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The Green Fuse Drives the Flower: Olya Meshcherskaya in Bunin’s “Light Breathing”

Though the title of “Light Breathing” (“Легкое дыхание”) suggests itself perhaps too temptingly as a key to the entire story, this temptation is not a new one. Just nine years after Ivan Bunin’s story was published, Lev Vygotsky explained in his own extensive analysis of “Light Breathing” why “the name isn’t given to the story for nothing, of course” (“название дается рассказу, конечно, не зря”).\(^{1}\) To support his claim that the meaning of events in a literary work is predicated entirely on their chronological arrangement by the author,\(^{2}\) Vygotsky argues that Bunin’s radical reordering of events results in a story whose real subject is not at all what it appears. According to Vygotsky, “the true subject of [Bunin’s] work consists in light breathing, and not in the tangled life story of a provincial schoolgirl.”\(^{3}\) Yet throughout all of Bunin’s agile flitting between wildly distant moments in his characters’ lives, the point of departure and return is always the same: the provincial schoolgirl herself, Olya Meshcherskaya. She is the scintillating central figure of “Light Breathing,” around whom all events coalesce. Though any analysis of the story must account for Bunin’s particular “unfolding” (“развертывание”) of his subject and his choice to name the story “Light Breathing” rather than “Olya Meshcherskaya,” this essay nonetheless focuses on Olya as the vehicle by which the deeper layers of “Light Breathing” manifest themselves. Although all the story’s personalities are animated by their reactions to Olya, Bunin underscores the extent to which Olya herself is powerless. What propels

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\(^{1}\) Vygotsky, 204. All English translations from Vygotsky given herein are my own.

\(^{2}\) Ibid., 192. “events… utterly change their sense and emotional meaning if we rearrange them”

\(^{3}\) Ibid., 199.
Olya through the story is the momentum of a beauty and vivacity beyond her control, and this force stands at the root of “Light Breathing.”

Despite the brevity of the story, Bunin’s takes his time introducing Olya. Using a graduated series of textures, Bunin seems to conjure Olya right out of her grave: the story opens with the dense earth, then moves to the sturdy wood of the cross, which is refined into the hard but fragile porcelain medallion holding a photograph “of a schoolgirl with joyous, wonderfully vivacious eyes” (“фотографический портрет гимназистки с радостными, поразительно живыми глазами”). These captivating eyes, projecting their liveliness out of the inanimate porcelain, act as a kind of spark, igniting in Bunin’s powerfully simple sentence, “It is Olya Meshcherskaya” (“Это Оля Мещерская”). Now she is alive.

Still, at this point Olya is only one of an as-yet-undifferentiated cohort. Bunin has yet to reveal how Olya is set apart from her coevals. This second phase of Olya’s animation occurs rapidly, in a single paragraph, emulating the preternatural speed of the girl’s development. At the beginning of the paragraph, “[n]othing would have made one single out this girl from the crowd” (“Девочкой она ничем не выделялась в толпе”), but by its end she is a renowned young lady, even loved by a boy who attempts suicide because of her. The speed of this transformation, combined with Bunin’s descriptions of Olya as carelessly elegant, flighty, wild, and heedlessly beautiful, endows her with a sense of inimitable lightness, as if the acceleration of her maturity has given her no chance to settle into any seriousness or stability. Consequently, when the possibility of Shenshin’s suicide is posited as a reaction to Olya’s caprice, the reader is hardly surprised that Olya’s meteoric vivification should have introduced a casual recklessness into her

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4 Bunin, trans. Brown, 59 / Bunin, 527. All English translations from Bunin given herein are Clarence Brown’s.
5 Ibid.
6 Brown, 59 / Bunin, 527-8.
emotional life. Bunin also points to the ease with which such carelessness can transform from elegance into cruelty. The mention of Shenshin foreshadows heightening pressure, a direct trajectory from the pleasantly tantalizing to the overwhelming, beyond which is collapse. A blossoming as incredible as Olya’s, Bunin hints, is unsustainable.

As the story continues to unfold, it becomes clear that Olya’s beauty verges on the unnatural or is at the very least set apart by its extraordinary precocity. This reading is corroborated by Bunin’s decision to focus on Olya as she was “during the last winter of her life” (“Последнюю свою зиму”). Her vivid blooming, with its connotations of springtime, is set against the backdrop of a “clear, cold, and snowy” winter full of “frost and sunshine” (“снежная, солнечная, морозная […] обещающее и на завтра мороз и солнце”), and this creates a dissonance. The result is twofold: first, it implies that Olya’s ‘springtime’ has arrived much earlier than it ought to—perhaps even too early. Second, the image of crisp winter sunshine sparkling on frost surrounds Olya’s beauty with an aura of crystalline imperishability that is all the more startling because it is out of season. Just as winter chill elicits a blush on an exposed cheek—a phenomenon echoed in Bunin’s “rosy evening sky” (“розовый вечер”)—so does Olya’s final, wild winter set her fantastic youth even more aglow. Importantly, Bunin utilizes both sides of winter, fortifying the implication of cold as a numbing, petrifying force; when compared to the raw, saturated fecundity of the garden in which Olya has her fateful encounter with Malyutin, Bunin’s winter ice suggests a defensive attempt by Olya to ‘freeze’—and thereby suppress—the trauma of that summer day.

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7 Brown, 60 / Bunin, 528.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 “солнце блестело через весь мокрый сад” (Bunin, 530).
That much of “Light Breathing” turns on an undercurrent of trauma is made apparent by Bunin’s repeated use of the motif of ‘going out of [one’s] mind.’ This motif is implied in the description of Shenshin, who “had fallen madly in love” with Olya (“в нее безумно влюблен гимназист Шеншин”), and so even before the motif appears in its full form, it is already marked by a threat of death (i.e., Shenshin’s attempted suicide). When Olya is reported to have “gone out of her mind from the wild gaiety of her life” (“совсем сошла с ума от веселья”), the attentive reader will note that this first use of ‘gone out of [one’s] mind’ falls, in absolute terms, after its second use—from the preceding summer, in which Olya says about her encounter with Malyutin, “I don’t know how it could have happened, I must have gone out of my mind—never did I think I was that kind!” (“Я не понимаю, как это могло случиться, я сошла с ума, я никогда не думала, что я такая!”). In light of this much more serious and earnest invocation, which comes as directly from Olya’s own lips as Bunin’s narrative layering will allow, the initial impression that Olya has gone out of her mind from gaiety (“от веселья”) rings ironically, even tragically. Bunin’s repetition of the phrase spans two markedly different moments: first, the seeming triumph of Olya’s irrepressible youthful beauty, as it appears to those around her; and second, Olya’s own inner confusion over her scandalous afternoon with Malyutin, a moment that acts as both the consummation of her womanhood and its irreparable violation.

Further, the idea that Olya has ‘gone out of her mind’ suggests, in both instances, that Olya herself stands outside the range of normal comprehension, that the essence of her character is inscrutable. To others, who presumably spread “the word around school” (“пошли толки,

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11 Brown, 60 / Bunin, 528. Emphasis mine –BT.
12 Brown, 60 / Bunin, 528.
13 Brown, 63 / Bunin, 530.
that Olya’s behavior and demeanor overstep the norms, Olya is a kind of impenetrable mystery; even the principal of Olya’s school has given up trying to reach her. By placing the reader in the position of an outsider looking on Olya with the same wonderment as those who have watched her emerge unexpectedly from the crowd and surpass all her peers, Bunin casts Olya as an opaque figure, whom one may speculate about but never truly know. This opacity reaches an apex when Olya decides to show the Cossack her diary. The reason behind the Cossack’s fatal reaction is understandable, given how sharply the sentiments of the diary contrast with the Cossack’s perception of Olya. However, Olya’s motives remain unexplained and unexplainable. What exactly Olya intended to achieve with her confession to the Cossack, and why she chose to show him the diary page about Malyutin (whom she did not love) rather than a page about Shenshin or about her feelings toward the Cossack himself, cannot be discerned with any degree of certainty. Even when Bunin introduces Olya’s own voice in the form of a direct quotation from her diary, the reappearance of ‘gone out of my mind’ at the end of the account brings into question whether Olya can be trusted to elucidate her inner state. At least in this crucial moment, Olya is as opaque and confounding to herself as she is to everyone else.

The difficulty of interpreting Olya’s inner character is compounded by Bunin’s frequent use of temporal shifting. In the second half of the story, the leaps in narrative time create a flickering effect, in which Olya is neither concretely dead nor alive. This begins at the moment when Olya ends her conference with the principal by recalling her encounter with Malyutin a year prior, opening a temporal disjunction between the two moments that is left unresolved. From here, Bunin jumps directly into a third, entirely different moment, the scene of Olya’s

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14 Brown, 60 / Bunin, 528.
murder by the Cossack.\footnote{Bunin, 529.} Although it is at this point in the narrative that Olya dies, Bunin immediately shifts back to the living Olya, who speaks through the diary excerpt. The intimacy of this first-person access to Olya directly contravenes the finality of her murder. When the diary concludes and Bunin moves forward to the absolute present—signaled by the phrase “These April days…” ("эти апрельские дни")\footnote{Brown, 63 / Bunin, 530.}—Olya is once more deceased. Yet Bunin resurrects her one final time within her teacher’s recollection, where she is again given the chance to speak directly, albeit this time through the remove of memory.\footnote{Bunin, 531.} In the story’s concluding sentence, the life-affirming substance of Olya’s self-proclaimed “light breathing” is allowed to saturate the entire textual present with the words, “this light breathing has been wafted anew through the world” ("Теперь это легкое дыхание снова рассеялось в мире").\footnote{Brown, 65 / Bunin, 531.} The ambiguity of this sentence leaves Olya amorphously suspended between life and death. By shaping the narrative so that Olya’s mortality is repeatedly undermined, then reinstated, and in the end left open-ended, Bunin allows Olya’s essential presence to escape the confines of her own timeline as a character, rendering her a sort of phantom around which the story revolves, a figure whom even Bunin himself cannot entirely pin down.

But from these questions of narrative structure another question emerges: what force is the true engine behind the course of “Light Breathing,” the root supporting its many modulations? For although Olya is in one sense the nexus of the story, it is also clear that Olya is not in control of herself; she admits this in her diary entry when she describes how incomprehensible her behavior with Malyutin was. Her lack of control over her own destiny is also present in Bunin’s description of how her rapid maturity took her by surprise: “Without the
least effort or strain, and almost, it seemed, without her noticing it, she acquired all those traits that set her apart from the entire school” (“Без всяких ее забот и усилий и как-то незаметно пришло к ней все то, что так отличало ее в последние два года из всей гимназии”). This passive induction into womanhood—which is most explicitly rendered in Olya’s naiveté vis-à-vis Malyutin, who shamelessly exploits her—is complemented by the carelessness of Olya’s particular beauty, a beauty so extraordinary precisely because it seemingly came upon her by no will of her own. And while this fetishized lack of agency opens its own set of questions, it remains that Olya cannot defensibly be called the root of “Light Breathing.”

Still, given that every character in “Light Breathing” is helpless in the face of Olya’s beauty and womanhood, the most convincing engine of the story is the preternatural vibrancy which Olya embodies. As a force, its potency—and the consequences of that potency’s clash with those who run up against it—underlies all of Olya’s interactions: with Shenshin, who veers into self-destructiveness when trying to grapple with it; with the principal, who is disturbed by its womanly maturity in one so young; with the Cossack, whose outrage most likely stems from the realization that he has completely failed to subdue or direct it; with Malyutin, who finds it irresistible and in response traumatizes the girl who bears it; with Olya’s teacher, who transubstantiates its echoes to feed her own dreams; and finally with Olya herself, whose case is perhaps most tragic of all. She is so deeply in the thrall of this strange vibrancy, so saturated with its vertiginous momentum, that in the end she cannot survive its reckless and unsustainable use of her fragile youth.

To return to Vygotsky’s reading of the story, the question arises: is the force of astonishing vibrancy that propels Olya into precocious womanhood, into fantastic beauty, and

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19 Brown, 60 / Bunin, 528.
into death synonymous with ‘light breathing’ itself? Vygotsky argues that the purpose of Bunin’s contorted chronology is “to destroy [the story’s] mundane filth, to turn it into clarity, to remove [the story] from reality.”20 In Vygotsky’s analysis, ‘light breathing’ is an unexpected “clarity” given to the story by the careful arrangement of events, but this clarity does not naturally belong to the events themselves. Between the “mundane filth” of the story’s material and the ‘light breathing’ that emerges from its form, there is a decisive and impassable divide.

This essay proposes an alternative understanding of the story’s strangeness—of the seeming incompatibility between what “Light Breathing” says and what it does—that does not rely on the idea of a divide. The vibrancy brought to light by Olya Meshcherskaya is not equivalent to the sensation that Vygotsky calls ‘light breathing,’ nor does the former replace the latter. If ‘light breathing’ exists on a plane above the events and characters of the story, then this vibrancy exists below them, on equal footing with other forces of nature like the weather and the changing of seasons. But, as the concluding section of the story demonstrates, the two planes are inseparable: in the final paragraphs, Olya’s own ‘light breathing’ is taken as a defining feature of her womanly beauty. Thus ‘light breathing’ is brought into dialogue with that which has driven the course of her womanhood from the beginning—i.e., the aforementioned vibrancy. With the last sentence, the same ‘light breathing’ that Olya exhaled a moment before assumes a dual character, at once ephemeral and immortal. This final moment exhibits the irresolvable chord struck between the lightness of ‘light breathing’—suffused with a single, gentle exhale, the very emblem of human impermanence—and the almost earthy vigor that relentlessly drives the story’s course forward with all the inhuman confidence of nature. The two, ‘light breathing’ and this fundamental vibrancy, are tied up in the character of Olya Meshcherskaya, and both continue

20 Vygotsky, 200.
to exist after her death. Together, the pair of them—one conspicuously proclaimed in the story’s title, the other working beneath the text—frame the story in a single, continuous tension: an attempt to reconcile that which is deep-rooted and imperishable in human life with the fragility and transience of the people who are its most vivid embodiments.

Works Cited

