

## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1933**



**Ivan Alekseyevich Bunin**

**The Nobel Prize in Literature 1933 was awarded to Ivan Bunin *"for the strict artistry with which he has carried on the classical Russian traditions in prose writing"*.**

Ivan Bunin's literary career has been clear and uncomplicated. He came from a family of country squires and grew up in the literary tradition of the times in which that social class dominated Russian culture, created a literature occupying a place of honour in contemporary Europe, and led to fatal political movements. «The lords of the scrupulous consciences» is what the following generation ironically called these men who, full of indignation and pity, set themselves up against the humiliation of the serfs. They deserved a better name, for they would soon have to pay with their own prosperity for the upheaval that they were going to cause.

Only the debris of the family possessions remained about the young Bunin; it was in the world of poetry that he could feel a strong rapport with the past generations. He lived in a world of illusions without any energy, rather than of national sentiment and hope for

the future. Nonetheless he did not escape the influence of the reform movement; as a student, he was deeply struck by the appeal of Tolstoy's proclaiming fraternity with the humble and poor. Thus he learned like others to live by the toil of his hands, and for his part he chose the craft of cooper in the home of a co-religionist who greatly loved discussion. (He might well have tried a less difficult craft-the staves come apart easily, and it takes much skill to make a vessel that will hold its content.)

For a guide in more spiritual doctrines he had a man who fought with wavering energy against the temptations of the flesh in a very literal sense, and here vegetarianism entered his doctrine. During a voyage with him to Tolstoy's home to be presented to the master - Bunin was able to observe his victories and defeats. He was victorious over several refreshment stands in railroad stations but finally the temptation of the meat pâtés was too strong. Having finished chewing, he found ingenious excuses for his particular fall: «I know, however, that it is not the pâté that holds me in its power but I who hold it. I am not its slave; I eat when I want to; when I don't want to, I don't eat.» It goes without saying that the young student did not want to stay long in this company.

Tolstoy himself did not attach great importance to Bunin's religious zeal. «You wish to live a simple and industrious life? That is good, but don't be priggish about it. One can be an excellent man in all kinds of lives.» And of the profession of poet he said, «Oh well, write if you have a great fancy for it, but remember well that it can never be the goal of your life.» This warning was lost on Bunin; he was already a poet with all his being.

He quickly attracted attention for verses that followed austere classical models; their subject was often descriptions of melancholic beauty of past life in the old manors. At the same time he developed in prose poems his power to render nature with all the fullness and richness of his impressions, having exercised his faculties with an extraordinary subtlety to reproduce them faithfully. Thus he continued the art of the great realists while his contemporaries devoted themselves to the adventures of literary programs: symbolism, neo-naturalism, Adamism, futurism, and other names of such passing phenomena. He remained an isolated man in an extremely agitated era.

When Bunin was forty, his novel *Derévnya* (1910) [*The Village*] made him famous and indeed notorious, for the book provoked a violent discussion. He attacked the essential point of the Russian faith in the future, the Slavophiles' dream of the virtuous and able peasant, through whom the nation must someday cover the world with its shadow. Bunin replied to this thesis with an objective description of the real nature of the peasants' virtues. The result was one of the most sombre and cruel works even in Russian literature, where such works are by no means rare.

The author gives no historical explanation of the decadence of the *muzhikí*, except for the brief information that the grandfather of the two principal characters in the novel was deliberately tracked to death by his master's greyhounds. This deed expresses well, in fact, the imprint borne by the spirit of the suppressed. But Bunin shows them just as they are without hesitating before any horror, and it was easy for him to prove the truthfulness of his severe judgment. Violence of the most cruel kind had recently swept the province in the wake of the first revolution - a foreshadowing of a later one.

For lack of another name, the book is called a novel in the translations but it really bears little resemblance to that genre. It consists of a series of immensely tumultuous episodes from lower life; truth of detail has meant everything to the author. The critic questioned not so much the details but their disinterested selection - the foreigner cannot judge the validity of the criticism. Now the book has had a strong revival because of events since then, and it remains a classic work, the model of a solid, concentrated, and sure art, in the eyes of the Russian émigrés as well as of those in the homeland. The descriptions of villages were continued in many shorter essays, sometimes devoted to the religious element which, in the eyes of the enthusiastic national generation, made the *muzhikí* the people of promise. In the writer's pitiless analysis the redemptive piety of the world is reduced to anarchic instincts and to the taste for self-humiliation, essential traits of the Russian spirit according to him. He was indeed far from his youthful Tolstoyian faith. But he had retained one thing from it: his love of the Russian land. He has hardly ever painted his marvellous countryside with such great art as in some of these novellas. It is as if he had

done it to preserve himself, to be able to breathe freely once more after all he had seen of the ugly and the false.

In a quite different spirit *Sukhodól* (1911-12), the short novel of a manor, was written as a counterpart to *Derévnyá*. The book is not a portrayal of the present times, but of the heyday of the landed proprietors, as remembered by an old servant in the house where Bunin grew up. The author is not an optimist in this book, either; these masters have little vital force, they are as unworthy of being responsible for their own destinies and those of their subordinates as the severest accuser could have desired. In effect one finds here in large measure the materials for that defence of the people which Bunin silently passed over in *Derévnyá*.

But nonetheless the picture appears now in a totally different light; it is filled with poetry. This is due in part to the kind of reconciliation that the past possesses, having paid its debt by death; but also to the sweet vision of the servant who gives charm to the confused and changing world in which, however, her youth was ruined. But the chief source of poetry is the author's imaginative power, his faculty for giving this book, with an intense concentration, the richness of life. *Sukhodól* is a literary work of *very* high order.

During the years which remained before the World War, Bunin made long trips through the Mediterranean countries and to the Far East. They provided him with the subjects of a series of exotic novellas, sometimes inspired by the world of Hindu ideas, with its peace in the abnegation of life, but more often by the strongly accentuated contrast between the dreaming Orient and the harsh and avid materialism of the West. When the war came, these studies in the spirit of the modern globe-trotters with the imprint created by the world tragedy were to result in the novella that came to be his most famous work: *Gospodín iz San Francisco* (1916) [*The Gentleman from San Francisco*].

As often elsewhere, Bunin here simplifies the subject extremely by restricting himself to developing the principal idea with types rather than complex characters. Here he seems to have a special reason for this method: it is as if the author were afraid to come too close to his figures because they awaken his indignation and his hate. The American multi-

millionaire, who after a life of ceaseless thirst for money, sets out as an old man into the world to refresh the dry consciousness of his power, his blindness of soul, and his avidity for senile pleasure, interests the author only in so far as he can show in what a pitiable manner he succumbs, like a bursting bubble. It is as if a judgment of the pitiless world were pronounced against his character. In place of a portrait of this pitifully insignificant man, the novella gives by its singularly resolute art a portrait of destiny, the enemy of this man, without any mysticism but only with strictly objective description of the game of the forces of nature with human vanity. The mystical feeling, however, is awakened in the reader and becomes stronger and greater through the perfect command of language and tone. *Gospodín iz San Francisco* was immediately accepted as a literary masterpiece; but it was also something else: the portent of an increasing world twilight; the condemnation of the essential guilt in the tragedy; the distortion of human culture which pushed the world to the same fate.

The consequences of the war expelled the author from his country, so dear to him despite everything, and it seemed a duty to remain silent under the severe pressure of what he had suffered. But his lost country lived again doubly dear in his memory, and regret gave him more pity for men. Still, he sometimes, with stronger reason, painted his particular enemy, the *muzhík*, with a sombre clear-sightedness of all his vices and faults; but sometimes he looked forward. Under all repellent things, he saw something of indestructible humanity, which he represented not with moral stress but as a force of nature, full of the immense possibilities of life. «A tree of God», one of them calls himself, «I see thus that God provides it; where the wind goes, there I follow.» In this manner he has taken leave of them for the present.

From the inexhaustible treasures of his memories of the Russian nature, Bunin was later able to draw anew the joy and the desire to create. He gave colour and brilliance to new Russian destinies, conceived in the same austerity as in the era when he lived among them. In *Mítina lyubóv* (1924-25) [*Mitya's Love*], he analyzed young feelings with all the mastery of a psychology in which sense impressions and states of mind, marvellously

rendered, are particularly essential. The book was very successful in his country, although it signalled the return to literary traditions which, with many other things' had seemed condemned to death. In what has been published of *Zhizn Arsénieva* (Part I, *Istóki dnéy*, 1930 [*The Well of Days*]), partially an autobiography he has reproduced Russian life in a manner broader than ever before. His old superiority as the incomparable painter of the vast and rich beauty of the Russian land remains fully confirmed here.

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