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Bunin’s “Petlistye ushi”:
The Deformation of a Byronic Rebel

It is a commonplace of Bunin criticism that the “darkest” period of his work was from 1909 to 1912. However, in 1916 Ivan Bunin wrote one of the grimmest and most unusual works of his entire career—the short story “Petlistye ushi.” Written at a time when Bunin was torn by growing anger and anxiety over the course of World War I in Europe, the story contains a harsh vision of human callousness and brutality. The plot of this strange piece is simple. The protagonist, Adam Sokolovich, a former sailor with an obscure past, wanders about St. Petersburg until evening, when he enters a tavern and engages in a long conversation with two sailors. Here he sets forth his conviction that a lust for violence exists in everyone, and he accuses society of condoning war while condemning murder. He then leaves the tavern, picks up a prostitute on the street, and accompanies her to a flophouse on the outskirts of town, where he murders her in cold blood. At the end of the story he leaves the scene calm and composed.

Although the plot of the story is straightforward, its meaning is elusive. Puzzled by Sokolovich’s cold crime, an urban setting that is uncharacteristic of Bunin’s work, and the lack of a clear moral to the tale, Bunin’s critics have arrived at a variety of interpretations for “Petlistye ushi.” A. Volkov, for example, states that the work is an exploration of the Freudian “instinct for aggression,” but he also confesses to see in the work “a certain element of mystification.” Serge Kryzytski, on the other hand, declares flatly that Sokolovich is “a degenerate sex-maniac, a sort of ‘Boston Strangler.’” Probing more deeply into the story, Albert Wehrle finds it to be a study in “Thanatos” with Sokolovich “a philosophical dead-end... existing in a ‘no-man’s land’ between sensual self-awareness and self-forgetfulness.”

None of these explanations, however, fully comes to terms with the breadth of Bunin’s vision in “Petlistye ushi.” Part of the problem is that Bunin’s critics tend to underestimate the character of Sokolovich. Coupling his murder of a
prostitute with his statement that one is drawn more readily to the murder of a woman than a man, it is easy to characterize Sokolovich as a degenerate and to go no farther. This is a mistake, however. Certainly Sokolovich’s remarks reveal abnormal feelings toward women, but these remarks are outweighed by the sheer bulk of his comments on society as a whole. His rational attack on society’s hypocrisy and war spans three pages, and to evaluate properly Sokolovich’s crime, one must consider his remarks on this wider topic as well as his views on women. Sokolovich’s incisive, detailed arguments about the failings of society are not the incoherent ravings of a madman, but rather the logical exposition of an intellectual iconoclast. His vision is unconventional, but his defense of it is passionate and sincere. Adding further probity to this character is the fact that certain of Sokolovich’s statements, particularly those on the war in Europe, are consistent with opinions held by Bunin himself, and thus it becomes more difficult to dismiss the character as completely crazed or irrational.  

Rather than looking to Freud or to an abstract ontological theory for an explanation of “Petlistye ushi,” then, one should explore the possibility that Bunin has drawn Sokolovich as a rebel, and that his angry words and perverse deed are in fact a form of defiance against the authority of a society that he perceives to be unjust. There is precedent for such an assumption in Bunin’s prior work: in his translations from Byron and in his own poetry during the previous decade, Bunin had treated the figure of the rebel in a variety of settings and situations.  

Curiously, neither Bunin’s deep interest in the work of Lord Byron nor his interest in the rebel figure have received more than passing commentary in the criticism of his work. Yet for Bunin, the dramatic struggles of the Byronic rebel represented the high aspirations of a suffering humanity, and from

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5. Another indication that ideological factors outweigh sexual ones arises from a study of the very origins of Bunin’s story. V. Afanas’ev has pointed out that Bunin seems to have based his work on an actual crime that had occurred in St. Petersburg in 1909, in which the perpetrator, Nikolai Radkevich, revealed a ferocity unmatched by Bunin’s protagonist. Like Sokolovich, Radkevich strangled a prostitute in a cheap hotel outside Petersburg, but unlike Sokolovich, he then stabbed her in the chest and abdomen thirty-five times, leaving the sofa and tables in pools of blood. In “Petlistye ushi” Bunin has significantly reduced the sensational and psychopathic aspects of the incident. There is no blood in his story, no evidence of savage mutilation, and no indication of prior crimes. The image of the murderer as a deviant remains in Bunin’s story, but his sexual deviance recedes before his ideological deviance.  


6. Most scholars, in the West as well as in the Soviet Union, have pursued Bunin’s links to other Russian writers such as Chekhov, Gor’kii, and Tolstoi, and have thus overlooked his interest in West European literature.