-garde portrait of a Madonna and Child. A peasant woman, thin and buck-toothed, offers her dry and yellowed breast to a "bare-bellied, clear-eyed child, its nose running and its lips bitten into blood by countless flies" (p. 276). Equally as shocking is the autopsy of a murdered man which becomes the object of public curiosity and entertainment. People flock to see "a corpse lying all naked, already stiff, yellow here and green there, while his face was all like wax, the red beard had become thin, and simply stood out" (p. 275). The autopsy itself is even more gruesome, Bunin carrying the reputed "vivisectionist" quality of the *ocherk* to a modernist extreme.³² As reported by Postnii, the surgeon first attacks the skull: "it just fell away, like a cup—the brain was all plain to be seen." Next, he slices the chest "right through the gristle. He hacks out a three-cornered piece and starts pulling away—it even started cracking—All the stomach came to view. And the blue lungs, and all the innards . . ." (p. 276). The close-up of the corpse, together with the "frames" of the slain Georgian and goat further distinguish Bunin from many of the realists of old. The realists, Turgenev among them, typically looked to death in order to understand more intimately the universe in which they lived. Death to Bunin, however, is not even an alternative to life but a state in which disembodied men pursue routine living and killing.

As a final stroke Bunin has the events of "Night Conversation"

occur against the background of a universe hostile to man. In this he adheres closely to the dichotomy of *stroï/roi* or “order/chaos” as posited by the modernists. That is, Bunin also believed that dark forces were moving life from empirical stability to primordial disarray. The opening scene in “Night Conversation” aptly expresses this idea. The backdrop against which the peasants pass the evening recalls the pastoral setting of “Bezhin Meadow”: summer breezes, harvested fields, stellar constellations, and a lone windmill. Bunin, however, tinges each of these details to produce an avant-garde melange of skewed and sinister detail and to reflect the horror to come.³³ For instance, the refreshing breezes are chill northeast winds; their “cool breath” carries the “bad odors of lanes and alleyways” (p. 258).³⁴ The cultivated earth is “a desolate stubble-field . . . its darkening hues blackened by irregular blotches of brushwood” (p. 257-58). The moon, which was present over Turgenev’s meadow, is replaced by stars like “icy diamonds [which] give out sparks and cut the sky with green narrow streaks” (p. 258). Bunin’s stars flare repeatedly but give no light. In clusters they make their own comment. The Capella, the constellation of the Goat, reminds man of his ongoing murder of innocents, while the Milky Way takes on “two smokingly-translucent branches” (p. 257) and suggests a winged creature returning to a primordial world. Such an image is reinforced by the windmill, whose “two horns of wings showing sharply black against the horizon” suggest the reappearance of dinosaurs in the world and hearken to an era in which men were cavemen or apes.³⁵ Against such a background, Bunin’s “master” and “man” have not merely finished dinner on a late summer evening. Rather, they have indulged in their own “last supper” and now await the crucifixion and, in the modernist’s view, condemnation of man.³⁶

IV

In summary, then, Bunin’s “Night Conversation” counters two conceptions of Russian cultural life that he considered erroneous: the intelligentsia’s idealization of the *narod* and their reputed adherence to the realist tradition of Russian literature. Bunin dramatizes his views by fashioning “Night Conversation” as a polemic with

Turgenev's "Bezhin Meadow" and by carrying his argument into three facets of his work: portrait, conversation, and setting. The situations of "Bezhin Meadow" and "Night Conversation" are similar: a seeker-nobleman comes upon peasants swapping tales of horror and gore. Bunin quickly departs from the realist mold, however. For instance, his peasants are not of sound mind and body. They are instead malign spirits, whose bodily vestiges have been skewed and twisted by Bunin's "modernist" brush. Similarly, their conversations do not enchant with gothic mischief or pastoral naiveté. On the contrary, they dwell on the murder of innocents. Finally, the backdrop of "Night Conversation" is not the secure glow of a warm, moonlit summer night. Its icy stars portend the destruction not only of "historic" Russia, but also of the universe as a whole. "Night Conversation" can thus be seen as marking a crucial transition in the portrayal of the folk in Russian literature as well as in Bunin's own evolution as a writer. It signals the transformation of the peasant-hero from "realist" to "contemporary" and, what is more important, the implicit willingness of Russia's "last *barin* in literature" to assist in the passage.

NOTES

1. N. Korobka, "Literaturnoe obozrenie. Sbornik pisatelei," *Zaprosy zhizni*, No. 15 (1912), p. 925.
2. A. Ozhigov, "Literaturnye motivy," *Sovremennoe slovo*, 1 January 1913, p. 3. For a concise summary of attitudes towards the Russian peasant in this period, see V. Matleev, "Russkaia dusha," *Novaia zhizn'*, No. 2 (1916), pp. 151-60.
3. A. Derman, "I. A. Bunin," *Russkaia mysl'*, No. 6 (1914), p. 57.
4. I. Popov, "I. A. Bunin i narodnichestvo," *Stolichnaia molva*, 29 October 1912, p. 2. Gor'kii was particularly angered by such literary attitudes. For instance, in an article entitled, "O tom, kak ia uchilsia pisat'," he wrote: "Gentry literature loved to depict (and did so splendidly) the peasant as a person who was meek, patient and enamored of some supra-terrestrial 'Christ's truth' which had no place in reality, but which peasants, the like of Turgenev's Kalinych and Tolstoi's Platon Karataev, had dreamed of their entire life." See M. Gor'kii, *Sobranie sochinenii v. tridsati tomakh* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1949-56), XXIV, p. 474.

5. V. Brusianin, "Derevenskaia epigrafiia," *Novaia zemla*, No. 11 (1910), p. 8.

6. Popov, p. 2. The intellectual's ongoing idealization of the peasantry in the first decades of this century called attention to the fact that he had suppressed (or discounted entirely) the "realistic" portrayal of the village as it existed in Russian fiction from the 1860s onward. For instance, G. Uspenskii's "Ruin" ("Razoren'e," 1869-71) and "From a Village Diary" ("Iz derevenskogo dnevnika," 1877-81), and Korolenko's "The Murderer" ("Ubivets," 1880), "The River Runs" ("Reka igraet," 1882) and "Bereft of Tongue" ("Bez iazyka," 1895), all had provided substantial (if graphic) journals of peasant dissatisfaction and unrest. Moreover, L. Tolstoi, in his play, *The Power of Darkness* (*Vlast' t'my*, 1888), and A. Chekhov, in stories like "The Murder" ("Ubiistvo," 1885), "The Peasants" ("Muzhiki," 1897), "The New Summer House" ("Novaia dacha," 1899), and "In the Ravine" ("V ovrage," 1900), had established this theme squarely in the mainstream of the national aesthetic writing.

With the events of 1905, however, readers were no longer satisfied with the writings of Korolenko, the Uspenskii's, and others of the old "ethnographic" school. Their works on the peasant were seen as valid, but antiquated: rich in details, but poor in answers. Chekhov's "The Peasants" and "In the Ravine," long hailed as turning points in the portrayal of the village, were now sharply criticized by reviewers. For instance, E. Koltonovskaia wrote that "The Peasants," for all its horror and gore, suffered from the usual Chekhovian "mildness" /*miagkost'*/. That is, Chekhov's "broad understanding" of the peasant problem had militated against specific conclusions (See E. Koltonovskaia, "Novaia derevnia" in Koltonovskaia, *Kriticheskie etudy* [Saint Petersburg: "Samooobrazovanie," 1912,] p. 8). Gor'kii, otherwise lavish in his praise of Chekhov, was even more severe. In a letter written to Bunin in early December, 1910, he wrote: "Chekhov's 'The Peasants' and 'In the Ravine' are episodes—you will excuse me—in the life of a hypochondriac!" See B. Mikhailovskii, ed., *Gor'kovskie chteniia, 1958-1959* (Moscow: Akademiia Nauk SSSR, 1961), p. 52.) Furthermore, in an article entitled "Razrushenie lichnosti," written a year earlier, Gor'kii noted his restlessness with the peasants in Chekhov's "The New Summer House" and in the fiction of Reshestnikov (see Gor'kii, pp. 74-75). Bunin was particularly careful to deny the influence of Chekhov on his fiction. Although he admired "In the Ravine," for instance, he also understood the present inefficacy of such writing and sought to divorce it from his own fiction on the peasantry. See his interview with *The Odessa News* (*Odesskie novosti*) on 2 July 1914.

7. I. Bunin, "Avtobiograficheskaia zametka," *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh* (A. F. Marks, 1915), VI, p. 332.

8. I. Mikhailov, *Ivan Alekseiovich Bunin. Ocherk tvorchestva* (Moscow: Nauka, 1967), p. 102.

9. For instance, "The Epigraph" ("Epigrafiia," 1900), "The Pines" ("Sosny," 1901), "The New Road" ("Novaia doroga," 1901), "Dreams" ("Sny," 1903), and

"The Gold Mine" ("Zolotoe dno," 1903). In line with this, L. Strelsky comments that "Bunin was the first important writer to reveal the reverse side of the pre-war fashionable worship of the Russian peasant" (L. Strelsky, "Bunin: Eclectic of the Future," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, No. 1 [1963], p. 283).

10. As quoted in: M. Minokin, "Perepiska A Bunina," *Orlovskaja pravda*, 7 December 1956, p. 4. Also see, "U akademika I. A. Bunina," *Moskovskaja vest'*, 12 September 1911, p. 4.

11. N. P., "Nashi besedy u I. A. Bunina," *Odesskii listok*, 1 March 1912, p. 2.

12. "Night Conversation" was published in "Sbornik pervyi" by the *Izdatel'skoe tovarishchestvo pisatelei* in Saint Petersburg in 1912.

13. From the beginning of Bunin's career, criticism of his fiction has been polarized. One group of critics has looked to Bunin as the final representative of Russian "classical" realism, contending that he was the last *aristokrat*-practitioner of the aesthetic elitism of Pushkin, Goncharev, Aksakov, and Tolstoi. For instance, Georgii Adamovich wrote: "Bunin in our literature is the last indisputable, indubitable representative of that epoch which, not unjustly, we call 'classical,' no matter how strained and unsteady is the sense of this word. Classical, that is, preserving that kind of balance which still has not slipped into confusion, indifference, or recklessness, which still has not flirted with frank and overt madness, and which has not looked upon such madness with a lecherous, confused, and ingratiating smile." See G. Adamovich, *Odinochestvo i soboda* (New York: Izdatel'stvo imeni Chekhova, 1955), p. 83. Another group, however, has posited that Bunin's world-view was consciously attuned to that of the Russian writers of both the Decadence and the Silver Age. Gleb Struve, for instance, wrote that in this period, Bunin "has more points or tendencies in common with modernism than with the pre-war realistic school." See G. Struve, "The Art of Ivan Bunin," *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 2 (1932-33), 426. K. Muratova neatly sums up the argument in an article, entitled "Izuchenie russkoi literatury kontsa XIX—nachala XX veka" in *Russkaja literatura*, No. 1 (1969), p. 194.

14. Conceivably, Bunin's structuring of "Night Conversation" as an *ocherk* suggests his desire to dissociate himself from the more rigid and complex models of "peasant" fiction. For instance, N. Berkovskii writes that Bunin's use of detail conforms "neither to the discipline, nor to the internal schemes" of Chekhov in his fictional writing. See N. Berkovskii, "Chekhov. Ot rasskazov i povestei k dramaturgii," *Russkaja literatura*, No. 4 (1965), p. 25.

15. Critics have often cited Turgenev's influence on the writer and, in particular, his portraits of dying estate life. Others perceptively discount such influence, however, positing that in his fiction Bunin sought to crack the "classical" cast of Turgenev's writing. For instance, *Russkie zapiski* complained that the Bunin had transformed the stillness of the Turgenev landscape into "universal asphyxiation." Similarly,

Kievskaiia mysl' noted that the "charming flowers of Turgenev's garden had become choked among new and evil plants." See "Ivan Bunin. Chasha zhizni," *Russkie Zapiski*, No. 4 (1915), p. 365; and L. Voitlovskii, "Novaia povest' I. A. Bunina. 'Derevnia,'" *Kievskaiia mysl'* (27 November 1910), p. 4. Bunin himself rejected each influence. For instance, as regards content, he stood opposed to the fictional estates of Turgenev, considering them "rare cases of culture" in Russia. As regards method, he stated that he generally used "sharper and stronger" colors than Turgenev. See V. Zenzinov, "Ivan Bunin," *Novyi zhurnal*, No. 3 (1941), p. 299; and "U akademika," p. 4.

16. From all reports, Bunin's first reading of "Night Conversation" was well received by his listeners, and, in particularly, by Gor'kii. For instance, M. Andreeva recalls that Bunin's story was "simply superb, but frightening in its concept. . . . Listening to it made your hair stand on end." See M. Andreeva, *Perepiski, vospominaniia* (Moscow: "Iskusstvo," 1968), p. 216.

Bunin was also pleased with his story, but greatly feared the opinions of the critics. See his letter to N. S. Khlestov, dated 24 December 1915, in Bunin, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, II, p. 407. Afanas'ev's comment that reviewers unanimously condemned "Night Conversation" is inaccurate, since they received the work with emotions ranging from grudging admiration to unqualified praise. See V. Afanas'ev, *I. A. Bunin. Ocherk tvorchestva* (Moscow: "Prosveshchenie," 1966), p. 47; V. L'vov-Rogachevskii, "Durnovka," *Snova nakaune. Sbornik kriticheskikh statei i zametok* (Moscow: "Knigoizdatel'stvo pisatelei," 1913), p. 26; P. Ardov, "Novye literaturnye iavleniia," *Utro Rossii*, 10 March 1912, p. 2; I. Aleksandrovskii, "Zapiski. Belletristy o derevne," *Odesskii listok*, 10 March 1913, p. 3; A. Burnakin, "Literaturnye zametki," *Novoe vremia*, 9 March 1912, p. 3; D. Tal'nikov, "Ob I. A. Bunine," *Odesskie novosti*, 15 January 1913, p. 2; and, O. L. L., "Novosti literatury," *Golos Moskvy*, 10 March 1912, p. 3. Also see Korobka, p. 924, Ozhigov, p. 203, and Derman, p. 176.

17. All citations from "Night Conversation" are taken from I. Bunin, *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennaia literatura," 1965), III, 257-58. Excerpts in translation have been taken from I. Bunin, *The Gentleman from San Francisco and Other Stories*, trans. Bernard Gilbert Guernsey (New York: Vintage, 1964), pp. 173-208. This reference: III, p. 262.

18. Afanas'ev has noted that the peasants in "Night Conversation" span a total of four generations. See Afanas'ev, p. 144.

19. Bunin often expressed the wish that his focus on the peasant be extended to Russians as a whole. See, for instance, I. Bunin, *Vesnoi v Iudee* (New York: Izdatel'stvo imeni Chekhova, 1958), p. 8; and "U akademika," p. 2.

20. Scythian motifs are not uncommon in Bunin's fiction. See, for instance, his reference to the icon of Saint Mercurius of Smolensk in *Dry Valley* (Bunin, *Sobranie*

sochinenii, III, pp. 139-41; p.184); Sokolovich's tatoo of the Japanese dragon in "Loopy Ears" (IV, p. 378); the "Mongolian" features of the prince in "The Gentleman from San Francisco" (IV, p. 318); and, Sosnovskaia's Japanese slippers, Oriental robes, and "Japanese" room in *The Elagin Affair* (V, pp. 280, 283, 291).

21. Critics have seized upon Bunin's penchant for iconography. For instance, Poggioli writes that Bunin's characters in *The Village* are "little more than figures in primitive paintings whose thoughts and actions are rendered in ancient and illegible lettering." See R. Poggioli, "The Art of Ivan Bunin," *The Phoenix and the Spider* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 149. Bunin himself was deeply attracted to the somber icons of Suzdal'. See, for instance, his poems, "The Wasteland" ("Pustosh") and "The Inheritance" ("Nasledstvo"), both of which were written in 1907 (I, pp. 284, 287).

22. V. Stepun relates Bunin's innovations in portraiture directly to Turgenev's peasant-heroes. He posits that in contrast to the *muzhiki* of "Notes of a Huntsman" (of which "Bezhin Meadow" was a part), Bunin's peasants lack *metafizicheskii antropolizm*, that is, presence in both the story and the reader's memory. See F. Stepun, "Ivan Bunin," *Vstrechi* (Munich: Tovarishchestvo zarubezhnykh pisatelei, 1962), p. 99 and p. 110. Also see Tkhorzhevskii, "Ivan Bunin," *Russkaia literatura* (Paris: Vozrozhdenie, 1946), II, p. 542.

23. Ivan Vol'nov, one of the new "village" writers (and an arch-adversary of Bunin) noted concerning the writer's peasants: "There is no *narod* as such, but only protruding noses, peering eyes, bristling hair, and pale or blushing cheeks. True, every nose, eyes, and cheek is painstakingly done. . . but why is there no unity, no force, no idea to that which is called the folk?" See A. Amfiteatrov, "Zapisnaia knizhka," *Odesskii novosti*, 19 May 1912, p. 2. Bunin's distortion of his heroes is a favorite device of both his pre-Revolutionary and émigré fiction. He was fascinated by human ugliness, especially by cretins. See, for instance, I. Bunin, *Vospominaniia* (Paris: Vozrozhdenie, 1950), p. 8. Compare, for instance, his description of Gervas'ka in *Dry Valley* (III, p. 160); Adam Sokolovich in "Loopy Ears" (IV, p. 386); and, Cornet Elagin in *The Elagin Affair* (V, p. 262).

24. Gor'kii perceived Bunin's penchant for distorted characters early in the writer's career, noting that Bunin seemingly "preferred a fog to character." See Gor'kii's letter to K. Piatnitskii, dated 13-17 October 1901, in Gor'kii, *Sobranie sochinenii*, XXVIII, (1956), p. 187. Such distortion, of course, is recognized as an important device of European Modernism. For a theoretical study of such innovation, see José Oretga y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art* (Garden City: Smith, 1951).

25. It should be noted that in an early variant of *Dry Valley*, Bunin stated that the rapid demise of gentry culture was due precisely to the nobleman's fear of life and his wish for destruction. See I. Bunin, *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, V, p. 148.

26. The term, *mnogogolos'e*, is, of course, recognized as a key theme in

M. Bakhtin's work, *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1963), translated into English by R. W. Rotsel as *Problems of Dostoevskii's Poetics* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1973).

27. Needless to say, Veretenkin aroused the hostility of the critics. See A. Derman, "Izdatel'skoe tovarishchestvo pisatelei. Sbornik I," *Zavety*, No. 4 (1912), p. 109; and, A. Red'ko, "Iz literaturnykh vpechatlenii ('Nochnoi razgovor')," *Russkoe Bogatstvo*, No. 4 (1912), p. 138 and p. 142.

28. Interestingly, the peasant Ger'vaska in *Dry Valley* is nicknamed "borzoi." See Bunin, *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh*, III, p. 160.

29. Bunin's portrait of the peasantry often upset the "village" writers and, in particular, Ivan Vol'nov. For instance, Vol'nov complained: "Bunin, of course, considers peasants incurable monsters and freaks. We are for him—Asia; in his view, we live on all fours. Would that he help us stand on our hind legs!" See Gor'kii, "Ivan Vol'nov," *Sobranie sochinenii*, XVII, p. 315. Bunin apparently agreed, confessing to G. Kuznetsova that "in the Russian there still lives Asia, the Chinese style /kitaishchina/." See G. Kuznetsova, *Grasskii dnevnik* (Washington: Victor Kamkin, 1967), p. 102.

30. Throughout the period, Bunin continued to attack the intellectual's idealization of the peasant. For instance, when Leonid Andreev complained of the peasants in Bunin's stories, the writer responded: "I know what kind of peasants you want! Just give you Platon Karataev!" See A. Baboreko, "Bunin na Kapri. /Po neopublikovannym materialam/" in N. Antonov, ed., *V bol'shoi sem'e* (Smolensk: Smolenskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1978), p. 240.

31. Bunin similarly rejects divine assistance in *The Village* (III, p. 38) and *Dry Valley* (III, pp. 139-40). For one reason or another, critics have commented upon Bunin's dislike of religion. For instance, Gor'kii wrote that "Bunin believes in God, but it is an evil faith" (see Gor'kii, "Ivan Vol'nov," p. 320). Bunin himself commented on Russian Orthodoxy: "Everything which has been said about our enlightened and joyous religion is a lie. There is nothing as dark, terrible, and cruel as our religion. Do you remember those black icons with those terrifying feet and hands, the standing about for eight hours at a stretch, and the night services?! No, don't talk to me about the 'enlightened' mercy of our religion. We are a long way from it" (Kuznetsova, p. 102).

32. Critics have frequently commented upon Bunin's talent for describing vivisection. For instance, Poggioli writes that in his work, Bunin treats "the palpitating substance of life with the frigid efficiency of a surgeon" (p. 143). Also see A. Izmailov, "Iubilei I. A. Bunina," *Birzhevye vedomosti*, 27 October 1912, p. 5.

33. F. Stepun notes that in this regard, nature in Bunin's work is "more psychological" than it is in Turgenev's fiction. See Stepun, p. 99. A. Izmailov compares Bunin's scenes of nature directly to the setting of "Bezhin Meadow," noting that in "Night Conversation" "the fragrant air of Turgenev's summer night has been poisoned

by the smell of blood, cruelly and senselessly spilt." See Izmailov, "Iubilei I. A. Bunina," *Russkoe slovo*, 28 October 1912, p. 3.

34. According to Tkhorzhevskii, Bunin saw wind as foreboding change and destruction (see Tkhorzhevskii, p. 539).

35. Bunin often uses such details to polemicize with other themes of Turgenev's fiction, and, in particular, his motif of "first love." For instance, Veretenkin's attraction for the high-school student Iushkova, takes place amidst details that suggest destruction passion and which recall the heated decadence of Andreev, e.g., "the blinding dazzle" of streams, windowsills "shot aflame with the sun," and a cat "lying in ambush for the first finches of spring." See III, p. 259.

36. Critics have likened Bunin's fiction to a funereal liturgy in which the "deceased" is none other than Russia itself. For instance, V. L'vov-Rogachevskii wrote that in his fiction, Bunin celebrates the gentry only by singing its requiem. See L'vov-Rogachevskii, *Noveishaia russkaia literatura* (Moscow: "Mir," 1927), p. 77. Also see A. Burnakin, "Literaturnye zametki. Paskvil' na Rossiui," *Novoe vremia*, 11 February 1911, p. 4; and, V. Viktorskii, "Literaturnoe vpechatlenie," *Zhivoe slovo*, 9 June 1911, p. 2.