Structure and Subjectivity in the Early "Philosophical" Tales of Bunin

Against the background of the diverse forms which the short story assumed in the hands of Ivan Bunin in the course of his unusually long literary career, one is struck by the consistent application of a principle of composition which gives his art a quite distinctive character in the history of Russian prose fiction. It may perhaps be most adequately summarised by the terms "segmental structure" or "bloc technique". The essential features of this technique may be observed on every level of his art, including that of the individual sentence. An extract from one of the many complex sentences in Господин из Сан-Франциско (1915) may serve as an example:

Океан с гулом ходил за стеной черными горами, вьюга крепко свистала в отягелевших снегах, пароход весь дрожал, одолевая и ее, и эти горы — точно плутом разваливая на сторону их зыбкие, то и дело вскипавшие и высоко взвивавшиеся пенистыми хвостами громады — в смертной тоске стенала удущаемая туманом сирена, мерзли от стужи и шалели от непосильного напряжения внимания вахтенные на своей высше...  

The first noteworthy feature of this extract is the element of symmetry in its structure. A marked tendency towards triple arrangement is visible in the disposition of clauses ("Океан... ходил...", "вьюга... свистала...", "пароход... дрожал...", "стенала...", "мерзли...", "шалели..."). It is not so much the specifically triple arrangement

1. И. А. Бунин, Собрание сочинений в девяти томах (М., 1966), IV, 311. Subsequent references to Bunin’s works will be to volume IV of this edition, and page-numbers will be entered in the text.

2. This observation is consistent with the conclusion reached by А. А. Ачатова on the basis of a study of the early drafts of Господин из Сан-Франциско: “In his attempts to improve the rhythmic organisation of his phrases, the author in some cases replaces in the second manuscript redaction of the story a two-part structure of the sentence with a three-part structure” (А. А. Ачатова, “Из творческой лаборатории И. А. Бунина”, Ученые записки Томского государственного университета имени В. В. Куйбышева, Л [1965], 58). In this connection it might be added that whereas Bunin was normally accustomed to reduce the size of this works in revision, the second variant of Господин из Сан-Франциско is longer by a third than the first, (cf. А. А. Ачатова, “Работа И. Бунина над рассказом ‘Господин из Сан-Франциско.’ По материалам рукописей”, ibid. cit., XLVIII [1964], 61.)
that is significant, however, as the vivid indication provided by this symmetry of the importance attached by the author, even at this structural level, to the manner in which the constituent parts of the whole are ordered and balanced. The second point to be observed is the looseness of the general syntactic structure which binds the component units together. Each unit plays its part in creating the total effect, yet each enjoys the same "apparent independence" that M. Iof'ev discerned in the compositional elements of Bunin's later stories. The extract confirms the recent remark of a Soviet critic that "...basically the complex sentence of Bunin differs only externally or formally from a number of independent simple sentences." No distortion of meaning or even rearrangement of words would result from the division of the extract into five distinct sentences by the insertion of full-stops after «горами,» «насих,» «громады» and «сирена.» The term "segmental structure" is used precisely in reference to this procedure of simply juxtaposing syntactically and semantically independent elements with a view to achieving a determined effect from their unmediated interaction.

In the present inquiry it is our intention to examine certain applications of this technique by Bunin not in the composition of individual sentences, but in the structure of entire stories, i.e., in the organisation of plot-elements. On this level it displays certain affinities with the technique observed by Professor Nilsson in some of Chekhov's later stories, and it may perhaps be viewed as evidence both of a fundamentally poetic sensibility intent on conveying meaning primarily by the suggestive power of juxtaposition, and of a modernistic distaste for the overt sequential logic of the traditional narrative with its characteristic concessions to the reader's passivity. Alternatively, the sheer persistence or continuity of this technique in Bunin's art from the beginning may suggest that it is something more than literary contrivance, that it reflects, in fact, his distinctive manière de voir and the imaginative process itself by which he was naturally disposed to recreate reality. Whichever view is adopted, however, it is not intended to imply that significant evolution was thereby precluded.

Perhaps the most crucial turning-point in the whole of Bunin's literary development came in the year 1912. It is not surprising that the critic E. Koltonovskaia, writing in 1914, was tempted to ascribe

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