

Music Preferred

Essays in Musicology, Cultural History
and Analysis in Honour of Harry White

Edited by Lorraine Byrne Bodley



HOLLITZER



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Professional Photo: Professor Harry White, DMus (NUI) PhD (Dubl) FRIAM MRIA MAE,
UCD School of Music

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L'AMI INCONNU: NATALIYA ESPOSITO AND IVAN BUNIN

PATRICK ZUK

In spite of occupying a central place in Irish musical life for over four decades, the Italian immigrant composer and pianist Michele Esposito (1855–1929) remains a rather shadowy figure. His professional activities can be reconstructed in outline from contemporary newspapers and institutional records (principally, those of the Royal Irish Academy of Music, where he taught for many years¹), but we have little sense of him as a person. The sole source of information about his early life is a slim volume of essays assembled by Giuseppe Aiello, an Italian local historian from Esposito's birthplace of Castellammare di Stabia, near Naples, which was published to mark the centenary of his birth.² It is an amateurish production – superficial and of dubious reliability. For the rest, all that has come down to us are a few brief reminiscences and scattered references in the diaries and letters of contemporaries. The Esposito family archive, such as it may have been, has disappeared, and with it, the manuscript scores of two piano concertos, substantial chamber works, and other compositions for Esposito which did not manage to find a publisher during his lifetime.³

Sadly, this state of affairs is far from untypical with many persons of note in the history of Irish music: again and again, one finds that source materials have been destroyed or lost, and that valuable testimony went unrecorded. The exiguous discourse on music in Ireland and its culturally impoverishing consequences is, of course, a major theme of Harry White's work, and he has done much to encourage the exploration and preservation of what remains of the fragmentary historical record of our art music tradition, which, for much of our history, struggled to establish itself in unpropitious circumstances. In the cases of important

1 I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Richard Davies (Leeds Russian Archive, University of Leeds), Jeremy Dibble (Durham University), Andrey Issarov (Russian Academy of Sciences), and the staff of the Turgenev Museum in Oryol (OGLMT) for supplying source materials and answering enquiries. The original texts of the letters are preserved in Bunin's personal archive, OGMT, №3209/1-10 оф. Marianna Taymanova provided specialist advice on linguistic points. All translations are my own.

See Richard Pine and Charles Acton (eds.): *To Talent Alone: The Royal Irish Academy of Music 1848–1998*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1998, and *passim*.

2 Giuseppe Aiello: *Al musicista Michele Esposito nel primo centenario della nascita*. Castellammare di Stabia, Naples: M. Mosca, 1956.

3 For a discussion of the available source materials and the fate of Esposito's papers, see Jeremy Dibble: *Michele Esposito*. Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2010, pp. xiii–xviii, and p. 186.

pioneers such as Esposito, the dearth of documentation is particularly poignant, given the difficulties that they faced and what they managed to accomplish in spite of them. As the celebrated Roman legal precept reminds us, *quod non est in actis, non est in mundo* – what is undocumented may as well not exist. But the undocumented is not always unimportant.

Esposito's friends and acquaintances included prominent political and literary figures of the day, including Douglas Hyde, John Millington Synge, and Padraic Colum. His daughters acted in productions at the National Theatre in its early years; Bianca, the eldest, taught the young Samuel Beckett Italian. His son Mario, who became a distinguished scholar of Hiberno-Latin, seems to have been involved with Sinn Féin. The entire family is thus of considerable interest to the social and cultural historian as well as the musicologist – but little trace of his wife and children's activities survives either. One by one, they left Ireland for Italy in the 1920s, Esposito himself being the last to do so after he retired in 1928. Before long, it seemed as though they were all but forgotten in the country where Esposito had lived for forty-six years.

If the paucity of source materials often creates insuperable difficulties for historians of Irish music, they are occasionally rewarded when chance occurrences bring surprising information to light. In late 2015, a Russian colleague, Professor Andrey Isserov, drew my attention to an article published in 1973 by the Soviet critic Leonid Afonin which details a remarkable episode in the life of Ivan Bunin (1870–1953), one of the greatest writers of his age and the first Russian recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature.⁴ Amongst Bunin's papers preserved in the Turgenev Museum in the city of Oryol, some 200 miles south of Moscow, Afonin discovered a cache of letters sent to Bunin between 1901 and 1903 by a Russian woman living in Dublin who was an admirer of his work. She was a complete stranger, but Bunin was sufficiently intrigued by her eloquent missives to reply. As their correspondence progressed, she came to treat him as a distant confidant (an *ami inconnu*, or “unknown friend”, in her phrase) to whom she could unburden herself and speak of painful matters that she felt unable to discuss with anyone else – her overwhelming loneliness and isolation in Dublin, which she found dull and provincial, and her unhappy marriage to a prominent local musician. The woman in question was none other than Esposito's Russian wife Nataliya.

These letters afford a unique and tantalizing glimpse into the Espositos' daily lives. Regrettably, Bunin's replies have been lost, together with the remainder of the Esposito family's papers. But coming as it did out of the blue, from distant Ireland, one can certainly understand why her first communication might have produced a vivid impression on him:

4 Leonid Afonin: “O proizkhozhdenii rasskaza *Neizvestniy drug*” [On the genesis of the short story ‘The Unknown Friend’], *Literaturnoye nasledstvo*, 84, 2 (1973), pp. 412–423.

St Andrew's, Ballsbridge, Dublin. Ireland

As you see, I live far, far away from you, on the westernmost margin of Europe, and we are separated not only by mountains and rivers, and lands and seas, but also by the entirety of the lives that we have lived, and our tastes and habits; nevertheless, the words that your hand committed hastily to paper have winged their way to me and set my soul ablaze. Why? Who knows? Perhaps because in my life I have faced many a rough and lonely pass, and had to resign myself to what life has sent my way, telling myself: "We'll plod on, we shan't give up yet. If we get through it – good; if not – well, no matter."⁵ Perhaps, too, because on occasion an alluring shape has beckoned momentarily from the gloom, and I have passed it by, leaving happiness behind! I write to you because you think and feel as I do. I have not the talent to express my thoughts in as elegant and refined a manner as you; but I know you will understand even what is poorly expressed and will see immediately what prompted my letter. If I am not mistaken, you will reply to me; if not ... then in any case, please accept my gratitude for the pleasure that your *Three Short Stories* have afforded me.

Nataliya Esposito
12 September 1901

Bunin evidently replied to this communication, which emboldened her to write again at greater length:

31 December 1901

I wish you happiness and well-being for the forthcoming New Year. Your letter gave me much joy: it is exactly what I would have expected from you – kind and warm. I have formed an idealised impression of you, about which I shall write another time if you do not find it wearisome to correspond with me. I still have not received the books that you promised. Why? [...]

Have you noticed that I find it difficult to write in Russian? I correspond with my relatives rarely, for I have little to say to them: our lives have gone separate ways and we have nothing in common. I am the only Russian not merely in Dublin, but in all of Ireland – so have no-one with whom I can speak Russian.

Nataliya's anxieties about her deteriorating command of her native tongue were quite unfounded: she writes stylishly in a high literary register, employing a sophisticated vocabulary. She comes across as an intelligent and cultured per-

5 A quotation from Bunin's short story "The Pass".

son with a decidedly unconventional cast of mind. After these preliminaries, she went on to relate the chain of events that brought her to Dublin. She had been born in Russia and was the only child of Pyotr Alekseyevich Khlebnikov, formerly Professor of Physics at the Medical-Surgical Academy in St Petersburg and a person of some note in the Russian scientific community. When she was six, her parents divorced, and he took charge of her care. In 1874, Khlebnikov retired on health grounds and moved abroad, taking his fifteen-year-old daughter with him. They successively resided in Germany, Switzerland, France, and Italy: “I speak and write four languages, I read six”, she informed Bunin.

In describing how she came to be married to Michele Esposito, Nataliya glided over a few inconvenient facts that emerge from other sources. She had taken piano lessons from Esposito as a teenager in Naples, which led to a relationship of greater intimacy. In 1878, she appears to have persuaded him to try his luck in Paris, travelling ahead to arrange a concert for him. Esposito duly joined her. Soon after their move Nataliya discovered that she was pregnant. They left for London, where they married on 27 April 1879, returning to Paris before the birth of Bianca on 13 July. They remained in the French capital for another three years, but Esposito failed to make his mark on its fiercely competitive musical scene. When an Italian friend living in Dublin informed him early in 1882 of a vacant teaching position at the Royal Irish Academy of Music, Nataliya urged him to accept: reading between the lines of Aiello’s account, which was largely based on information provided by Mario, the young couple were in dire financial straits.⁶

As Jeremy Dibble observes, Esposito probably viewed the post as a stopgap until he managed to obtain a better position elsewhere, perhaps in England.⁷ But by the time of Nataliya’s first letter to Bunin, they had been living in Ireland for almost twenty years, and the attractions of both her husband and their adopted country had long since palled. Her letter continued:

He is a music professor in the conservatoire here and conducts the local symphony orchestra. He also writes music. In brief, he is at the head of the music profession in Dublin, which means that I have to lead a twilight existence, receiving and returning visits, attending *soirées*, dinner parties, and so on – which I find very tedious. I have four children. My two eldest daughters are almost fully grown. When they were small, I tended them constantly; now that they are older they no longer have need of me, so I have much free time, which I spend reading. I read a lot and think a lot, and I write – but only for myself. I have no friends, and could have none: I am too different from the ladies here; and as for the men – I do not believe

6 Aiello: *Al musicista Michele Esposito*, p. 38.

7 Dibble: *Michele Esposito*, p. 42.

that men and women can be friends. Except, perhaps, when one is in the farthest east and the other in the farthest west? I have not been in Russia since I married, but I am nonetheless wholly Russian in my tastes and temperament, even if I am out of practice at writing. [...]

Let us turn to a more interesting subject – that is, to you. Who are you? From your three short stories, I can discern something of your inner life, but I know nothing of your outer life. Every month I look forward to reading *Russkaya myśl*⁸, and since July alone it had contained two poems by you and three short stories. You have a lot of talent, and your style is so beautiful and simple. Apart from talent, you have a soul, heart, and mind, and I understand you so well. When writers write, do they know that their words sink straight into the souls of their readers, as if addressed directly and solely to them? So your three stories seemed to me to be three letters written for me alone, and I have replied to you *plus ou moins mal*. [...] Do you like Heine, Alfred de Musset, Shakespeare? Do you want me to send English books, those that I like – do you read English? You see, so many questions: do not delay, answer me, and I will tell you about Ireland and the books I am reading, about you and about everything else that fills my life. Do you like music? Have you already written a great deal?

At the start of April, Bunin forwarded a volume of his poems. She sent a postcard to thank him, followed by a long letter a month later.

10 May 1902

Did you receive my *carte illustrée*? I was delighted by your book as a sign that you had remembered me, and even more by the short stories themselves, in which I recognise myself and feel that you have experienced the things of which you write, and that, notwithstanding all the moments of bitterness, the disappointments, and sufferings, you believe in beauty, in love, and in poetry, of which our lives are full if only we have the gift of seeing it. If you are being honest in your stories, than I know you well, and like you. One of these days I will summon the energy to visit a photographer, but for the time being I will send you a photograph taken six years ago in which I am wearing old-fashioned mittens. I have changed little since then: my coiffure and toilette are different, I have grown somewhat thinner and have more grey hairs, but my general appearance is unchanged. However, it is difficult to tell what an unknown person is like from a photograph: the play of the imagination is missing, there is no smile, no sound of a voice; one cannot discern the colour of the hair or

8 *Russian thought* – a prominent Russian literary journal founded in 1880.

the eyes. Hence, I almost fear to ask you for a portrait photograph: I have formed an idealised image of you, and would be sad if you were not as I wished you to be. Please answer my letter quickly. Just think how far away you are, and how long our letters take to reach each other: this is now my third letter to you, but I have only received a few words from you; and I so want to get to know you more closely and directly, not through the medium of your writings. I would like to write to you often and at length about everything, just as you write your stories under the influence of a moonlit sky, a spring day, a stormy sea, a book that you have read. I want to write to you as though writing to myself: you do not know me and will never meet me; you will never enter my life, and therefore I can be myself with you as nature made me, with all my inanities and dreams and illusions. It is pointless to fear your misprision or seek your approval. You will be my *ami inconnu*. Do you want this?

A few weeks later, without waiting for a reply, she sent him another letter – this time in the form of a diary.

Tuesday, 27 May [1902]

Why do you not write? I am impatient and do not like to be kept waiting, especially as the rules of good breeding dictate that I ought not to write again until I receive a reply – and I want to write to you so very, very much. About what? – you will ask. I do not know ... About you, about me, about Ireland, about life, about the stars, about the moon, about the sea, about books ... For the whole world is so interesting and beautiful and sad, and we carry it within ourselves, and we are only such a nugatory part of it, yet it is ours all the same; we possess it and derive pleasure from it, although it can destroy us in a moment with the breath from one of its volcanoes: it is eternal, and we live but for a day, but all the same it belongs to us and not we to it. Ours are the azure of the sky and the fragrance of the lilies-of-the-valley adorning my *escritoire*; ours are the caressing murmur of the waves and the majestic thunderclap; ours are the moonlit frosty night and the scorching June noonday. Yes, it is good to be alive, full of the life of nature, to experience even suffering, if only that there should be

Much thought in the head,
 Much fire in the heart ...⁹

9 A celebrated couplet from the poem “The Way” [*Put'*], by the nineteenth-century Russian poet Aleksey Kol'tsov.

In essence, what is suffering? ... Does not suffering serve to demonstrate the possibility of happiness? And the brief minutes of true happiness – do they really not deserve to be earned at the price of tears and sorrows? Of course, life is full of disappointments: we expect so much and receive so little; but for all that, there are moments of bliss which are beyond even our imaginings, and the trace of such moments never disappears. After them, we become better and kinder, and the pettifogging things of life no longer have such an overwhelming effect on us – one is raised above them. If you have not had such moments in life, then what I am writing will mean nothing to you; but if you have experienced them, then you will understand me. I am sending you this letter immediately after receiving your reply, and if I must wait as long again for the next, you can imagine what proportions it will assume, since I will write to you often. Why you, and not someone else? Because in front of friends and acquaintances, one wears a mask of reasonableness and nonchalance, and one would be ashamed to repine and pour forth one's soul – for they have nothing in their souls; but I am not ashamed in front of you: in your stories, you have revealed your whole soul, and I find it sympathetic and kindred to my own. I am particularly close to “Silence”, “Fog”, “Hope”, “The Pass”, “The Bonfire”, “The New Road”, “In Autumn”, because in them, I see you being as I once was: I myself have thought and experienced the things that you describe. I even rowed on Lake Geneva, taking the oars myself, as you did. I paused and looked long into the pellucid deep blue depths that reflected the deep blue of the heavens. Except that I lived at the eastern corner of the lake where the water is deeper, the mountains are higher, and Italy is closer. Ah, Italy! “Kennst du das Land, wo die Citronen blühen ...”.¹⁰ It is probably not so much a question of the lemons, for they also grow in Nice and Monte Carlo, but of something unique to Italy. How many reminiscences, desires, and regrets are connected with that name: I also sailed around the Bay of Naples of a wonderful moonlit night – thinking, waiting for something to happen. And now, I am waiting for the very same thing, although I live in a country where the scenery is not so alluring, and where there are neither hot summers nor icy winters – merely six months of mild and rainy autumn, and six more of chill and rainy spring. Mournful, tedious, and eternally green Ireland ...

10 “Do you know the land where the lemon trees grow?” – the opening lines of one of Goethe's most famous poems, from his Bildungsroman *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*.

Wednesday, 28 May

Do you know what thought suddenly came into my head? That if I write to you much and often, I will inevitably repeat myself. ... What's to be done? Content myself only with answering your letters? But I like to write to someone. Heretofore I have only written for myself: now I have a reader, and this pleases me. I would like to write as you do – that is, beautifully, and clearly. I would like to tell you about life in Ireland, about its literature, its history; I would like to describe to you the wild existence on the rocky western isles, where the raging ocean cuts off all contact with the rest of the world for weeks at a time, and where the inhabitants speak Gaelic, and can neither read nor write; I could describe life in the turf bogs, where nothing grows except potatoes. I could tell of many things, if only I had the talent, but I am unable to do anything except be a woman with all her weaknesses and defects. [...]

Thursday, 29 May

Still no letter from you. Why? Every morning I open the letter box in hope, but as yet in vain. Do you really not understand what it means to wait for a letter? I am angry with you and want to say horrid things to you, but as I have not the slightest inkling of your weaknesses, I am not able to guess what might irk you; moreover, my Russian is too poor and I have too paltry a quantity of words at my disposal to attain the result that I desire. I have not spoken a word of Russian to anyone since 1898 [...]

Sunday, 1 June

Today is 1 June, and what a horrid autumnal, cold, and miserable day it is. A fine persistent drizzle is falling for the third day in a row, and the entire sky is lined with heavy grey clouds, the wind is souging in the tress and rocking their dripping branches. Where is the sun? Where is happiness? My soul is oppressed; I would like to close my eyes and fall asleep, and put an end to this long drawn-out grey summer day. Where is the summer? The bright, scorching summer; where is the deep blue sea?.. Where is the breeze laden with the fragrance of orange blossom? Where is youth, hope, and desire? Not here! I am sitting in front of a lighted fire, fretting and feeling sorry for myself. Was it for this that I was endowed with health and strength, and a mind and heart, in order to languish here, far away from all that is dear to me ...? I completely forget that I am no longer my own mistress and do not have the right to my own life. Since the birth of my eldest daughter, I have renounced my own tastes,

inclinations, and joys, all for her and for the other children. [...] And all the same, to live without desires is impossible, and when one no longer grieves for something or someone, it means that one is no longer alive; and when we cease longing ... what remains?.. And the drizzle still falls, the sky is even more overcast; it is only three o'clock, but we have had to light a fire ... Some guests are coming for dinner tonight: we always have guests on Sundays, and I dislike them so much. They will talk about the weather, about the war in Africa, about Martinique, and everyone will express their opinions, all garnered from the latest newspapers – and I will be bored, so bored.

Nataliya broke off her diary on 2 June and only resumed weeks later after she at last received Bunin's long-awaited reply and further volumes of his writings.

16 July

I have only just received your letter and will answer it soon, but for now I will send you the pages of this diary which I stopped writing over a month ago. [...]

Thank you for *The Fall of the Leaf* and for *New Poems*. Do not forget me.

On 19 July 1902, she started another letter in the form of a diary.

I am glad that you like my letters. I have long sought someone with whom I could share all the things that transpire in my soul, and till now, I have had no-one. Like you, I am alone. And now, I have you, and writing to you affords me much pleasure. Those three short stories of yours that I read last year made a powerful impression on me, as you already know; and this impression is caused precisely by the fact that you are writing about yourself. Your constant striving towards the unattainable and the sublime; your thirst for a boundless and hitherto unexperienced joy; your isolation amongst men who do not understand your desires; your sorrows and afflictions resulting from ethical and moral constraints; the unbearable awareness of being at the mercy of others and of circumstances – all of this I have endured, and by some instinct divined and discovered in your stories. I know what you seek in love and know that you will never find it, as no woman could ever combine the physical and spiritual qualities that would wholly satisfy your needs. [...] You live through

sentiment rather than sensibility, and for you happiness is unthinkable, except for those brief minutes when external conditions harmonise with your spiritual needs ... I have expressed all this so unclearly that you may not understand me properly. [...] You lament your spent youth, and you are only thirty years of age! I am much older than you, but feel myself to be young and strong; people interest me as before; and sorrow affects me as strongly as it did twenty years ago. I have lost no illusions, and I still believe in happiness and love, though I have yet to find them and know that love and happiness are impossibilities for me. Nevertheless, I live in hope and expectation, and seize the joyous fleeting moments: I pay dearly for them, but they are worth it; and I console myself with the thought that one easily grows accustomed to continued happiness and it ceases to be such. Your youth is in your hands: it is yours to retain if you are to love and toil. Toil and love, love everything: women and Russia, people and animals, nature and peasants – and receive their love in return. Inspire love and know your own power: to arouse it at will is not always easy, but victory could be yours to savour! Struggle and attain. This will bring you happiness and help you to live. You are young and overflowing with life: do not succumb to despair. Be passionate about everything, if only your correspondence with me, even – unless it does not engage your interest?

Nataliya did not resume this epistolary diary until July 1903 and ceased writing to Bunin for eight months. However, in April 1903, she sent him a letter that she herself described as “crazed”.

Where are you? What are you doing? Have the waves of the Black Sea yielded up your long-awaited Aphrodite? Or are you still on the shore, with arms outstretched towards your elusive love? I have not written to you. I do not know why: there is no reason in particular, except, perhaps, first, because you are so negligent in answering, by the time your letters reach me I do not remember what I wrote to you; and secondly, you reveal little of yourself in your letters – you are unable to talk freely about yourself to an acquaintance; it is easier for you to address yourself to a faceless public than to me, a person who knows you ... Yes, but do you know me? Oh, I know you so well, and like you exceedingly well: your stories and poems describe you, and I love you. I love your strength and goodness; your tenderness towards all who are weak and who suffer; your intellectuality and your understanding of everything that is beautiful and good; and your kinship to me. We feel identically about many things, and – who knows? – if we were to meet, perhaps we would find in one another that which we have sought vainly in others ... Yes, we will love

one another, across the mountains, across the rivers and deep seas. It will be dangerous, yet diverting. An incorporeal union of two hearts! [...] Ah, do not tarry to respond: I am so sorrowful here, so lonely, in spite of the love with which I am surrounded – but what is the good of it if I am unable to love in return?

She received a reply on 28 June. She replied on the same day:

No, I am not angry, neither because of your long silence or because you look like Sienkiewicz¹¹: he has a kindly, intelligent, and sad face. Let me start from the beginning. I was waiting a long time for your letter: morning and evening I remained in wait for the postman and examined the letters myself; but yesterday, as I was dressing for dinner (we were to spend an evening at the house of acquaintances), I forgot about you and about the post – so that when I came downstairs and saw your letter at my place on the dining-room table, it came as a surprise, though I had long been anticipating its arrival. I did not open it after dinner, but folded it into a large envelope and put it in the small bag in which I carry my headscarf ... The dinner dragged on, and when we eventually rose from the table, we had to go out immediately, so I took your letter with me and it spent the entire evening in the house of the editor of the Irish political newspaper *The Freeman Journal* [sic].¹² There, we drank vile-tasting English tea and talked on all manner of subjects. [...] I mostly remained silent and listened, and sometimes did not even listen at all, but opened my little bag and looked at your letter. When we finally returned home and dispersed to our separate rooms I remained alone and at last took it out – but I did not open it immediately: I waited until the house had grown quiet and I could no longer hear anything except the nocturnal silence; only then did I open the envelope and read it. I sat for a long time afterwards, thinking ... And now, I am sitting thinking, pen in hand – once more, a sunny day, a pale blue sky; roses and carnations are in bloom in the garden; the strains of a melancholy Chopin Nocturne make their way to me from the drawing-room; and I somehow feel happy and sad at once. Today I procured copies of *Quo Vadis?* and works by Byron. My copy of *Quo Vadis?* is in English translation and has a portrait of Sienkiewicz: it will remain on my table until I receive your photograph, which I await impatiently. Before your next letter, I am re-reading *Manfred* and *Cain*: when I was young, I was

11 Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916), the Nobel-prize winning Polish writer whose historical novel *Quo vadis?* (1896), set in Nero's Rome, was widely translated and won international acclaim.

12 *Recte*: *The Freeman's Journal*, the oldest nationalist newspaper in Ireland, founded in 1763.

greatly fascinated by Lucifer.¹³ In general, I like all demons. Are you familiar with Milton? He too has good devils. Why are you translating Byron? For pleasure or as a commission? I will devote myself to you: I will write to you every day, I will read what you are reading, and also what you write to me ... We shall be friends, shall we not?

A week later on 4 July, Nataliya returned to the diary that she had abandoned almost a year previously:

As you see, this letter was commenced about a year ago, and for some reason remained uncompleted and unsent, but I did not destroy it because I always intended to continue corresponding with you. In April, I wrote to you under the spell of a wonderful spring day which kindled in my soul an irrepressible desire to share with you the feelings that animated me at that time. For me, you are something unique, new, unprecedented – and also infinitely kind and dear ... Why you, and not another? Because the other is here, opposite me, and I can see all too clearly the weaknesses of his physical and moral nature; but you are far away, and I can adorn you with all the qualities that he lacks. Ah, how boring he is, this man that loves me! How commonsensical and materialistic he is: for him, roses and the sun, the sea and the moon all mean nothing; and I too am so commonsensical when I am with him: I listen so attentively to all his political views, his thoughts on literature, his opinions about life and about people; he talks about everything under the sun, and it never enters his head that perhaps I too could perhaps have something to say – but if I were to talk, he would find it wearisome and I would bore him, and as I do not like to bore people, I simply listen. And because of that, he loves me and considers me to be an intelligent woman. It is, of course, pleasant to be loved: sometimes he too falls silent, and his heart beats faster and love gleams in his eyes; and I know that I am dear to him, and that when I leave him, it will distress him. How it would distress him if he knew that I *have a distant friend*¹⁴, to whom I write about him cold-bloodedly and dispassionately, without love, critically ... Today, a cold drizzle is falling, and a drizzle fell yesterday, and will fall again tomorrow, and forever, without end, until death itself. I read *Manfred* and *Cain*, and found it pleasant to read them: they rekindled my love for demons, and I also read Lermontov ... Do you like Tolstoy's *Resurrection*? I find it very interesting, but Tolstoy does not write for me. He would not like me: I am not like

13 Lucifer features as a personage in Byron's closet drama *Cain* (1821).

14 These words were underlined by Bunin.

his female characters – neither Katyusha nor Anna nor Natasha.¹⁵ I cannot understand how she could be transformed into a stout slatternly wet-nurse to her children. It is possible to love without turning oneself into a cow. Farewell, my friend. I will write again soon. I am thinking of you a lot and writing novels. Shall I send them to you?

Votre amie N. Esposito

Do you want to know anything of Irish legends, the history of Ireland, its literature, legends, writers, leading figures? It is somehow hard to part from you, but it is time, however – and so, *adieu!* I re-read this exceedingly long letter. Lord, how I have repeated myself – but you are to blame for that. Why do you now answer me promptly, for I cannot recall from year to year what I write to you? It is almost two years how since I made your acquaintance.

On 9 July, Nataliya started another letter:

A cloudless moonlight night perfused with a mysterious magic that penetrates one's soul like a love potion. This wan half-light reposes like a caress on everything that it illumines: the white lilies glisten like silver, and their sweet intoxicating perfume is borne on moonbeams into my room. The night sleeps, it is quiet all around, and a light breeze gently shakes the muslin drapes, bringing fresh air from the fields bearing the scent of mown hay. All are asleep, and how I enjoy the silence after a day filled with noise and people. How good it feels: I am with you; I see you as you are in your stories, your features melded with those of Sienkiewicz's expressive face. Yes, I love you, I talk to you so tenderly and sincerely, and you listen to me and are not bored: you cannot be bored with me, for I am *she*¹⁶ whom in life you did not find. [...]

She resumed ten days later:

The air is warm and redolent of the scent of sweet-pea; the sky is blue, it is quiet all about, and there is love in my heart. For whom, for what, I do not know, but it is somehow joyful: I feel young and strong. The awareness of my strength rarely leaves me: even in the most sorrowful moments, my confidence in myself remains unshaken. I always know what I want and I

15 The heroines respectively of Tolstoy's novels *Resurrection*, *Anna Karenina*, and *War and Peace*. In the course of the latter, Natasha undergoes a transformation from a spirited, headstrong young girl into a rather dowdy plump matron, whose interests focus narrowly on her husband and four children.

16 Underlined by Bunin.

do not spare any efforts to attain my desire. This may strike you as boastful: perhaps you are right, and I hold too high an opinion of myself. I do not know – it is difficult to judge oneself. I do not like false modesty. But neither do I like excessive self-regard. Why I am writing this to you? You have nothing to do with any of it. What am I to you? I am not writing to you, but rather to myself about myself ... It is interesting to analyse oneself and to describe what one would like to be. Shall I send you this letter or not? Yes, let it go to distant Russia just as it was sent, with all its repetitions, contradictions, and its offences against logic and the Russian language.

On 25 July 1903 Nataliya received a letter and photograph from Bunin. In the days that followed, she wrote a remarkably frank account of her unhappy marriage to Esposito and the breakdown of their sexual relations:

Shortly after our marriage I arranged to have a separate bedroom under the pretext that I was breastfeeding my children myself and they slept with me. I did not allow my husband to come to my room, but went to his once a week. These periodic visits to my husband's bedroom were terrible for me: sometimes I started to feel nauseous for two days before the appointed day. The main thing was that I felt very sorry for him. He loved me and to a certain extent I had to conceal what I was feeling. But he knew all the same that I did not like these visits, though he attributed this to the coldness of my Russian nature and insisted on his rights. Even a hot scented bath did not seem sufficient ablution after these visits. Now all of that has stopped and I have been free for five years. My husband and I are friends and there is a complete *entente cordiale* between us, but I no longer belong to him and that is already something akin to happiness.

She “diverted herself” with affairs, but these too left her unfulfilled:

Somehow they always turn out to be platonic, perhaps because deep down I am virtuous; perhaps because I am in reality cold, or because a suitable opportunity never presented itself, or simply because I did not love any of my heroes sufficiently. In essence, being an adulterer is inartistic: one must lie, deceive, live in fear; and none of that is to my taste – only a powerful, passionate love can excuse deception and lies; but in its absence, it is better to live virtuously as I do, notwithstanding my letters to you and the engineer's visits. How dreadfully all this has turned out: when I started to write to you this morning, I intended to answer your questions, but instead I have told you things that I have never told anybody. I like to write to you precisely because I follow the promptings of my fancy, and not according to a preconceived plan. [...]

I am glad that you told me how you spend your time. At the moment, you, like me, are sitting at your desk writing. I want to know more about you. Why do you write so little about yourself? What are you like, what do you like? Pierre Loti?¹⁷ I also like him, although everything that he writes is the same. I am about to obtain a copy of *Fantôme d'Orient*: I will read it, knowing that you have read it too. If I find that I particularly like something in it, I will make a note of it and ask you about it. Ah, why are you so far away! [...] Today I will send you this letter and resume my diary, which you will receive in time. I am writing to you a great deal: my inspiration will soon run dry, and then I will take my leave of you forever. For it would be impossible to sustain such a correspondence for a long time: you would find it wearisome, and it would start to bore me. [...]

I was very pleased to receive your *carte postale*.¹⁸ Now I know you better and am not offended by it. In general, I am slow to take offence, but I often get angry with you.

Today is a delightful day, but you are sitting at your desk translating *Cain*: I do not envy you. Lucifer's philosophy and scientific speculations are very old-fashioned. He is in no wise an original demon, but I loved him in my youth. Now I prefer Mephistopheles.

No further letters from Nataliya Esposito to Bunin have come to light: it is not known whether they continued write to one another or whether the correspondence petered out at this point. However, as Bunin's underlinings and notes on the texts of the letters make apparent, he studied them closely and re-read them several times. Over twenty years later, after emigrating from Russia in the wake of the 1917 Revolution and settling in Paris, he used their contents as the basis for a powerful short story entitled "An Unknown Friend" [*Neizvestniy drug*], which was published in the Berlin-based émigré almanac *Zlatotsvet* in 1924.¹⁹ It takes the form of a series of letters sent by a Russian woman living in Ireland to a noted Russian writer whose work she has read: she pours out her unhappiness to him, desperately hoping to elicit his sympathy and understanding – but he never replies. As Aforin demonstrated through a close textual comparison, Bunin evidently remembered Nataliya's letters with remarkable accuracy, though he had left them behind in Russia – the resemblances between many passages are strikingly close, down to the details of Nataliya's evocations of the Irish weather and landscape. However, the story ends on a note of tragedy, leaving the reader

17 Pierre Loti (1850–1923) was a French writer, principally renowned for his novels set in exotic locations. His novel *Fantôme d'Orient* (*Phantom of The Orient*) was published in 1892.

18 That is, Bunin's photograph.

19 The story was published in English translation in Ivan Bunin, *Night of Denial: Stories and Novellas*, trans. Robert Bowie. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2006, pp. 313–323.

with a disturbing intimation of unassuageable loneliness and despair. Whatever unhappiness she experienced, Nataliya seems to have continued to find life worth living.

We shall probably never know whether she happened to come across Bunin's short story but her contact with him may well have roused her to literary activity of her own. In a letter of 19 June 1904, John Millington Synge reported to Stephen MacKenna: 'Madame Esposito is translating "Riders to the Sea" into Russian and French, her Russian I cant [*sic*] judge, in French it loses a good deal as she has put it into standard healthy style – but hasn't managed to give it any atmosphere or charm. She hopes to get in into a Russian review, and we are thinking of trying the *Mercure de France*, they like young movements.'²⁰ In his study *John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre*²¹, which appeared in 1913, Maurice Bourgeois reported that both had yet to be published. The French version seems never to have appeared in print. The literary magazine *Russkaya misl'*, to which Nataliya subscribed and in which she had read Bunin's poems and stories, published Russian translations of Synge's *Riders to The Sea* and *In The Shadow of The Glen* in 1915 which are attributed to one 'Ye. Odinets'. One piece of evidence suggests that these may be Nataliya's handiwork: the title *Riders to The Sea* is translated rather oddly as *Zhertvi morya*, 'Victims of the Sea' – rather than the more obvious (and now customary) equivalent, *Skachushchiye k moryu* – which Bourgeois records as being the title of Nataliya's Russian version.

Thereafter, Nataliya all but disappears from view. She may have finally resolved to separate from Esposito: Aiello records that she was the first of the family to move to Florence in 1920, leaving him behind in Dublin. She survived her husband by fifteen years, dying on the 5 January 1944.²²

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