

Rehabilitating Cornet Elagin

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Abstract

Scott Morrison: Rehabilitating Cornet Elagin
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In this thesis I attempt to incorporate a misinterpreted and under-valued story, *The Elagin Affair*, into the standard canon of Ivan Bunin, the first Russian writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature. To do so, I analyze several unusual features of the story and connect them to Bunin's more conventional, better understood works. The main features of *Elagin* examined here are the style and texture of narration, the relationship between man and nature, and the Dostoevskian subtext of the story. Through each of these aspects of the work, I show that *Elagin* largely conforms to Bunin's canon in its characteristics and choice of themes but complements that canon through its unique formulations of these features, and it thus helps to form a more complete understanding of Bunin's artistic philosophy.

To my wonderful wife Linsey, who believed in me even when I wasn't so convinced.

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The Elagin Affair («Дело корнета Елагина») is an intriguing work by an equally intriguing, if underappreciated, author.¹ His expressive, highly poetic style does not translate easily, making him less visible to readers in the West than to his fellow Russians (despite emigrating to France in 1919 and winning the Nobel prize for literature in 1933), and his staunch opposition to the Soviet system which transformed his homeland made it difficult for him to be read even in his native land, so his contributions to world literature were not widely appreciated until after his death.² But while the author himself has begun to receive the recognition he deserves in the West (scholars in Russia were quicker to pay him long-overdue attention), this particular story has been grossly misinterpreted as “un-Buninian” and received relatively little critical attention for far too long.

The story is based on a real court case from 1891, in which one Cornet Aleksandr Bartenev was charged with killing the Polish actress Maria Wisnowska. The main details of the true case are nearly identical to those of the story: both the lovers themselves and their relationship are peculiar, eccentric, and poorly understood; there are strong

¹ For an introduction to Bunin’s works, English readers can obtain a highly representative survey of the author’s most important works through the excellent recent translations of *Dark Avenues* (Темные аллеи, 1938) and *The Life of Arseniev: Youth* (Жизнь Арсеньева, 1927-29, 1932-39), as well as Robert Bowie’s carefully chosen – and equally carefully translated – collection of Bunin’s most important and enduring shorter works, *Night of Denial* (2006), which also includes very informative supplementary materials. For a more thorough knowledge of Bunin’s oeuvre, see the non-fictional materials of Bunin’s diaries from the period of the October Revolution, *Cursed Days* (Окаянные дни, 1918-19, published in 1925), and his book on Tolstoy, *The Liberation of Tolstoy* (Освобождение Толстого, 1937).

² For readers seeking a more complete portrait of Bunin, several admirable biographies are available: in English, Thomas Gaiton Marullo’s three-volume biography examines Bunin through his literary works and also through his personal correspondence and the memoirs of those closest to him; in Russian, Aleksandr Baboreko’s recent one-volume biography of Bunin puts the author’s works into a very detailed biographical context.

indications that the murder was carried out at the actress' insistence; both the real Wisnowska and her fictional counterpart produce very puzzling suicide notes.³ Bunin took these real events, used them as raw material, and transformed them over thirty years later into a work of fiction whose scope transcends the boundaries of its real-life inspiration.

The Elagin Affair was written late in the summer of 1925 and was first published in its entirety in the émigré journal *Современные записки* in 1926.⁴ This was during one of Bunin's more productive periods and the first such period after his emigration from Russia in 1919.⁵ It is indeed curious that the works written in this period of the mid-twenties in the Maritime Alps (*Mitya's Love* («МИТИНА ЛЮБОВЬ», 1925), “Sunstroke” («СОЛНЕЧНЫЙ УДАР», 1926), and *The Life of Arseniev*, among others) are often considered to be among Bunin's most significant achievements, and yet *Elagin*, written in this same period and engaging with the same themes of love and mortality as these works, is frequently seen as one of his least “successful” creations.

The critical attention paid to *Elagin* has not been substantial in either breadth or depth. Well into the 1930s, Soviet criticism interpreted the story, along with his novella *Mitya's Love* which came out in the same year as *Elagin*, 1925, as typical of Bunin, in that Bunin “vividly described his epoch...from the point of view of his own milieu,

³ L. Nikulin, *Chekhov, Bunin, Kuprin*, pp.227-28.

⁴ I.A. Bunin, *Собрание сочинений в девяти томах*, 9 vols (Moscow 1965-67), 5:526. All references to Bunin's works are to this edition (by volume and page number).

⁵ Though the aforementioned diary of Bunin's time during and immediately after the October Revolution was written in 1918-19, it was only published in 1925, in the same period of productivity as *Elagin* and others.

which was receding into the grave”⁶ (*живописал свою эпоху...с точки зрения собственной, сходящей в гроб среды*).⁷ Though Bunin is frequently nostalgic and often does grieve for the loss of the lifestyle of Russia’s pre-revolutionary upper class through his art, such critical assessments – even forgiving their clear political influences – do not give Bunin due credit for the artistic achievements of such works, *Elagin* among them. Subsequent Soviet criticism continued, when writing on Bunin was allowed, in this vein or simply ignored this particular story altogether. And despite something of a “rediscovery” of Bunin among readers since *perestroika*, few books have been published on Bunin in general, and little attention has been paid to *Elagin* in particular.

Criticism in the West varied: Bunin received limited early attention due to the lack of translations available,⁸ and much of this criticism was directed at his pre-emigration works (*The Village*, “The Gentleman from San Francisco”, “Light Breathing”, and “Sunstroke” were especially popular). When *Elagin* later received attention, some authors only mentioned the work in passing (Kryzytski 1971); some gave more attention to the work but reached ultimately negative conclusions (Woodward 1980); still others appreciate the work only from narrow lines of inquiry (Connolly 1982).⁹ More recent criticism (Mal’tsev 1994; Marullo, 1993, 1995, 2002) has made admirable progress in analyzing many of Bunin’s major themes, but still does not appreciate all the features of *Elagin*. On the whole, criticism regarding *Elagin* is largely negative; most critics note

⁶ All English translations from Bunin’s works are my own, unless otherwise noted.

⁷ *Соб. соч.*, 5:527.

⁸ *Elagin* was first translated into English by B.G. Guernsey in *The Elagin Affair and Other Stories*, New York: Knopf, 1935.

⁹ Connolly appreciates *Elagin* mostly for elements of the story which he sees as representative of Buddhism’s influence on Bunin (101).

only that the extensive descriptions of nature that are so characteristic of Bunin are almost entirely absent,¹⁰ or they conclude that *Elagin* is either a failed experiment that is superseded by more evolved works.¹¹ They have not seen beyond the superficial details, beneath which lies a very rich text. The notable exception is Robert Bowie: he defends the story, notes its relationship to Dostoevsky, and sees it as a successful experiment and unique among Bunin's works.

While many of the other works from this period have certain poetics and themes in common, *The Elagin Affair* distinguishes itself as a story which displays elements of Bunin's modernist sensitivities,¹² lacks the characteristic presence of nature, and engages very directly with Dostoevskian themes and setting, a writer for whom he had no great love and whose art he publicly regarded with little more than indifference. Though these features seem very uncharacteristic for Bunin at first glance, possible explanations and subtle elements of his typical themes and poetics can be discerned, and these elements ultimately paint a much more complete picture of the work as it fits into the author's typical canon. For as I intend to demonstrate, contrary to previous assessments, this work *does* fit, and genuinely complement, the rest of Bunin's oeuvre.

To that end, I propose to illustrate both how *Elagin* conforms to Bunin's oeuvre through its similarities and connections to other works and also how its distinguishing features make complementary contributions to understanding Bunin's artistic philosophy.

¹⁰ Kryzyski, for one, remarks that "*The Elagin Affair* is not representative of Bunin's work, for it lacks entirely one of his strongest trump cards, the presence of nature" (179).

¹¹ Connolly refers to Bunin leaving behind the "anxious formulations" in *Elagin* about human desire and suffering for more sophisticated interpretations in later works (130).

¹² Much of Bunin's works are consciously or outwardly more traditional, but *Elagin* belongs to a group of works with strong modernist tendencies, including *Drydale* (*Суходол*, 1911), "Light Breathing" («Легкое дыхание», 1916), and *Dark Avenues* (1938), among others.

In Part I, I will show that the style of the story's narration and composition, while unique, are not entirely anomalous for Bunin; In Part II, I will explore the characters and their relationship to the world around them and endeavor to determine whether they, likewise, are not without precedent; finally, in Part III, to fully understand the characters as they relate to Bunin's overall creative philosophy and the possible intent behind the story, *Elagin's* connections to Dostoevskian themes will be investigated. As the style of the narration and the texture of the language are what often first strike readers as so unusual for Bunin, that is a logical place to begin to examine the tale's distinctiveness.

Chapter 1

Experiments in Style

As mentioned before, *Elagin* is often seen as unrepresentative of Bunin for a number of reasons. The ornate, poetic style, rich with sensory detail, that is generally so characteristic of Bunin is largely absent in *Elagin*.¹³ The narrator himself is something of a curiosity: he is an observer in the events of the story, but not a participant, so his narration often consists of extensive quotation of the court proceedings which themselves are recapitulations of the actual events in addition to his own commentary. And furthermore, the structure of the story, along with its shifts in narrative style and voice, speak to elements of modernism in Bunin's mature prose.

In its fictionalization of real events, *Elagin* takes facts from the real world and transforms them into a fictional work that is unquestionably recognizable by its origins, but becomes something more in Bunin's very adept hands.¹⁴ As part of constructing the narrative, Bunin creates a curious, anonymous townsman who recounts the events of a "бульварный роман" and its subsequent criminal case. What is particularly unusual about this narrator, however, is that his narration often, though not always, lacks much of Bunin's usual flourish and poeticism. In my view, Bunin uses this narrator as a means of removing his own style from the narration. However, there are occasional deviations in

¹³ Of Bunin's eye for detail, the philosopher and literary critic Fyodor Stepun remarked, "Bunin thinks with his eyes...he has an eagle's eyes for the day, but an owl's for the night. Truly, he *sees everything*" (qtd. in Sukhikh 162).

¹⁴ Many of Bunin's stories are inspired by real incidents (e.g. "The Son," *The Life of Arseniev*), though the variation in the form and content of the resultant works is highly diverse.

Bunin's attempts to restrain his poeticism in the narration that are often overlooked by critics and readers alike.

In order to understand the exceptional nature of these deviations, one must first characterize the norm of the narration. Take this representative passage:

В большом противоречии с общим низким мнением об Елагине стояли и показания многих его полковых товарищей. Все они отзывались о нем самым лучшим образом. Вот каково, например, было мнение о нем эскадронного командира... (5:273).

(The generally accepted low opinion of Elagin is greatly at variance with the testimony of his many comrades in the regiment. All of them spoke of him in the highest of terms. Here, for example, is the opinion of the squadron commander...)¹⁵

The texture of the narration here is impartial and impersonal enough that the reader could easily imagine the narrator as a court reporter or a journalist. However, as previously mentioned, the impartial, unadorned texture of the narration is not always maintained.

In the very first chapter, as the narrator sets the stage for Elagin's entrance in the story, he describes Captain Likharyov's dining room with a passage that borders on poetry:

Ужасно и началось оно, это дело. Было 19 июня прошлого года. Было раннее утро, был шестой час, но в столовой ротмистра лейб-гвардии гусарского полка Лихарева было уже светло, душно, сухо, и жарко от летнего городского солнца. Было, однако, еще тихо... (5:261).

(And how terribly it began, this affair. It was the nineteenth of June of last year. It was early morning, after five o'clock, but in the dining room of Captain Likharyov of the Household troops of the hussar regiment it was already bright, stuffy, dry, and hot from the city's summer sun. It was, however, still quiet...)

The poetic register of this section rests on the hypnotic repetition of *o* (also as *ě*), *a*, and forms of *был*. Note also the trochaic series of adverbs *душно*, *сухо*, *жарко*,

¹⁵ Trans. R. Bowie (*Night of Denial*, 478).

which centers on the hushers *и* and *ж* and the “dark” vowel *у*. This is Bunin’s artistry contaminating the otherwise neutral narration.

There are several brief passages of metered language that slip into the narration. An exhaustive catalogue of these moments would be beyond the scope of this work, but their effect in *Elagin* is an important one. For example, toward the end of the second chapter, in describing Sosnovskaya’s “love nest,” the narrator says that “оказался небольшой вход в соседнюю комнату, *то́же соверше́нно те́мную, моги́льно озаре́нную опа́ловым фона́риком, висе́вшим под потолком...*” (5:264, *my italics*). This brief section of duplet rhythm is likely unintentional on the narrator’s part, for he does not show overt signs of any artistic tendencies. The timing of this lapse of consistency in the narration, however, is not coincidental. Bunin is fascinated by dead bodies and their surroundings because they are reminders of mortality, that human lives are fleeting, and that no one is exempt from the ruthlessness of nature, be they beautiful or grotesque, young or old. It is unsurprising, then, that he would be so excited by the opportunity to describe Sosnovskaya’s corpse and her death-decorated rooms that he loses his composure and allows a bit of himself to show through the narration. The effect is subtle enough that it could easily go unnoticed, but it goes to show that Bunin did not completely rid the narration of his characteristic style. He was, however, successful in eliminating all but the faintest traces of the colors and scents which are so typical of his other works.

One characteristic element of his style that Bunin eliminated in this story is the richness of sensory information with which he would often bombard the reader. In particular, the lack of smells in *Elagin* creates a rather sterile world devoid of the obvious

presence of nature. The word *занах* occurs but twice in the entire story, once in one of Sosnovskaya's journal entries as she describes the flowers with which she would surround herself in her imagined death scene, and once when Elagin goes to visit Sosnovskaya and smells her perfume. No other forms of words relating to smell or aroma occur anywhere else in the story. So not only has Bunin created a world virtually devoid of smells, but the only source of smell, at least as far as Elagin and the narrator reveal, is Sosnovskaya herself, the hand of nature in this world.¹⁶ Compare this to *The Life of Arseniev* or "Antonov Apples," among others, where smells and aromas are among the most intense sensations and sensual pleasures that they are easily the strongest trigger of memory.

Likewise, the multitude of distinct and very precisely defined colors that are typical of Bunin is absent in *Elagin*. The three most prevalent colors, judging by the number of times each modifier is used, are black, white, and gray (in that order).¹⁷ Bunin depicts a rather sterile environment in the city with color just as he does with aroma (or lack thereof). The few colors that are used, however, are perhaps all the more striking because of their rarity: Elagin's eyes are "greenish" (*зеленоватые*, 5:273); the tree outside their "love nest" is an "unnaturally bright" shade of green (*противоестественно ярка*, 5:264); the spot of blood from Sosnovskaya's gunshot is "crimson" (*багровое*, 5:266); the shirt lying near Sosnovskaya's body is "light blue, with a pearl shimmer" (*голубая с перловым отливом*, 5:265). The effect of this sparse, but intense coloring on the reader creates a dull, colorless background that is punctuated by

¹⁶ Sosnovskaya's role in regard to nature is explored in greater depth in Part II.

¹⁷ The occurrence of these colors in the story is as follows, including shades (e.g. greenish, light-gray): black – eight times; white – six times; gray – three times; green – twice; crimson and light blue once each.

highly vivid points or objects of color. This is a technique that has been used to great effect in late 20th- and early 21-st century film. But Bunin uses his artistically developed sense of vision to achieve the power of such a visual effect the better part of a century earlier. In fact, much of Bunin's work has a cinematic quality to it, both in the fidelity of his imagery and in the overall structure of his works. Viktor Shklovsky even writes that "[Bunin's] extraordinary memory, at any moment, recalls before his eyes every speck of dust of his faraway home, and, *like in the cinema* [*в кинематографе*], it stands before him with all the fences, clouds, homes, bushes, and ravines of his native 'backwater'" (305, my italics). Shklovsky here is discussing only the visual aspects of Bunin's art, but this comparison is still apt regarding the structural concerns of *Elagin*.

The townspeople in *The Elagin Affair* describe the story of Elagin and Sosnovskaya's romance as a "*бульварный роман*" (pulp fiction, a "penny dreadful"), which is not an inaccurate description. On the surface is the story of a love affair between a hussar officer and a well-known, and eccentric, actress. He meets her, falls for her, and they experience an intense love, eventually setting up an apartment as a love nest. Feeling that marriage would be impossible for two people in their social positions, they see no other option but to end their lives rather than be forced to live without one another. Ultimately, Elagin kills Sosnovskaya but does not kill himself. A few hours later, he arrives at the flat of one of his comrades and rather matter-of-factly announces to his fellow officers that he has killed Sosnovskaya. At first incredulous, his friends are soon convinced to investigate. They ultimately make their way to the lovers' nest and find Sosnovskaya's body, and an investigation and court proceedings against Elagin ensue. The reader would be wrong to think the story ended here, for as the defense

counsel asserts, “Everything is as it seems, but also *not* as it seems!” (*Все так, да не так!*) Though the *fabula* (chronological order of events) is not especially complicated, the retelling of the events in Bunin’s story is rather more complex.

First, the story’s *syuzhet* begins at the end,¹⁸ with the narrator recounting commentary from both the prosecution and defense before introducing Elagin as he arrives at his comrade’s and confesses the morning after the murder. This is no ordinary murder; considering the structure of this work, the narrator’s characterization of the affair as “terrible, strange, enigmatic, and insoluble” is much more accurate. The narrator himself, in his capacity as a reporter instead of that of a mere bystander, constructs the tale, as presented, in a rather cinematic fashion, complete with the lovers’ biographies leading up to the events of the affair. The lovers prove to be more complicated figures, as well. Elagin is not simply the typical wastrel hussar; he is described by his fellow officers alternately as a carouser and a deeply introspective, perhaps even philosophical man. Sosnovskaya’s peculiarities go beyond eccentricity into morbidity, and while she is fickle and playful with her gentleman admirers, she also reads Schopenhauer, Musset, and pessimist philosophy and poetry. The defense and prosecution offer significantly different accounts of the motivations and events in the story. As the defense counsel suggests, “In any matter, everything can be understood in various ways” (*Во всяком деле все можно воспринять по-разному, 5:261*). This is a point which readers should take to heart as they delve further into the text, for it begins to touch upon the theme of irresolvable ambiguity with regard not just to events but to people themselves, a topic

¹⁸ Mal’tsev notes that “In Bunin, the inception and conclusion of the events almost never coincide with the beginning and end of the story” (106).

that concerned Bunin particularly in this work but that may also be indicative of some modernist tendencies in his work as a whole.

The distinct construction of the *syuzhet* in contrast to the relatively simple *fabula* is yet another feature of the story that speaks to the influence of modernism on Bunin. And *Elagin* is not the first instance of this technique. Bunin certainly experimented with the non-linear *syuzhet* much earlier, notably in *Drydale* (1911) and “Light Breathing” (1916),¹⁹ which uses several narrators and/or layers of narration to great effect. Though the *fabula* has a relatively traditional dramatic structure, the *syuzhet* seems to end at the climax of its development, when Elagin explains himself to the court and the reader. Structuring the story in this way alters the tension in the narrative. Rather than building suspense as to what will become of the two lovers, Bunin tells the reader in the very first chapter that Elagin kills Sosnovskaya, and knowing how or why this happens is even more suspenseful and intriguing for the reader. As Mal’tsev notes, “That which should have been the culmination of the *syuzhet* turns out to be forced [оттесненным] to the background; the emphasis falls totally differently: not on ‘what’, but on ‘how’” (106). And though Bunin addresses the “how”, he does not necessarily reach any conclusions, which is consistent with the theme of irresolvable ambiguity that speaks to Bunin’s modernist tendencies.²⁰

This story further confirms that, though Bunin outwardly opposed himself to modernist trends, inwardly he was still preoccupied with these same ideas. However, the

¹⁹ For a seminal analysis of the role of narrative structure in Bunin’s “Light Breathing,” see chapter seven of L.S. Vygotsky’s *The Psychology of Art* (Психология искусства, 5th edition, 1997).

²⁰ Irresolvable ambiguity is also a trope of Romanticism, and given Bunin’s respect and appreciation for “Romantic” Russian authors like Pushkin and Lermontov, it is possible that this element of the story can trace its origins beyond modernism.

influence of modernism on the story can be felt not only in its style and structure, but also in its themes and characters. To further an understanding of the work, one must look beyond the layer of the text's style and narration and into layer of the relationship between the characters and the world in which they exist.

Chapter 2

Nature and Her Agents

i. Sosnovskaya

One aspect of *Elagin* that is often misunderstood is the apparent absence of nature in the work. Whereas nature is often not only a backdrop for characters and events in Bunin, but occasionally a participant in the plot itself,²¹ its absence here seems to make the work feel distinctly un-Buninian: after all, Bunin is renowned for his beautiful descriptions of natural settings. Robert Bowie is correct in observing that the story “eschews nature description and the excessive embellishments of style” (667).

Woodward goes further, saying that “its weakness is mainly attributable... not so much to the exclusion of nature as to the cause of its exclusion, that is, to the intrinsic limitations of its theme” (199). To suggest that certain themes have intrinsic limitation may generally be an acceptable position, but for a writer of Bunin’s caliber, any theme can overcome such limitations and become worthy of his literary talents (as in the case of the “бульварный роман” of Cornet Elagin), or no plot in particular may even be necessary, as in “Antonov Apples,” “Night” («Ночь»), or *The Village*. In *Elagin*, however, as previously noted, gone are the smells of Antonov apples and the seas of wheat, gently swaying in the wind, that are so familiar to many of Bunin’s characters and readers

²¹ Khodasevich notes that “In Bunin, the world, set and unchanged, rules over man” (*У Бунина мир, данный и неизменный, властвует над человеком*) (4).

familiar with his earlier works. These peculiarities are due largely to the setting, which is an unusual one for Bunin – Petersburg, the city, to Bunin, of Gogol and Dostoevsky.²²

Woodward presents a convincing analysis of the representation of nature in Bunin’s works as a whole, though I disagree with his assessment of this particular story. Generally, he believes that “nature is present in the fiction as the embodiment of the laws of existence that determine the human condition... It is present as a rationally incomprehensible amalgam of beauty and horror, as a source of blind, implacable forces that demand man’s submission and ruthlessly punish his resistance” (21). If one examines the overall characterization of nature in Bunin’s works, certain qualities that he normally associates with nature– indifference to earthly life, fickleness, synthesis of creative and destructive forces – become evident in the character of the female protagonist, Sosnovskaya.

Recalling the general lack of sensory information in the story, Sosnovskaya stands out because she is connected to the only two explicit mentions of smell in the story. Even her name evokes the image of the pine tree (*sosná*, in Russian), while also retaining the sounds of the real actress’ name upon whom she is based (Wisnowska, in Polish pronounced [Visnóvska]). I suggest that nature is not entirely absent, but rather that Sosnovskaya herself acts as nature’s agent in the story, exerting nature’s influence over herself and Elagin, as nature typically does over man in Bunin’s other works, with the goal of finding unity with nature itself. Moreover, elements that are only subtly present in other works are given the room to develop to a greater extent in this work, giving it a unique viewpoint, but one that is ultimately consistent with Bunin’s overall artistic

²² Bunin’s first story set in St. Petersburg was “Noosiform Ears,” first published in 1917. The manifold connections between this story, *Elagin*, and Dostoevsky are discussed here in part III.

philosophy. Namely, Bunin continues to explore the significance of sexual love, the relationship between love and death, and man's relationship to nature. These are elements of many of Bunin's works which are treated here in ways that are not immediately apparent to many readers but which complement the treatment of these same themes in Bunin's other works.²³ In order to examine Sosnovskaya's role as an agent of nature, I will apply James Woodward's concept of man's "degeneracy" in Bunin's works.

Woodward sees the concept of "degeneracy" as a central feature of Bunin's creative philosophy. As he puts it, "man's reactions to the experience of 'natural' love...are represented by Bunin as tragic illustrations of the degeneracy or unnaturalness that is the unalterable fate of man simply by virtue of the qualities that make him an individual human being" (135). Woodward distinguishes between two types of this "degeneracy": he defines "social degeneracy" as those actions or features of characters that further dissociate themselves from nature and their own instinctual human natures, while "inherent degeneracy" is exactly that – the separation of humans from nature by the simple fact of their existence as individuals. Though both Elagin and Sosnovskaya suffer from this "inherent degeneracy," as every individual does, he also suffers from "social degeneracy" at the outset of their affair while she exhibits many characteristics that suggest she is perhaps an agent of nature. Thus, she is suited to the task of correcting Elagin's "social degeneracy" because she is portrayed in much the same way as nature often is in Bunin: inscrutable, volatile, and capricious.

One of the characteristic features of nature in Bunin's work is an indifference to human concerns. Take, for example, the passage from *The Life of Arseniev* after

²³ These themes are prevalent in a great many of Bunin's works: "Antonov Apples," *Drydale*, "Light Breathing," "Night of Denial" («Ночь отречения»), *Mitya's Love*, "Night," and *The Life of Arseniev*, to name a few.

Arseniev leaves his cousin Pisarev's funeral service. "It was as if the world had grown still younger, freer, wider, and more beautiful after someone had departed from it forever" (*Мир стал как будто еще моложе, свободнее, шире и прекраснее после того, как кто-то навеки ушел из него*).²⁴ He exits the dark, fragrant church to a world of sunshine and life. This moment can be understood in two main ways: this passage may reflect the conception that death plays a logical and healthy role in nature as a necessary step for renewal; it is also possible that the stark contrast between nature's seeming eternal youthfulness and the sudden death of Arseniev's cousin underscore nature's indifference to individual human lives and actions.²⁵

Such indifference, however, is in stark contrast to Sosnovskaya's behavior. Rather than take an indifferent stance, she "loved life carnivorously" (*плотоядно любила жизнь*), as one of Sosnovskaya's friends, Zalessky, puts it during his testimony (5:280). She seems obsessed with all facets of sensuality in life. I believe that this intensity of feeling with regard to human concerns is a result of Sosnovskaya's dual role as both an agent of nature and also as a carnal woman. Bunin combines in Sosnovskaya

²⁴ Соб. соч., 6:112.

²⁵ An example which Bunin would have known well is from Pushkin's poem «Брожу ли я вдоль улиц шумных...»:

Гляжу ль на дуб уединенный,
Я мыслю: патриарх лесов
Переживет мой век забвенный,
Как пережил он век отцов
...
И пусть у гробового входа
Младая будет жизнь играть,
И равнодушная природа
Красою вечною сиять.

The image of "indifferent nature" became almost a trope in 19th-century Russian literature; see, for example, the finale of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, another author and work which Bunin knew well.

both the majestic, indifferent nature that is present in many of his works and the intense sensuality that is typical of many of his characters. However, in her relationships with men, Sosnovskaya's feelings are not only intense but polarized, as seen in her fickle and volatile behavior towards them, another manifestation of her role as the hand of nature.

A certain fickleness is very typical of nature as Bunin usually portrays her. She can be merciless or nurturing, gentle or fierce, and she can very suddenly go from one extreme to the other. As Woodward describes it, “[Nature] is present as a rationally incomprehensible amalgam of beauty and horror, as a source of blind, implacable forces that demand man's submission and ruthlessly punish his resistance” (21). In a similar fashion, Sosnovskaya's behavior and very personality are equally extreme and erratic. One witness in the trial remarks that, while she was typically cheerful and coquettish with her guests, “sometimes, for no particular reason, she would suddenly fall silent, roll back her eyes, and drop her head down on the desk. Or else she might start throwing things, smashing tumblers and glasses on the floor”²⁶ (*случалось – вдруг ни с того ни с сего умолкнет, закатит глаза, уронит голову на стол... а не то начнет бросать, бить об пол стаканы, рюмки...*) and she would then stop this behavior just as quickly (5:281). Her behavior towards Elagin is equally erratic; when he describes how their relationship came to be, her feelings toward him go from intensely passionate to indifferent and back in less than half a page.

In addition to this destructive, capricious behavior, Sosnovskaya embodies the creative impulse through her chosen profession in the theater. After boarding school, Sosnovskaya announces to her mother her decision to “dedicate herself to art” (*посвятить себя искусству*). Though the reader is told that much of her success is

²⁶ Trans. R. Bowie (*Night of Denial*, 488).

dependent upon her beauty and her exploitation of that beauty, the nature of acting is in creating and re-creating art on the stage. This creative occupation is similar to the creative forces at work in nature. To dedicate oneself to art is indeed a high calling, as Bunin himself would attest, but as the narrator goes on, his description of the young actress is even more telling.

Her beauty, he says, is “unoriginal,” but nonetheless, there is in her “a kind of special, rare, unusual enchantment, a kind of mixture of naiveté and innocence with animal cunning; and besides that, a mixture of sincerity with constant theatricality” (*какое-то особое, редкое, не обычное очарование, какая-то смесь простодушия и невинности с звериным лукавством, а кроме того, смесь постоянной игры с искренностью*) (5:279-280). The narrator explicitly describes Sosnovskaya here in terms of contradictions: she is both simple-hearted and animally cunning, both theatrical and sincere. And though her sincerity is logical as an agent of nature, her theatricality speaks to her human side with its desires for artificiality. Just as nature is characterized by contradictions, so is Sosnovskaya.

Sosnovskaya also plays some very dangerous games with the gentlemen who visit her by threatening to kill herself in various ways unless one of her callers immediately kisses her. While these might simply be seen as peculiar jokes for another eccentric actress, these cannot necessarily be taken as idle threats given Sosnovskaya’s penchant for death-obsessed literature and philosophy. Among the notes in her “diary” there are two entries of the utmost importance. First is an unattributed quote, “Not to be born is the first stroke of luck; the second is to return as quickly as possible to non-existence” (*Не родиться – первое счастье, второе же поскорее возвратиться к небытию*)

(5:276), which, if she indeed believed this statement, would begin to explain her preoccupation with death. Since she has been born and is alive, the “best happiness” is unavailable to her, so she must take advantage of the “second best” option, to “quickly return to non-existence.” Thus, in order to encourage this impulse to “return to non-existence” and surround herself with death in the meantime, she adorns her love nest with black cloth and draperies and hangs weapons of all sorts on the walls of the room in which she will ultimately die. The most important of the notes in her diary, however, explains how she fills her time before embracing death.

“Only love or death,” Sosnovskaya writes. She goes on to say “And how am I to die, when I love life like one possessed?” (*А как же умереть, когда я, как бесноватая, люблю жизнь?*) (5:276). She herself sets up the contradiction that in many ways defines her character: consumed as she is by both love and death, which is she to choose? In her relationship with Elagin, it would seem that she resolves this contradiction by achieving death through love and love through death: she finds a receptive spiritual mate in Elagin who is capable of killing her and speeding along her “return to non-being,” and through a death which she perceives as meaningful or predestined, she finds the kind of eternal love that was lacking in her affairs with the multitude of nameless gentlemen callers. Though examination of the relationship between love and death, as it originated in 19th-century Romanticism, is a feature of many early 20th-century works with modernist tendencies, Bunin’s conception of this relationship in his artistic philosophy was all his own.

Sosnovskaya rather subtly equates life and love in these statements, an equation with which Bunin himself would likely agree. In fact, given her ecstasy both in relationships with men and with physical objects such as the polar bear pelt that Elagin

sends her, it would seem that the most vivid aspects of life for her are sensual in nature. This sensitivity to sensuality in all its forms is seen by Woodward as a feature of those people who are “in tune” with nature, which supports the idea that Sosnovskaya is very attuned to nature, as one of her agents. Through physical love, Sosnovskaya finds brief moments of unity with nature and retreat from the otherwise “socially degenerate” world around her.

Indeed, Elagin himself may find similar moments of clarity in his time spent with Sosnovskaya. In their testimony regarding Elagin, one of his comrades states that “After beginning his affair with Sosnovskaya, he was greatly changed. He always went to great lengths to hide his feelings for her from everyone, but he was often lost in thought, gloomy, and said he had assured himself of his intent to commit suicide...” (*Вступив в связь с Сосновской, чувства к которой он всегда чрезвычайно старался скрыть от всех, очень изменился: часто бывал задумчив, печален, говорил, что утверждается в намерении покончить с собой...*) (5:274). While he had previously been prone to the same kind of mood swings as Sosnovskaya, once Elagin becomes involved with her, he is more consistently introverted and preoccupied with thoughts of suicide. Certainly, as with much of their relationship, the motivations for Elagin and Sosnovskaya’s behavior are subject to debate – Bunin intended it to be so. However, one possible reading of Elagin’s response to his affair with Sosnovskaya is that his physical intimacy with her gives him moments of clarity which allow him to understand the “social degeneracy” in his wastrel lifestyle. This, in turn, convinced him that suicide was the only solution to his dilemma. And beyond their initial physical intimacy, Elagin and Sosnovskaya complete the symbolism of their search for unity in their secret wedding, which unites them as one

on yet another spiritual level. Whereas he had glimpses of such an understanding before meeting Sosnovskaya, he sustains this clarity by abandoning himself to his primal instincts in Sosnovskaya's arms. As D.J. Richards notes in regard to the theme of love in Bunin's works, sexual love "highlights human limitations and frailties and brings into sharp relief man's helpless dependence on the vagaries of fate and the mysterious workings of his own soul" (166). That is, sexual love acts as a kind of light of understanding in a life that is dark and seems to deprive man of his agency. Bunin himself hints at this phenomenon of contrasting extremes through the narrator early in the story.

The narrator is describing the simple, even banal, scene of Likharyov's rooms, when he says "As this always happens – that when something unusual happens amidst the usual, it is all the more horrible" (*Как всегда это бывает, когда среди обычного случается что-нибудь необычное, тем ужаснее*) (5:261). He is referring in this comment to the horrible shock that Elagin's fellow officers will receive when the relative peace of their post-revelry morning is broken by Elagin's arrival and confession to his crime. But this statement is also easily applied to life in a larger sense in Bunin's works – banal, quotidian life is made all the more horrible when compared with fleeting moments of true happiness.²⁷

Richards also notes that "On the one hand [Bunin's] lovers are victims of fate – circumstances, social conventions, their own psychology, etc. – and on the other they are subscribing, willingly or not, to his values, according to which moments of poetic rapture are a supreme good, come what may" (166). Elagin and Sosnovskaya certainly see themselves as victims of fate in the form of social mores, and it is clear through their

²⁷ See Bunin's "The Son," "Heinrich" («Генрих»), or "Sunstroke" for excellent examples of this.

interactions that they value their physical love above all else, so they do seem to subscribe to Bunin's belief that physical love is perhaps the most meaningful and pleasurable aspect of human life. They even see death as the only viable option when the legitimization of their love seems impossible. Their association of death with sexual love may be a product of nature's influence on their psychology, since death is a liberation from the flesh and a path to unity with nature for Bunin.²⁸ This similarity connects Elagin and Sosnovskaya to Bunin's greater tradition while allowing the particular circumstances of *The Elagin Affair* to further develop the essence and significance of man's relationship to nature in his artistic philosophy.

ii. Elagin

James Woodward correctly identifies the matter of man's relationship to nature as one of the central features of Bunin's artistic philosophy. He notes that "The type of hero whom Bunin most favored exists in body alone. His responses to life are entirely instinctive and sensual, and his proximity to nature is the criterion by which his health is measured" (20). Woodward extends this analysis, observing that perhaps the most common source of suffering and tragedy in Bunin's works is the inability of man to realize his insignificance before nature and his powerlessness before "certain immutable, organic things about which nothing can be done – death, sickness, love" (Bunin, qtd. in Woodward 20). Examining Elagin through this almost atavistic prism gives some insight into his true character.

²⁸ Khodasevich notes that "The subject of Bunin's observation and study is not the psychological, but the irrational side of love, its incomprehensible essence, which...carries the heroes to meet fate." (БУНИН: Собрание сочинений, 1934, p. 4) For more on Bunin's conception of death and its relationship to love, see his non-fiction work "The Liberation of Tolstoy" (1937) and the short story "Night" (1925, written within a month of *Elagin*).

While much of Elagin's behavior is motivated by his physical desire for Sosnovskaya, he engages in a great deal of introspection, more than one would expect for someone who is "entirely instinctive and sensual." Elagin reveals, perhaps unintentionally, that he was very preoccupied with quantifying their feelings for each other when he and Sosnovskaya first become acquainted: "At some times it seemed to me that she loved me even more than I her, and at other times it seemed quite the opposite" (*Порой мне казалось, что она любит меня даже больше, чем я ее, а порой – наоборот*) (5:282). When Sosnovskaya's feelings toward him appear to cool, it seems that he affects a change in her attitude toward him when he "began to adopt a cold restraint in his behavior towards her" (*начал усваивать себе холодную сдержанность в обращении с нею*) (5:283). She appears to be intrigued and attracted to the same fickleness in him that he finds so enchanting in her. The difference, however, is that his fickleness seems to be actively affected, and thus more intentional, more calculated than Sosnovskaya's, which appears to simply be her natural state of being. This disingenuous fickleness suggests that Elagin is not the instinctive and sincere protagonist that Woodward proposes as ideally Buninian, i.e., he is a "degenerate" from the ideal. The artifice of Sosnovskaya's chosen profession exhibits this same insincerity, another consequence of the duality of her role. Though Woodward very aptly describes the relationship between man and nature as seen in Bunin's works, he draws one unjust conclusion in his explicit discussion of *The Elagin Affair* when he says that it offers a counterpoint to Bunin's "The Son."

"The Son" («СЫН», 1916) is the story of the rather unremarkable middle-aged Mme. Marot, a wife and mother, who develops feelings for a young man, the son of one

of her friends.²⁹ The story is often interpreted as being about an affair between a man and a woman, though the text also supports an interpretation of motherly love, rather than romantic love. After lengthy descriptions of Mme. Marot's quotidian existence, Marot rather suddenly and decisively guides Emile to kill her, with the intention that he would then kill himself. But like Elagin, Emile fails to kill himself.

Woodward asserts that Elagin and Sosnovskaya are "rebels" against nature like Mitya in *Mitya's Love*, while Emile and Mme. Marot submit themselves to nature, and that the similarities in the circumstances of the two intended murder/suicides are meant to underline the fundamental differences between the two sets of protagonists. He sees both Elagin and Sosnovskaya as "rebels against their biological and social heritage with which their spiritual needs are as incompatible as those of Mitya with the love of Alenka" (204). Woodward sees their desire to "withdraw from the chain" as a rebellion against nature. He concedes, however, that they fulfill their spiritual needs through their love, unlike Mitya and Alenka, though he believes that nature condemns them to death because of their rebellion against it. First of all, to come to such a definite conclusion about Elagin and Sosnovskaya is too reductive – part of Bunin's message in the text is that it is almost impossible to pinpoint human motivations and psychology. Also, Woodward's assessment of Elagin and Sosnovskaya totally ignores the characteristics noted here that support an interpretation of Sosnovskaya as the hand of nature and Elagin as a "degenerate" who finds meaning and unity with her. If Elagin and Sosnovskaya do find meaning through sexual love, then it is because they realize their insignificance before

²⁹ Interestingly, "The Son" is based on a real-life murder scandal c.1890, just as is *Elagin*. See Albert Wehrle, "Bunin's Story 'A Son' and the Chambige Case." Though I disagree with Woodward's conclusion that *Elagin* is a kind of counterpoint to "The Son," it is clearly closely related both by the source of its inspiration and by its themes of death and love.

forces far greater than themselves, and thus they submit to nature. In the same way, they desire unity with nature through the same destructive impulse that is found in nature itself. They seek what Stepun describes in regard to other works as “the ‘naturalization of man,’ the dissolution of man in nature.”³⁰ So while Woodward’s theory of “degeneracy” in Bunin’s work has serious merit, it seems he has misinterpreted *Elagin* in respect to this theory. Elagin and Sosnovskaya may be “degenerate,” both socially and inherently, at the onset of their affair, but they find a path to regeneration by submitting to nature’s will, not rebelling against it.

To confirm that they submit to nature, the reader need only recall that fateful note found with Sosnovskaya’s body – “I die not by my own will” (*умираю не по собственной воле*) (5:267). The prosecutor’s assumption, and perhaps that of the narrator and the reader, is that Sosnovskaya means she dies by Elagin’s will, rather than her own. However, I suggest that it is also possible that if she has surrendered herself to nature, then it is by nature’s will that she dies. The fact that Elagin actually carries out her murder is a result of his own surrender to nature’s will. He may have killed her not according to his own will, either. This explains his statement at the end of the story that, though he may be guilty before the laws of God and man, he is not guilty before her, for he has done only what was required of him by nature and by his love.

Elagin’s failure to carry out his suicide, likewise, has many possible explanations. He says that he was overwhelmed by “total indifference” after her murder, that he is now indifferent to the very fact that he is alive. This is consistent with the theory that Sosnovskaya is used by nature to guide them back to their primal, physical status, even if that means uniting with nature through death. If Sosnovskaya’s influence allows Elagin

³⁰ Woodward, “Eros and Nirvana in the Art of Bunin,” p.578.

to overcome his degeneracy, then killing his link to nature and inner peace causes Elagin to lose that connection to instinctual action and return to the degenerate state from which he suffered before meeting Sosnovskaya. He is overtaken by “total indifference” because he has experienced intensely passionate love and now understands how insignificant and banal life is without his conduit to nature’s influence, Sosnovskaya. This indifference is not the same as the indifference of nature, which behaves without regard to human concerns; Elagin’s indifference after the murder is coupled with total inaction for several hours – he is indifferent to *his own* existence as well as that of others.

There is tremendous tragic irony in Elagin’s murder of Sosnovskaya. He is driven by his desire to find unity with nature, first through Sosnovskaya and then, ostensibly, by “withdrawing from the chain,” freeing them both from their physical bodies and becoming one with nature spiritually. However, in attempting to release Sosnovskaya the woman from her earthly existence, he also cuts off his connection with Sosnovskaya the agent of nature by murdering her, leaving him incapable of completing his plans as he finds himself in what could be called a state of mental shock. The effect of Bunin depicting this irony may be to suggest to readers that, while nature and man are, and should be, inextricably linked, murder/suicide is, on the level of common sense, surely the wrong course of action in one’s attempt to find unity with nature; on the symbolic level, however, the motivations for their actions are more consistent with their beliefs and with Bunin’s artistic philosophy. Nevertheless, even if death actually and permanently frees them from the “inherent degeneracy” of their physical existences, it does so at the expense of the temporary physical love which also allows them to find unity with nature. Thus, the tragic irony of Elagin’s mental shock which prevents him from carrying out

their plans in full may signify, yet again, the paramount importance of physical love in Bunin's art.

The emotional and psychological extremes exhibited by Sosnovskaya and Elagin, as well as their struggles with love and self-destruction, speak to another feature of the story – the unusual (for Bunin) undercurrent of Dostoevsky and his works. What begins on the level of the characters continues on the level of the intent of the work within Bunin's artistic philosophy. So in order to complete our understanding of the overall effect of the work, we now turn to Dostoevsky.

Chapter 3

Bunin and Dostoevsky's Footsteps

One facet of the story with which many readers struggle, and which in some ways is the most surprising feature of the work, is the strong Dostoevskian vein in the story.³¹ Robert Bowie makes note of several characteristics of *Elagin* for which he believes Bunin owed a debt to Dostoevsky. The narrator, a “local resident who takes an interest in a local scandal” (Bowie, 668-669), is not dissimilar to the narrator of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Much like the narrator of that work, the thoughts and speech of Bunin’s narrator are very tightly woven into the quoted testimonies of other characters. Here, the narrator also repeatedly makes the point that multiple logical (and often mutually exclusive) explanations exist for Elagin and Sosnovskaya’s behavior; “everything cuts both ways,” as one reads in *Crime and Punishment*. Bowie concludes his discussion of *Elagin* by saying that “Somehow [Bunin] felt out of his element in *Elagin*.” Though he is correct to note the similarities between *Elagin* and Dostoevsky’s novels, Bowie perhaps stops short of acknowledging the full significance and nature of these similarities.

In an article addressing Bunin’s relationship to Dostoevsky in two improvisational oral stories, Yuri Lotman makes a number of observations which also prove valid in relation to *Elagin*. First, he suggests that Bunin frequently takes an element from a

³¹ In a letter dated May 28, 1891 to E.M. Shavrova, Anton Chekhov, one of Bunin’s literary idols, made the following remark regarding the Bartenev/Wisnowska case: “...в таком сложном абсурде, как жизнь бедняжки Висновской, мог бы разобраться разве один только Достоевский” (4:238). It is ultimately irrelevant whether Bunin knew of this comment, but the fact that Chekhov would note, like Bunin, the Dostoevskian vein of the story helps to validate Bunin’s choice to use this story as raw material for a unique, original work dealing with themes that are central to Bunin’s works as a whole.

classical work (even one which he dislikes himself) and by repurposing it in his own poetic world, he creates something new and distinctly his own. Lotman discusses this phenomenon regarding Bunin's stance to 19th-century Russian literature in general. He contends that Bunin "creates his artistic position as a defense of the classic tradition of Russian literature" by "rewriting" (*переписывая*) authors and poets of that period "afresh" (*заново*). Frequently, the "lyrical motive" of a story can stem from a few lines of Fet, Zhukovsky, Baratynsky or even Tolstoy. Among the more well-established examples of Bunin's drive to rewrite his predecessors are "Sunstroke" (from Chekhov's "The Lady with the Little Dog")³² and *Mitya's Love* (potentially from a number of Tolstoy's works).³³

In these two oral improvisations recorded by Irina Odoevtseva, Bunin takes his "inspiration" from an unusual source for him, Dostoevsky. For Bunin, Dostoevsky was the "Petersburg writer," whose works exist outside of nature and its beauty. Stepun observes that in Dostoevsky, nature is "spiritualized" or "humanized," while in Bunin, it is man that is "naturalized."³⁴ Bunin himself believed that Dostoevsky "did not have the gift to see and describe nature."³⁵ In the first of these two stories, Bunin transforms the image of a moonlit night from *Crime and Punishment* into "an active participant of the love scenes, a space for love" (Lotman 3:182-183). I suggest that, in *Elagin*, Bunin

³² For one examination of this connection, see Richard Porter's "Bunin's 'A Sunstroke' and Chekhov's 'The Lady with the Dog.'" *South Atlantic Bulletin* 42 (1977): 51-56.

³³ Lotman, 3: 172. Lotman notes that Gorky made the connection between *Mitya's Love* and *The Kreutzer Sonata*, and both Gorky and Shklovsky noted Bunin's "ориентация...на трех великих классиков." Woodward calls Gorky's assessment of *Mitya's Love* "totally misguided", and notes that the story has greater resonance with Tolstoy's *The Devil*, though Bunin apparently had never read it (see Woodward, "Eros and Nirvana in the Art of Bunin," p. 583; also Bitsilli, p. 280).

³⁴ Qtd. in Woodward, *Ivan Bunin*, p. 22.

³⁵ Qtd. in Lotman, p. 173.

seems to be further developing a Dostoevskian theme with which he began to struggle almost ten years earlier in “Noosiform Ears”: that of “crime without punishment.”

In “Noosiform Ears” («Петлистые уши», 1917), Bunin presents a very striking and frightening character in Adam Sokolovich. Unlike Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov, who struggles and is consumed by his crime and its consequences (his punishment), Sokolovich murders perhaps an even more innocent woman than Raskolnikov, apparently with no moral reservations or regrets, and then the story abruptly ends. The fact that Sokolovich explicitly refers to Dostoevsky’s novel – and very condescendingly, at that – is no small wink and nudge to the reader that Bunin is addressing his nemesis’ familiar themes. Unlike the end of *Crime and Punishment* in which Raskolnikov finds absolution and redemption for his sins through suffering and Christianity, the reader can never know what happens to Sokolovich. In the world of the story, his crime comes without any moral repercussions. Indeed, one might even question the degree to which the murder is even considered a crime, which also recalls Raskolnikov’s question regarding the “extraordinary man,” a human for whom anything is permissible and earthly laws are not applicable. In this respect, Sokolovich can even appear to be an answer to Svidrigailov, Raskolnikov’s “double” who lacks the latter’s conscience. In fact, Svidrigailov ultimately commits suicide, presumably because he can no longer bear the burden of his crimes, so Sokolovich proves to be at least as monstrous in his apparently remorseless murder of the prostitute Korol’kova. Bowie, along with Thomas Gaiton Marullo, suggests that in “Noosiform Ears,” Bunin offers a rather scathing parody of Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, depicting the kind of character who commits “crimes without any kind of punishment at all” (4:389). This connection is significant because it not only

offers precedent for what will be seen in *Elagin*, but because the connections between “Noosiform Ears” and *The Elagin Affair* will prove to be very enlightening themselves.

There are a number of similarities between the protagonists of the two stories, Sokolovich and Elagin, though their physical characteristics are profoundly different. Sokolovich is described as large and powerful, but he is also “ungainly” (*нескладный*, 4:386) and has awkwardly long arms, legs, and feet. Elagin is short, “puny” (*щуплый*, 5:262), and freckled, and he also has “unusually thin legs” (*необыкновенно тонкие ноги*, 5:262). In short, both protagonists are described rather unflatteringly. Moreover, both characters are referred to at some point as “degenerates”: Sokolovich calls himself a *выродок* (“degenerate”, black sheep), while the narrator of *Elagin* quotes the prosecutor as referring to Elagin’s “degenerate features.”

Marullo goes further and suggests that, in addition to his physical features, even Sokolovich’s name speaks to his “degeneracy.” “As Adam he recalls the sinful father of 'mankind'; as Sokolovich, he evokes the image of a *sokol* or “falcon,” intimating that he has striven for the ideal, but, like Icarus, has perished in the attempt.”³⁶ This connection to Icarus seems rather tenuous in my opinion. While the origin of Sokolovich’s name in the word *sokol* is clear, there may be other layers of meaning in his name. Bunin has a very sensitive ear for the sounds of words as well as their lexical meanings and register; *sokol* could come not just from “falcon”, but from the sounds of “-skol-” in “Raskolnikov”, meaning that Sokolovich is, in a way, “son of Raskolnikov.”³⁷ This makes the connection to and renunciation of Sokolovich’s progenitor still more explicit,

³⁶ Marullo, “Crime without Punishment: Ivan Bunin’s ‘Loopy Ears.’” p. 617.

³⁷ Of course, the etymology of Raskolnikov’s name from *raskol* (split) is also pertinent here, as it can speak to the conflict that Elagin feels in his life, as well.

as Sokolovich does not suffer from Raskolnikov's indecisiveness. However, even though both male protagonists are described physically as degenerates, the trajectories of their emotional and psychological degeneracy diverge rather significantly in the course of their respective stories.³⁸

Though Sokolovich and Elagin initially suffer from a similar degeneracy, they subsequently develop very differently. Elagin seems to struggle with his place in the world before meeting Sosnovskaya, a "playboy" (*прожигатель*, 5:271), "crazy...from an idle, rowdy life" (*ошалелый...от праздной, разнузданной жизни*, 5:272) as his defense attorney refers to him. But after falling for Sosnovskaya and experiencing the sincere love of which only a man connected to nature is capable, he wishes to remain with her to maintain his connection to nature to make his earthly life more bearable. Sokolovich's degeneracy, however, rampages unchecked. He does not appear to see anything positive in the world around him, let alone find love in himself for other human beings. Woodward even concludes that the detail of Sokolovich being a "former sailor" is significant because it suggests that he has abandoned the sea, one of the most potent sources of nature's life-force.³⁹ This is a critical detail, for it completes not only Sokolovich's physical degeneracy, but also his moral degeneracy. He shows no overt remorse for the murder, as he settles up his bill with the innkeeper and rejoins the crowds of workers in the gloomy St. Petersburg morning. Though Elagin claims to be seized by "total indifference" after the murder and does not explicitly express remorse, he also does

³⁸ Though the analysis here is confined to the connections between the two male protagonists, Marullo makes the excellent observation that "by equating desire with self-destruction, she [Korol'kova] foreshadows Bunin's Sosnovskaia in *The Elagin Affair*" ("Crime without Punishment," 621).

³⁹ Woodward, *Ivan Bunin: A Study of His Fiction*, p. 122.

not seamlessly reintegrate into society, nor does it seem that he would have had he not confessed and been arrested and tried for the murder. Thus, Elagin is able to overcome his social degeneracy, and attempt to find unity with Sosnovskaya and “dissolve” into nature, while Sokolovich shows no such development and remains, in the end, as “degenerate” as he was in the beginning.

Ultimately, one must consider the possibility that, just as “Noosiform Ears” was meant as a parody of *Crime and Punishment*, Bunin intended *The Elagin Affair* not simply as an experiment with Dostoevskian themes, but as a corrective to them. One of the most telling features of the story in this regard is actually one that is absent in its final published form. *Elagin* was originally published with a final chapter in which Elagin is convicted and sentenced to ten years of penal servitude, not unlike Raskolnikov’s eight year-sentence in *Crime and Punishment*. However, in preparing *Elagin* for publication in the collection *The Knotted Ears and other stories* (Петлистые уши и другие рассказы), Bunin excised the chapter in which Elagin is convicted,⁴⁰ thus ending the story with Elagin’s exclamation that “No! I may be guilty before the laws of man, I may be guilty before God, but not in her eyes!” (*Нет, нет! Может быть, я виноват перед людским законом, виноват перед богом, но не перед ней!*) (5:296). Ending the story this way, with no resolution, achieves a more pointed effect on the reader and also adheres more closely to the style for which Bunin became famous.

In fact, there is a precedent for precisely this type of editing decision in “Noosiform Ears.” Bunin worked on a number of variations of “Noosiform Ears” in

⁴⁰ Bunin, Соб. соч., 5: 527.

which the story in its published form was only the beginning of the tale.⁴¹ Among the various continuations of the story are those in which Sokolovich is caught after the crime and brazenly recounts the murder to the policemen who arrive, one in which Sokolovich successfully escapes after the murder and subsequently sends a rather gruesome description of the murder and his thoughts about it,⁴² and yet another in which Sokolovich is eventually arrested and then, in his written statement to the police, frames his account of his actions as “The plot for a small novel as the consequence of human cowardice never before seen in humane literature” (*Сюжет для небольшого романа, вследствие человеческой трусости еще не появлявшегося в изящной литературе*) (4:494). The irony of Sokolovich acknowledging that he is a fictional character and suggesting that his actions are somehow a consequence of human cowardice never before seen in “humane literature” is difficult to underestimate. Needless to say, “Noosiform Ears” would be a significantly different work had any of these variants been part of the final published version of the story. Just as is the case with *Elagin*, the material that was eventually removed (or simply never included) is enlightening both in its own right and because of its ultimate exclusion.

Many of Bunin’s stories of this period make use of very abrupt or oblique endings to achieve a heightened sense of suspense and then shock on the reader (e.g., “The Cranes” («Журавли»), “The Calf’s Head” («Телячья головка»), as well as many stories in *Dark Avenues*). Though a thorough exploration of this element of Bunin’s poetics is beyond the scope of this paper, one effect of this technique in this work is that the

⁴¹ Ibid, 4:492.

⁴² In this variant, Sokolovich refers to Korol’kova’s corpse as having been suffocated by his “paw,” a physically atavistic, “degenerate” detail which is surely not coincidental (Ibid, 4:493).

boundaries of *Elagin*'s world are very sharply defined. The story begins with the narrator's descriptions of the events to follow as both "very simple" and "very complex" and his statement that Cornet Elagin's case resembles both a "dime novel" and the plot of a "profound literary work." And in its final form, the story ends with Elagin's assertion of his innocence "before her eyes," even if he may also be guilty before man and God. Though the woman to whom he refers here is presumed to be Sosnovskaya, he could also be referring to nature, which is also grammatically feminine in Russian. If Bunin is suggesting that the two protagonists are acting as conduits for nature's influence in the story, it would follow that Elagin should not feel guilty before nature and her laws; in fact, he should – and the vehemence of his assertions suggest that he does – feel that he has done his duty as prescribed to him by nature. The symmetry of the unfinalizability of both the opening and closing passages in the story's final form is much more powerful than the story's original published form and speaks very strongly to Bunin's motivation to excise the original last chapter and strengthen the corrective aspect of the story as a whole.

In my opinion, there is yet another interpretation of Bunin's decision to excise the final chapter and end the story with Elagin's testimony, one which reflects both Bunin's connection to classic 19th-century Russian literature and also his departure from that tradition. Lotman describes a dominant theme, a "narrative link" based in mythology, between many works and authors of the 19th-century – that of resurrection. In many classical myths, the hero may die, travel to hell, and then emerge from hell a new, changed man. Lotman suggests that this pattern of "death, hell, resurrection" is transformed into one of "transgression, exile to Siberia, resurrection," especially in the

works of Gogol and Dostoevsky.⁴³ I suggest that Bunin may be engaging this idea (offering his corrective) with *Elagin*.

In the original ending of *Elagin*, the reader is presented not only with Elagin's conviction – confirmation of his transgression – but also his sentence: ten years at hard labor (*каморза*).⁴⁴ Following the mythological trajectory, Elagin's resurrection would be all but guaranteed. By removing the conclusion of Elagin's guilt along with the final chapter, Bunin also eliminates the possibility of resurrection for his protagonist. He does not do this solely to distinguish Elagin from the Dostoevskian protagonists to whom he is related; Bunin may be using Elagin to explicitly illustrate the lack of this concept of resurrection in his works.

Just as love, especially atavistic, unrestrained love, casts the banality of everyday life into sharp relief, death reminds us of the fragility of life and the importance of those intense, albeit often brief, emotions (especially brief in Bunin's fiction). For Bunin to suggest that there is even the possibility of another kind of existence after death, even the figurative death of penal exile, would be to betray the significance of life. For him, life, both its exalted moments of ecstasy and its otherwise menial, quotidian features, is significant precisely because it is all we can be sure that we have, and when it is over, there may be nothing left. To promise more than that would be dishonest and disrespectful of life itself.

⁴³ For a better understanding of Gogol's intentions with the lost second volume of *Dead Souls*, see Yuri Mann, *В поисках живой души: «Мертвые души»: писатель – критика – читатель*, Moscow: 1984.

⁴⁴ As one last note on "Noosiform Ears": in one of the variant endings, Sokolovich is described as "one of those few who break their backs at hard labor (*каморза*), and one of the very many who walk free", which serves as yet another example of Bunin's denial of resurrection for these characters.

In short, the most probable explanation for Bunin's excision of this chapter is as a response to what some see as the shortcomings of *Crime and Punishment*. Dostoevsky's artistic (and perhaps theological) decision to include an epilogue, in which he reveals Raskolnikov's "death" through penal labor and subsequent "resurrection," destroys the ambivalence and suspense that make the rest of the novel so successful by ending a polyphonic work with a monological conclusion.⁴⁵ In similar fashion, Bunin's original inclusion of a chapter that resolves the plot, even while allowing for multiple interpretations of the events, does find Elagin guilty, even if only "before the laws of man." By removing this chapter, Bunin contains the world of the story only to the recapitulation of the events through the court proceedings, thus leaving the readers to come to their own conclusions (or not to come to *any* conclusion) about Elagin and Sosnovskaya's actions and their consequences; he thus allows the work to remain "polyphonic" throughout, to an extent. This final ending is more faithful to one of the themes of the story, that of ambiguity. If Bunin indeed intended this story as a corrective to *Crime and Punishment*, it would appear that he succeeded in creating a story that struggles with the same theme of irresolvable ambiguity but – appropriately – does not come to any final conclusions on its own.

It is truly remarkable that Bunin chose to tackle some of the features that defined Dostoevsky's art in *Elagin*: narrative polyphony and the unfinalizability of man (in Bakhtin's understanding of these terms), as well as the extremes of human emotion. Perhaps, even though his public comments regarding Dostoevsky and his works always displayed some cynicism for the much-lauded author, Bunin did come to appreciate the

⁴⁵ See chapter one of Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* («Проблемы поэтики Достоевского»).

poetics of the Dostoevskian text. Of course, even if that is the case, Bunin's work on *Elagin* clearly shows that he felt he could contribute something to this discourse on irresolvable ambiguity and make his own mark, as he did with the works of many other authors from the 19th century.

In the end, *The Elagin Affair* will always be an anomaly to a certain degree; many aspects of this story are undeniably "un-Buninian." However, by examining *Elagin* on the levels of style, characterization, and its manifestation of Bunin's creative philosophy, one can see that the story has as many features in common with the rest of Bunin's oeuvre as it does distinctive, singular ones. Though the style of the work is somewhat idiosyncratic, it nevertheless fits within Bunin's accepted canon when its elements of narration, modernism, and occasional moments of poetic language are taken into account. Once Sosnovskaya is understood as an agent of nature's influence in an otherwise sterile environment, the relationship between the characters and nature becomes clear and fits very neatly with Bunin's creative philosophy as expressed in other works. And the surprising Dostoevskian vein of the story can be understood when it is connected to precedents of similar themes in earlier works. Shklovsky, as early as 1915, wrote, "Recently, Bunin is again at a crossroads. He is clearly drawn to new genres, to a new theme, to a different, less typical style" and, in referencing Bunin's poem "A Calling" («Зов»), in which Bunin writes of his call to "new wanderings" (*новые скитанья*), Shklovsky asks "What will he find in these new wanderings?" *Elagin* is surely an example of the new genres, themes, and style which Shklovsky noted were in Bunin's future. In short, *Elagin* is very consistent with Bunin's overall artistic philosophy, and

the “un-Buninian” features of the story can all be traced to other individual works of Bunin’s, so *Elagin*’s true peculiarity is its combination of all these features in a single work.

The Elagin Affair deserves to be accepted as part of Bunin’s standard canon, for not only does it explore the same themes and wrestle with the same questions as more accepted works like *Mitya’s Love*, “Sunstroke,” “Noosiform Ears,” “Light Breathing,” or even *Dark Avenues* and *The Life of Arseniev*, it does so in fascinatingly different ways which can help to illuminate Bunin’s creative philosophy more fully and illustrate the complexity of his talent to new generations of readers.

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