

Geometry of Love

*While tombs and bones and mummies keep the silence
The word is all that matters still.
Emerged from timeless darkness of the grave yard
The transcripts have the meaning carved within.
We don't seem to have another sacred treasure!
Make sure you preserve it, yes you will.
In times of trouble, sadness and suppression
Preserve the treasured gift of speech*

I have got a notion to write about Ivan Bunin and his loves after I watched the Italian TV series 'Elisa Di Rivombrosa'. The events are not related by any means but I will explain myself. 'Elisa Di Rivombrosa' and its two latest installments 'Parte Secondo' and 'La Figlia Di Elisa' are traditionally soapy but very well done series about love stories and dangerous liaisons in XVIII century North Italy. The series have all the typical paraphernalia of an action drama – love taken into an aim of seductive treachery, friendship perpetually tested for loyalty and danger hidden in each single fold of the beautiful seductress' dress. As soon as the plot takes a turn to tranquility and beyond and starts showcasing the happiness it becomes dull and boring. That's when the small specs of future malice are inserted into the script here and there to save the plot. Neither melodramatic sight of the happy newlyweds nor the first dance in the brightness of sunshine or the beautiful baby as the perfect gift of love could give the plot all the necessary energy and suppress the boredom. The story about happily ever after lacks the dramatic torque and is not exciting by definition. Hence I had been thinking about Bunin and his women. Were all the messy relationships that he had had a tribute to his personal drama or was he actually quite lucky to have all that excitement as an important boost to produce passionately profound masterpieces of prose that he was so famous for?

You could pass your own judgment upon it. In 1899 Ivan Bunin, aristocrat by birth and upbringing, was 19 years old. As it was common for the future writer he was working at the 'Orlovsky Vestnik' magazine. Of course he would not be interested that much in caps as he would be in his surroundings. It is very important to find a spiritual leader and an object of affection when one is young. If one is not lucky to find a spiritual teacher the books could take the lead but the object of desire has to be real. The first flame of Ivan Bunin was a girl named Varvara Pashenko. The pictures don't do her much justice. Being static they deprive the viewer from seeing the youthful exuberance or understanding the charisma of a real person. Besides, Varvara was as smart as Yoko Ono to spice up her appearance and she knew how to distinguish herself from the crowd by trickery of boldly chosen accessories. She also appeared to be arrogantly independent thus was the perfect choice for Bunin. Varvara was one year older and had graduated from Elets'k grammar school, contrary to Bunin – a grammar school dropout from grade 6. Varvara was a practical young lady and although she refused to marry Bunin she was courageous enough to live with him as a partner. All the circumstances of their affair were, in fact, tuned for an ultimate breakdown. There is an opinion that Varvara was double dating with her future husband Arseniy Bibikov at the same time as Bunin. It is more likely that one of the most famously attractive female characters in Bunin's prose – Lika – was not Varvara's literary incarnation, but the source of inspiration is rather straightforward. As Bunin's second wife Vera mentioned in her diary Lika had similar looks but the dialogues between her and the main male character point to another woman as an inspiration. The woman, who later would join to form the sharpest edge in the Bermuda triangle of Bunin's personal disaster. Varvara and Ivan survived for 4 years together. They stayed in

Oryol then left for Poltava, where Bunin worked as a librarian and an office clerk. Varvara couldn't put up with the poverty and after series of on-s and off-s left Bunin for good returning to her father and later marrying the most practical choice – wealthy Arseniy Bibikov. It is not happy development of the circumstances but the result one would have expected nevertheless.

In romantically imaginary form the situation was described as: “I couldn't hear or see anything. All I could say was – she will be back, she will bring back herself and this night and the morning after, and those folds of delicate fabric brought to life with the swift movement of her feet in dry grass, she will or there is no future for both of us.” Varvara's reply was less dramatic, not a piece of literature, of course, but a letter. A ruthless statement typical for 20 something years old: «I don't want you. I probably don't love you the way you want me to. Later I might fall in love with you. I am not saying it is not possible but I don't want to lie to you. I respect you too much. Please believe me and don't do anything stupid. You will only make the things worse. With time, perhaps, I'll grow into appreciating you the way you deserve. Dream on.” Judging by mature standards the letter falls into playing the mind games category but it is not hard to play with poet's mind because that's what they need. Also the romantic style of tormented love affair is the best way to escape from boring reality, in which poverty is both, a sin and a punishment. ‘Today I only had a bottle of milk and a bowl of soup without soft bread; didn't even have a smoke, couldn't afford it’ – such was a bitter taste of reality. Besides it was very painful that Varvara's father appeared to be right after all because he was always reluctant to agree to his daughter's marriage to Bunin. So finally Varvara disappeared for good.

In poem dated 1922 Bunin chose gothic tone to describe his feelings:

It was spring, and life was nice and easy

The freshly dug grave was appealing as hell

But life was easy as the weightless clouds

As easy as the censer smoke could be.

For Bunin the bitterness of the experience was nevertheless an important lesson of maturity, the one that helps understand women better. The elegy of lost dreams transformed into sad and beautiful colors in his prose. In ‘*The Dreams of Chang*’ he wrote: This woman will never love us Chang. There are such souls my friend; they are always searching desperately for love and while searching never actually love anyone. Who can solve their mystery?” At the same time for the writer as well as for the reader the most attractive female characters are those who carry certain mystery. Characters like Olya Mesherskaya in ‘*Light Breathing*’ or Katya in ‘*Mitya's Love*’ or Maria Sosnovskaya in ‘*The Elaghin Affair*’. This kind of attitude that Bunin showed towards women is an important aspect of his popularity. Similar to other great writers of the XIX and XX century – Balzac, Maupassant, Stendal, Turgenev, Kuprin, Hemingway and Fitzgerald – he wouldn't be able to live and write without dramatic events in personal life. Writing about Maupassant in his diary Bunin mentioned: “He was the only one who dared to declare that the whole life is marked with succumbing to the power of a woman.”

In 1898 Bunin married a Greek girl from Odessa. Her name was Anna Tsakni. Later he would describe the whole affair as a momentary lapse of a reason. Everything happened so soon; “she was a

grammar school graduate yesterday and became a married lady overnight”. Their relationship was rather complicated. In lyrical form he wrote:

I had a dream as sweet as it was sad

She was luring me with her shy stance

And endearing smile

But I knew so well that it was not for real

The dream will disappear with the break of light

Yet we have some time before that happens

So smile at me and come into my arms

That’s what the love of a poet is like. No matter how hard one tries, he will always find some gothic ways to put it. Anna and Bunin’s relationship started to fall apart only a year after they got married and in three years they separated. The only child Bunin had had, a boy named Kolya, died in 1905 of scarlet fever. The reason of the failure of their marriage is under the seal of privacy but according to one interpretation Anna was more interested in theatre than in her husband. His writer’s future held no interest for her and she was oblivious to his talent, maybe even bored in his presence. More bitter account of the events suggests that Anna’s stepmother Eleonora turned her against Bunin because she was attracted to him. The relationship fell apart in the most trivial way, they just grew apart and the separation was a mutual relief.

Bunin was 36 years old when he met Vera Muromtseva. Her father was a professor and her uncle State Duma Chairman. Bunin was famous by then and he was being compared to Chekhov and Gorky. Vera appeared to be an ideal wife: smart, humble, forgiving. She never gave any reason for jealousy. Was that good? Anyhow, that’s how they survived together for 46 years and were able to pull through all the hardships they had had to endure. In 1907 Vera was 26 years old. Her life is an incredible example of loyalty of a wife, or woman’s wisdom, perhaps. It would not be possible to live with a great writer without compromise and sacrifice, would it?

Together Bunin and Vera survived the immigration, life abroad, fame and perils of recognition. Despite of the fact that Bunin was categorically opposed to the Revolution and its consequences Russia was always a background and inspiration for his literary work. The best of his prose – autobiographical ‘*Dry Valley*’, ‘*The Village*’, ‘*Antonovsky Apples*’, ‘*Dark Avenues*’, ‘*Life of Arseniev*’ – are considered to be masterpieces of Russian literature. The genre in which Bunin used to write is called ‘short novel’. The writer has to be extremely skillful in his craft to be able to uncover the psychological motifs for the behavior of his characters considering the limited number of pages he has at hand.

After the immigration Bunin and Vera settled in France, in a place called Grasse. In 1922 Anna finally accepted the divorce settlement and he could marry Vera. Shortly after their financial situation improved and they were able to rent out a small villa in Grasse. Merezhkovsky, Rahmaninoff, Hodasevich and Berberova were frequent visitors. The days that followed were peaceful and

somewhat boring. For the sake of passion in his literary work he would have needed some drama, wouldn't he?

Bunin met Galina Kuznetsova in Paris in summer of 1926. She was married to former White Army officer who worked as a cab driver in Paris. Her husband tried really hard to provide for Galina. That's when 56 years old Bunin came into the picture. He certainly had what it takes to spark a love notion in the imagination of a young woman. On the other hand, Galina tried herself in composing poems and writing prose so having an affair with Bunin might have seemed like a stroll in Vienna Forest for her. Hence when her husband popped up a 'me or him' question she nonchalantly shot back – Ivan Alekseevich, of course. The decision was easier for Galina and much harder for Bunin because of everything he had had to endure together with his wife. Besides he would have suffered from traditionally Russian sense of guilt had he made a decision to leave her. So it turned out that living together, all three of them under one roof, was the craziest yet the best solution.

Therefore, Bunin and his wife welcomed new addition to their family and there were five of them living at the villa – Bunin, his wife, Galina and three more male students. They all were living at Bunin's expense. The situation reminds me of Hemingway's life in Cuba, except Hemingway didn't have problems with guilt controversy, he lived as large as he pleased surrounded by people he liked. On the other hand, the misalliance that took stage in Bunin's house resulted in intrigue, which was productive for creativity. Bunin was working at the third installment of 'Arseniev's Life' and Galina proved to be a passionate listener to the draft excerpts. He was also teaching her how to write, how to transfer the obscure shadows of the days passing by into powerful metaphor in prose.

The complicated psychological situation was not getting any better due to hardship of financial circumstances. "We were so poor. I only had 2 shirts, all the pillowcases had been mended, we only had 8 sheets, and only 2 were still in a good shape. I (Ivan Bunin) couldn't afford buying warm underwear. I mostly wore Galina's clothes" – states the entry in Vera's diary in the end of 1933. Bunin described the situation straightforwardly: "My beautiful borders. I take care of all of them, it's all for free. Zurov is the only one who pays 10 franks per day...I never experienced anything like that in my lifetime: there is no food, nothing except dates and cabbage – devastating!"

The later development of circumstances could have been useful for Bunin as a writer had he been brought up differently. After he won the Nobel Prize and traveled to Stockholm to collect it he got acquainted with Russian philosopher Fyodor Steppun. The acquaintance itself was fine, Fyodor was charming and charismatic but he had a sister, an opera singer named Margarita. As Bunin's wife mentioned she was big and had a wonderfully loud laughter. Margarita had the courage to be openly gay. It happened so that for Galina, perhaps tired mentally and physically, Margarita or Marga was the best company, a perfect change of circumstances compared to the company of men. So she fell in love. Although she stayed at Bunin's house for eight more years, she finally followed Marga. They actually lived happily ever after. According to Bunin: "I thought some coxcomb with glassy hair partition will come and take her away from me but it was a woman who took her..." It seems to me that such development of circumstances could have made a nicely controversial novel. But Bunin was a Russian aristocrat, not Henry Miller. Otherwise he could have produced something much better than 'Tropic of Cancer' or 'Tropic of Cancer' and 'Hopscotch' combined.

He died in Paris at the age of 83, in the attic apartment and in poverty. Based on his diaries he was afraid of dying but even more of being alone while dying. He was lucky because Vera never left his side. Everything she thought of their life together is expressed in her book. The book is extremely

loyal; she never brought herself to saying a single bad word about her husband. But what bad could be said about Bunin after all? Life with him must have been a profound choice, unorthodox experience and a generous sacrifice and it probably was worth it.

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