



Imagining the Countryside in Literatures of the Eastern Lands:

Juxtaposing “Dưới bóng hoàng lan” (“In the Ylang-Ylang
Shade,” 1942) by Thạch Lam (Thach Lam, Vietnam) and
“Антоновские яблоки” (“Antonov Apples”, 1900) by Иван
Бунин (Ivan Bunin, Russia)



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[*Abstract*]

Using Peter Barry’s conception of “outdoor environment” in discoursing nature and culture, this article analyzes images of the countryside in the short stories “Dưới bóng hoàng lan” (“In the Ylang-Ylang Shade”) by Thạch Lam (Thach Lam) and “Антоновские яблоки” (“Antonov Apples”) by Иван Бунин (Ivan Bunin). The two share portray the Eastern Lands, as may be seen in Vietnamese northern countryside and the East Slavic, Byzantine. The paper focuses on three aspects of the countryside—cultural values; traces of urban life and; the aspirations of people. The article aims to emphasize people’s desire to return to a type of nature that bears traces and harmonizes with human cultures.¹

Keywords: Thạch Lam (Thach Lam), Иван Бунин (Ivan Bunin), Eastern Lands, countryside, nature, culture

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¹ All translations from Vietnamese and Russian, unless indicated otherwise, are translations by the author.

I . Introduction

Nowadays, it is undeniable that nature is becoming more and more important in human life. Nature leads people to “joy and laughter” (Schiller² in Dole 2010: 126). This value of nature is continually being recognized by recent researchers, especially ecocritics. While many ecocritics totally ignore culture as they appreciate the value of nature, many others look at how nature and culture strike a balance in ecological spaces. Peter Barry points four areas of the “outdoor environment” that articulate the dynamics of nature and culture: wilderness (e.g. deserts, oceans, uninhabited continents); scenic sublime (e.g. forests, lakes, mountains, cliffs, waterfalls); the countryside (e.g. hills, fields, woods); and domestic picturesque (e.g. parks, gardens, lanes) (Barry 2009: 246). Peter Barry affirms that the countryside and domestic picturesque often appear in literary works, often in the form of farms, fields, and gardens. I subscribe to Barry’s formulation, believing that farms, fields, and gardens are evocative in literary works because in them we see how nature embraces traces of human culture. Nature may be understood as the ecological or natural environment of man; culture, on the other hand, is an organic system of material and spiritual values created by man, accumulated in the process of practical interaction between people and nature and social environment. In the regard, the countryside is the house-garden space of Thanh’s grandmother in “Dưới bóng hoàng lan” (“In the Ylang-Ylang Shade”) by Thạch Lam (Thach Lam); and the entire estate in “Антоновские яблоки” (“Antonov Apples”) by Иван Бунин (Ivan Bunin) is a rural space where nature and culture converge. Nature and culture intertwine and harmonize in these narratives, and consequently preserve pleasant memories and virtues of people inhabiting them. This article uses the countryside to refer to both the countryside and the domestic picturesque.

This article examines images of the countryside in the literatures of the Eastern Lands, as articulated in Vietnam and

² Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) is a German poet, playwright, philosopher, and the most important representative of classical German Literature. He is dubbed the German Shakespeare.

Russia through the short stories mentioned. This article, which offers suggestive and recognitive perspectives on the Eastern Lands, emphasizes the importance of the countryside in the interaction between culture and nature, where the spiritual life of urban people are restored. Thạch Lam (Thach Lam) (1910-1942), a founding member of the writers' group Tự Lực Văn Đoàn³, wrote many short stories that capture the scenery and life in rural Cẩm Giàng, Hải Dương, Vietnam, his mother's hometown.⁴ "In the Ylang-Ylang Shade," part of the collection *Sợi tóc* (*A Strand of Hair*, 1942), tells the story of Thanh's homecoming after two years of work in the province. The story narrates his impressions of idyllic Vietnam, as embodied by ylang-ylang flowers. Meanwhile, Иван Бунин (Ivan Bunin) (1870-1953), the first Russian writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, once belonged to an aristocratic family. He wrote deeply the idyllic countryside of the the Russian estate⁵, owned by nobles, landowners, or peasants. In itself, the estate is "a continuation of the surrounding nature. The houses are closely linked with old orchards, fishponds with waterfalls, rows of wing houses, kitchens, barns, stables, and dog cages" (Радугин 2005: 262). The Russian estate then is also very much attached to nature: "The farm life is closely associated with nature, farming, hunting, family traditions, and peasants' life" (Радугин 2005: 262). In his memoir, Bunin remembers how he spent his childhood writing "original verses full of sadness" (Богомолов 2000: 542) in his family estate Buturky Village, Elesky District, Orlov Province. Nevertheless, life in the estate acquainted him with the land and culture, as well as the

³ Tự Lực Văn Đoàn was founded in Hanoi, Vietnam. This literary school and movement renewed ferment and led the modernization of Vietnamese Literature in the early twentieth century. One of its most important principles is: "to glorify the beauties of the country, which has a quotidian mentality" (Phan Cự Đệ 2004: 529).

⁴ On this issue there are articles: Đinh Quang Tồn. 1992. Thạch Lam và quê hương sáng tác. *Tạp chí Văn học* số 6(258): 20-22, Nguyễn Kim Hồng. 2001. Xu hướng hiện thực tâm lý qua các tác phẩm viết về làng quê của Thạch Lam. *Tạp chí Văn học* số 12 (358): 53-60.

⁵ In the Award ceremony speech of the Swedish Academy read at the award ceremony of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Bunin on December 10, 1933, there is a passage: "But he had retained one thing from it: his love of the Russian land. He has hardly ever painted his marvelous countryside with such great artists as in some of these novellas".Hallström P.(1933), "Award ceremony speech". http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1933/press.html

serene lives of peasants and small landowners. He also fell in love with their folk poems and songs. He faithfully replicates the scenery and daily activities of “harmonious” Russia⁶ in “Antonov Apples” (1900), a four-part, first-person narrative of autumn reminiscences of a Vyselki village made more enthralling by the scent of Antonov Apples growing around.

Vietnam in Southeast Asia geographically belongs to the what has been categorized as the East, which usually include the rest of Asian and Africa (Trần Ngọc Thêm 1999: 14). From another perspective, the East is mainly composed of Asian civilizations: ancient China (which include Japan, Korea, and even Vietnam and the rest of the old Indochina); ancient India; and ancient Persia (Konrad 2007: 22). Ancient Egypt is later added to this group (Said 1977: 44). However, Russia is a special country, always perceived to be independent, and right in the middle of West and East. This perception originates from Russia’s geographical location of Russia stretching across Europe and Asia. Russians may view themselves the way they are viewed to be part of Europe. However, they are the most easternized in Europe—but not easternized like the rest of Asia. Making up most of Eastern Europe and North Asia, Russia historically associates itself with the Eastern Slavs, the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire, and the Eastern Orthodox Church, which broke away from Catholic Rome in 1054 during the Great Schism. That is the special point: “Russia cannot identify itself as the East, different from the West. Russia needs to be aware that it is also West, a West of the East to unite the two worlds” (Бердяев 2008: 30).

II. Images of the Countryside

2.1. A Nourishing Countryside

Both Thach Lam and Bunin are inclined to be intuitively receptive of nature, past or present. “In the Ylang-Ylang Shade,” Thach Lam reconstructs the scenery of the old town as remembered by Thanh:

⁶ I allude to *Лад* (*Harmony*) by Vasily Belov, an ethnography of the ideal Russian countryside.

“The landscape still remained the same, the house was still quiet, and his grandma was still grey-haired and gentle.” (Thạch Lam 2015: 170). The entire compound form a tranquil garden space. The story begins with the house’s wooden door opening to a mossy Bát Tràng bricked path as a low flower-filled wall stretches to the eaves. Flanked by the floral walls is a verdant garden kissed by sunlight streaming through gaps in canopies “dancing with the wind.” (Thạch Lam 2015: 168). From Thanh’s perspective, the interior of the house darkens while the space outside remains vivid. Understanding that “the old house remained unchanged, exactly the same as the old days when he left” (Thạch Lam 2015: 168), Thanh returns gets out once again. He walks down the trellis of Tonkin jasmine where he sees his grandmother. It is as if “he had never left” (Thạch Lam 2015: 170). Upon entering the house later, he lies on a divan, looks out the window, and observes the garden: “Outside the window, the sky was blue, limpid and ever bright; the leaves fluttered in the gentle breeze. A tree trunk towered in front of him. At the same time, he muttered: “Ylang-ylang! Its subtle scent!” (Thạch Lam 2015:171). After which, “he quietly stood up, leaning on the window, crouching to look at the pond. The ylang-ylang shade stirred the whole area. Suddenly, he remembered and ran down to the wing of the house, cheerfully calling: “Nga...”” (Thạch Lam 2015: 171). Nga is “a next-door girl who still visited and played with him in the garden and every time he came back, he met her at home, just like someone dear” (Thạch Lam 2015: 172). Thanh and Nga break bread together and go for a walk in the garden, just as “they were little kids,” with “the ylang-ylang tree towering, with drooping branches welcoming them” (Thạch Lam 2015: 172). They may have grown up but the sentiments also remain unchanged. Surrounded by things of the olden days, as well as the ylang-ylang shade and its scent, Thanh inhabits eternity—eternal space, eternal landscape, eternal time full of actions, and eternal spiritual world. This story, placed alongside a string of other stories by Thach Lam, reveals an ecological preference where old-time values restore anyone who spends time in the countryside. It may also be said that Thach Lam’s life in the rural Cẩm Giàng was formative as far as this perspective is concerned.

The image of the garden also sprawls in “Antonov Apples.” The garden is serene and all around, the scent of Antonov apples wafting in the air: “I remember a fresh and quiet morning... The big garden, its dry and thinned-out leaves turning golden in the early light. I remember the avenue of maples, the delicate smell of the fallen leaves, and the scent of autumn apples—antonovkas, that mix of honey and fall freshness.” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 408). The story details two estates: the first is owned by the narrator’s aunt Anna Gherasimovna of the storyteller; and the second by his brother-in-law Akseni Semenuts. The first is famous for its trees bearing varieties of apples, such as antonovkas, belle barynyas, borovinkas, plodovitkas: “The estate is not large, but all of it is aged and solid, surrounded by willow trees and birches that are at least a century old... My aunt’s garden is well known for its neglected state, its nightingales, its turtledoves, and its apples” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 412-413). Meanwhile, the other estate is known for having “a vast territory, a fifty-acre garden, with borzoi dogs or Kirghizia horses.” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 413). The scenery refreshes and revitalizes the narrator. It even makes him indulge in sleep, as if time is standing still:

Occasional oversleeping to miss the hunt makes that rest particularly pleasant. I would wake up and stay in bed forever. The whole house is full of quietness... I would dress leisurely, then wander around the garden, pick an apple hidden in some wet leaves which has been accidentally forgotten, already wet and cold. I find this apple extraordinarily delicious somehow, completely different from other apples. (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 416).

The countryside in both stories sustain the material and spiritual needs of inhabitants. Both character return to the countryside because they find tranquility there. The narrator in “Antonov Apples,” for instance, has always found comfort in vitint the estates, even if it had fallen into disarray and decline years later. Memories of warmth and rejoicing never left, and the scent of home remained. Today, estates in Russia are considered as “emblems of the past...a very important element of modern culture” (Радугин 2005: 261). All in all, both estate and garden provide respite for the weary souls of the stories' characters. The scent of apples and

ylang-ylang keep them coming home.

2.2. Countryside Fragrance and Moral Credence

The countryside also appear to share the common elements of scenery and experience. In “In the Ylang-Ylang Shade,” the countryside dark and damp with the “the smell of soil, the smell of moisture and the smell of burning garbage” (Thạch Lam 2015: 50). Upon his return, Thanh first experiences “the cool feeling of green bamboo leaves” (Thạch Lam 2015: 46). “The closed doors clattered, he gently came in. He felt pleasantly cool” (Thạch Lam 2015: 168). Among these naturally evocative experiences, the most powerful is the scent of the ylang-ylang, which signifies the pristine state of the locality. The scent always lures Thanh back because it brings back memories of love and a nostalgia for the place and its people. Also, the scent of ylang-ylang not only awakens memories of childhood in the wing of the house where Nga and his would cook. It also reminds of Thanh and Nga’s subtle affections, the unsaid between them. The scent has also always been gendered, feminine: “When they are close, Thanh could feel the subtle fragrance from Nga’s hair just like that of ylang-ylang. But ylang-ylang flowers have not fallen off; they are still fresh on the branches” (Thạch Lam 2015: 174). Both nature and femininity may be key in maintaining the idyllic and restorative order.

The exciting point of meeting between Thach Lam with Bunin also lies in the appearance of the feminine element in their compositions. It is no coincidence when researchers remark that Bunin’s poetry is “filled with colors and sounds and scents and monotonous paired rhymes,” especially “nature’s femininity extends back to Eve” (Reeve F.D. 2008: 655). The writer’s poetry and short stories all possess some strange compatibility and closeness: “the creative innovations in prose of Bunin were often prepared in his early poetry” (Двнятина Т. Bunin-lit.ru 16/6/2021. <http://bunin-lit.ru/bunin/kritika/dvinyatina-zametki-o-poezii-bunina.htm>). Bunin himself also admits: “If I want to, I could write any of my favorite stories into poetry” (Лю Сычэнь 2017: 421). Thus, nature in his poems and short stories is in the form of “feminine” appearance and essence. As seen in the quotes above, nature goes

hand in hand with fragrance. In “Antonov Apples,” it is the fragrance of Antonov apples. This fragrance relates to the past and preserves the eternal beauty of the past. This fragrance also has the *power* to recall the joys, emotions, and desires of man. In “Antonov Apples,” Antonov apples populate all four parts of the story. In the first three parts, Antonov apples are made concrete by way of image and aroma. In the end, Antonov apples remain only in the narrator's memory.

In Thach Lam's story, the ylang-ylang fragrance is associated with the female character Nga, the eternal fragrance and femininity. And in Bunin's short stories and poems, although nature has no association with any particular woman, it is still very charming to the storyteller. It is so overwhelming that the narrator must assert: “With not much land, life is still beautiful.” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 418). Despite little land, there are still fields and hunting forests (despite the absence of borzoi dogs and Kirghizia horses), and sparsely leafy gardens (albeit not apple orchards). Russian philosophers always emphasize the harmony and oneness of femininity and nature, which is usually identified in various names including “Russian Mother Earth, Russian eternal femininity,” and “Russia is a dependent, negative land” (Бердяев 2008: 16). Perhaps, that could help explain why, despite the ups and downs, together with poverty, Russia with its nature, estates, and scenery are still all beautiful in the eye of the writer. As Бердяев (Berdiaev), a philosopher, once stated: “The exclusive domination of the Eastern qualities in Russia has always been a slave for the feminine nature” (Бердяев 2008: 30). Here, we could realize a significant difference in presenting nature and femininity in the two literary works. In “In the Ylang-Ylang Shade,” nature and femininity are two entities connected by fragrance, evoking feelings, and preserving memories of the characters. In “Antonov Apples,” nature and femininity have become a unity, so when the fragrance connecting the eternity and evoking sensations are gone, the memories of that natural-cultural landscape remain. This contention is an interesting perception of the nature of the two eastern elements in two stories of two writers, although two eastern lands are respectful of women and femininity. In *Cơ sở văn hóa Việt Nam (The cultural foundation of Vietnam)*, Trần

Ngọc Thêm affirms that respect for women is characteristic of the wet-rice agricultural culture of a Southeast country like Vietnam (Trần Ngọc Thêm 1999: 23). And the Russian philosopher Berdiaev considers Russian “becoming the Virgin Mary” (Бердяев 2008: 20). Simultaneously, this exciting perception also forces the readers to recognize and have a more careful view when examining and perceiving Eastern concepts in the culture and literature of Vietnam and the world.

Karen J. Warren (2000) highlights the relationship between women and ecology when it comes to various aspects, namely trees, forests, forestry, water and drought, food and agriculture, colored people, children, health, and climate justice. This data tends to be mechanical and quantitative. In this context, I would like to highlight a qualitative and abstract relationship, albeit on enduring philosophical and literary bases. In the romantic manifesto “On the sublime,” Schiller, more than once referred to nature by the pronoun *her* (the third-person pronoun, singular, female, often translated into Vietnamese: *Nàng*). Evidently, the fragrance here serves as a sensory connection: the originality, femininity, and eternity in each human being and scenery. *Từ điển biểu tượng văn hóa thế giới* (*The Dictionary of World Cultural Symbols*) not only asserts the role of fragrance as a factor to distinguish the immortality of goddesses from ordinary women but also affirms the symbolic values of fragrance for memories: “The lingering fragrance of a person after she has gone could kindle a conception of time and memories. Thus, the fragrance also symbolizes memories” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 2002: 461). Fragrance also “represents the awareness of conscience” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 2002: 461) as well, due to its purifying effect. This effect, together with the representation of conscience via the virtues of Thanh and Bunin’s narrator seems to be evident in “In the Ylang-Ylang Shade” and “Antonov Apples.” Still speaking of that return, Thanh and Bunin’s narrator show an attachment to the land and people in his homeland. Doctors and psychologists confirm that “fragrances and smells have the human psyche in power” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 2002: 462). Fragrance and the human senses link people and nature, and bring people closer to nature.

III. Traces of the Urban in the Countryside

In “In the Ylang-Ylang Shade”, a city’s symbol, the product of urbanization and industrial civilization, is a train. However, Thanh refuses to use these once he set foot in his motherland. On the one hand, perhaps, he wants to be wholly immersed in the countryside. On the other hand, he also wants to preserve the silence and purity of this place. When his grandmother asks him why he has not taken the coach, Thanh replies: “Just a short dirt road, no need to drive. I can walk every day” (Thạch Lam 2015: 169). Also, the urban area with the train’s appearance in the story of Thạch Lam is nothing but the product of the colonial regime. When the French colonialists invaded Vietnam, France also rebuilt cities and combined with the railway transport system to meet socio-economic needs.⁷ What came from the city at that time was considered bad for Vietnamese people, especially farmers.⁸ Having rejected those products of civilization right at the entrance of his hometown, Thanh seemed to be seeking some ways of preserving the ecology and nature of the countryside from urbanization and colonization.

More interestingly, there are also some traces of civilization and industrialization in “Antonov Apples,” which is embodied the image of a train. That train appears at night in the first part of the story:

- Yes, it’s me. Aren’t you sleeping, Nikolay?
 - Sleep’s not for us, sir. But it must be late already. Seems the night train’s coming now...
- We listen for a long time, eventually discern a trembling in the ground. The trembling turns into noise, and soon it seems the train wheels are pounding out their rapid measure just beyond the garden:

⁷ As soon as they established dominance in Vietnam and Indochina, French colonialists prioritized the construction of projects with "strategic objectives: canals in Cochinchina, railways to the Vietnam-China border" (according to Lê Thành Khôi 2014: 507). The Vietnamese railway was built by the French in 1881, and in 1885 the first train departed (*Development history*, Vietnam railways corporation, <http://vr.com.vn/lich-su-phat-trien.html>).

⁸ According to Trần Ngọc Thêm in *The Cultural Foundation of Vietnam*, the traditional Vietnamese people are inherently attached to village stability, especially “not value urban areas”, “the psychology of focusing on agriculture (rural), scorning commercial (urban) is everywhere” (Trần Ngọc Thêm 1999: 123).

rumbling and knocking, the engine flies toward us... closer, closer, ever louder and more furious... until its roaring suddenly subsides, dies off, as if the cars had sunk into the earth... (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 409-410).

It appears that the train, at that time, was not influential enough to affect or cause any harm to the peaceful, serene, and beautiful life of people in the country estates. However, in the fourth part of “Antonov Apples,” although the narrator does not directly state the cause of deterioration and dilapidation of noble families - Russian country estates, the year of publication (1900) could potentially suggest some of the reality of Russian society at that time. At that time, Russian capitalism began to penetrate Russian social life, witnessing the feeble power of the monarchy, degeneration of the nobility, bourgeois-democratic revolutionary movements, and new development of proletariat revolutionary movements. Russian peasants and rural areas had to encounter major changes. In *Lịch sử văn học Nga (History of Russian Literature)*, Nguyễn Kim Đính wrote: “Entering the twentieth century, the center of the world revolutionary movement moved to Russia. The brutal tsarist regime is the ‘jail of a hundred nations,’ the oppression of the capitalist ‘iron and steel bosses’ is very heavy” (Đỗ Hồng Chung, Nguyễn Kim Đính et al. 2003: 466). However, the story by Bunin highlights that the Russian countryside at that time still shows a desirable life in harmony and closeness to nature. That life is encapsulated in just a single word “beautiful”: “The aroma of antonovkas is disappearing from estates and country houses...” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 418). Regardless of “the age of petty farms, owners on the verge of abject poverty. But even those impoverished lives are good!” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 418). In the mind of the character *I*, the train and its terrible sound quickly had sunk into the earth. Obviously, like Thanh in “In the Ylang-Ylang Shade” who does not bring urban elements in the countryside, the character *I* do not want to ruin the peace of the Russian estate by the noisy sound of the train. Although the invasion of urban civilization is inevitable, beautiful memories may still be made of the estate of the pure countryside. Today, the Russian estates are deemed “a museum of living conditions for the real Russian society, not an abstract

representation of Russian culture” (Радугин 2005: 261). In early 1923 Russia, the *Society for the Studies of Russian Country Estates* with a new scientific discipline called “the study of estates” came into being. This existence of new scientific study highlights the role of the Russian country estates in the cultural and spiritual life of modern Russian people, especially the role of preserving cultural memories about the pure countryside.

IV. The Countryside and the Desire of Contemporary People

Narratives of the countryside and traces of urban in “In the Ylang-Ylang Shade” and in “Antonov Apples” suggest that it is humans who transform natural entities living and working spaces which then become the embodiments of the harmonious interaction between nature and humans. In these spaces, people can live in harmony with nature and in rural people’s warmth and pure kindness. In “Antonov Apples,” more than once, the narrator confesses his desire to become a farmer: “There was a time when I found nothing more alluring than the life of a mouzhik” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 411). Becoming a farmer, he “will be riding through the village on a sunny morning, taking a scythe into the fields, threshing the wheat, sleeping on sacks of straw on the threshing floor” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 411-412). Especially the farmer will “get up with the sun on holidays as church bells ring” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 411-412). And “that mouzhik” will have “lunch at the home of your bearded father-in-law-a lunch of hot mutton served on wooden plates with sifted-flour bread, with honey from the comb, and homemade beer-one could wish for nothing more” (Бунин 2006. Том 1: 411-412). That dream is apparently associated with a historical context. That is, in Russia, when Populism was thriving, many intellectuals and nobles were engrossed in forming an attachment to peasants and the countryside, typically some extreme wishes and actions of the Count - writer Лев Толстой (Lev Tolstoy)⁹ towards whom Bunin always showed his admiration. Bunin also approached

⁹ Lev Tolstoy (1828-1910) is a great Russian writer and thinker of the nineteenth century, the author of classic work novels: *Война и мир* (*War and Peace*), *Анна Каренина* (*Anna Karenina*), *Воскресение* (*Resurrection*).

Populism quite a lot through his brother (See Богомолов 2000: 544-548). Populism is a movement of Utopian Socialism for peasants of the young Russian intelligentsia in the late 19th century. The founders are А.И.Герцен (A.I. Ghersen), and Н.Г.Чернышевский (N.G. Chernyshevsky). In the 1870s, the most prominent thinkers of Populism included П.Л.Лавров (P.L. Lavrov), М.А.Бакунин (M.A. Bakunin) and Н.К.Михайловский (N.K. Mikhailovsky). Populism represents the ideology of peasant democracy with a dream of advancing to socialism and bypassing capitalism in the form of rural communes. (Populists asserted that the peasantry (led by intellectuals) was a major driving force of the revolutions. In the 1870s and 1880s, Populism played an active role in fighting against the Tsar. However, Populism, later, became an obstacle to the propagation of Marxism in Russia) (Ильичев Л.Ф. 1983: 515). In both real-life and his compositions, Lev Tolstoy always showed his favor and good endings to characters in rural areas, particularly rural nobles (provincial nobles) like the old Duke Болконский (Bolkonsky)¹⁰ in *Война и мир* (*War and Peace*) or Левин (Levin)¹¹ in *Анна Каренина* (*Anna Karenina*). Even Нехлюдов (Nhekhludov)¹² in “Утро помещика” (“The Landowner’s Morning”) is an ideal model for the noble landowner of Tolstoy. Bunin, in writing of “Antonov Apples,” appears to have implicitly engaged in a dialogue with the great writer about the rurality, together with the social status of the rurality and peasant. Tolstoy realized that the rurality and peasant were the roots of the Moscow nobility to feed that nobility, he called

¹⁰ Old Duke Bolconsky in *War and Peace* by Lev Tolstoy is the father of Duke Andrei Bolconsky, a retired general-commander of the army; he lives in the countryside on his large estate. He loves his children and loves labor, especially hates the frivolous aristocracy in the capital.

¹¹ Levin is a provincial aristocratic landowner in Lev Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Levin has valuable property in the country, and he has many serfs. Levin wishes to live all his life in the peaceful countryside, surrounded by his serfs. Levin also cherishes plans and projects for rural reform to "pursue a peaceful life for the Russian countrymen." Levin loves Kitty, a noble lady in Moscow. However, only after Kitty failed in love with the pompous guy Vronsky, Kitty agrees to marry Levin. Kitty accepts to return to the countryside with Levin to live a quiet and noble life here.

¹² Nhekhludov is the main character in Lev Tolstoy's short story “Утро помещика” (“The Landowner’s Morning”). Nhekhludov gives up his career in the noisy and gaudy urban to stay on his family's estate in the countryside and take care of his peasants to re-educate them.

them as “people who make a living” (Trần Thị Phương Phương 2000: 13). However, it appears that the rurality (particularly rural nature) and peasant in his eyes are not beautiful, harmonious, pure, original, and eternal as in the literary works of Bunin. From the perspective of poor nobles living in a rural hamlet, Bunin emphasizes that the rurality is always beautiful when it belongs to itself and when it exists in harmony with people, albeit in urbanization.

Speaking of Vietnamese Literature, Hoàng Đạo - Thạch Lam's brother, was also pillar of Tự Lực Văn Đoàn. In his novel, *Con đường sáng* (*The Bright Road*)¹³, Hoàng Đạo depicted two characters Duy – Thơ, based on the model of Nhekhludov and Levin - Kitty of Lev Tolstoy. In *The Bright Road*, Duy and Thơ tried to integrate with the countryside life and farmers. They tried to build new-style cottages for farmers and guide them to lead a civilized life. In the eyes of intellectuals who advocated reformism like Duy and Thơ, apart from nature, the countryside is rustic, and the peasants are dirty and disheveled. However, in Thạch Lam's works, especially “In the Ylang-Ylang Shade,” Thạch Lam views the countryside through a more different eye, gentle, honest, harmonious, and beautiful. The reason for this is because Thạch Lam lived and maintained a strong attachment to the countryside and farmers (while his fourth brother, Hoàng Đạo, mainly studied in urban areas) (cited in Nguyễn Thị Thế 1974: 46-49). The true ecological life creates a sense of precious and pure ecology in his works, adding a voice in the dialogue, even re-adjusting the perception of urban readers about the rural areas in Vietnam at that time. His contribution plays a significant role in the contemporary literary and social context and even in this modern society.

Thus, the garden, the house, the water tank, the trellis of Tonkin jasmine, the bricked yard, and the flower-filled wall stretching to the house in “In the Ylang-Ylang Shade” (a cultural memory of the countryside in Vietnam for such a long time) and the

¹³ *Con đường sáng* (*The bright road*) is a novel about Duy, a petty-bourgeois intellectual young man who returns to the countryside because of hating a revelry and leisure life in the city. Duy and Thơ (his wife) teach the poor peasants to live in hygiene, live in harmony, and be equal with them.

Russian estate, are natural-man made products under the influence of culture and civilization to serve the needs of food, accommodation, labor, and rest, and today, have become a target that modern people aspire to own. However, undeniably, they are also the embodiment of people's search for harmony and balance between the satisfaction of humans' feelings and material needs on the one side and spiritual enjoyment on the other side. It is in these are natural man made products that help people get as close to nature as possible without destroying it, and then being "punished" by it.

Nowadays, the dream of living in nature is common among many people, including many Russians and contemporary Russian writers. In recent compositions, they have always been looking for "paradise." Their characters all find paradise in remote rural areas where people live close to and in harmony with nature. They are the narrators in the short story of Ключарёва Наталья (Natalya Klucharova) "Один год в раю" ("One Year in Paradise"), or in "Дом в деревне" ("The Country House") of Алексей Варламов (Aleksei Varlamov). The narrator in "One Year in Paradise" moves back to a wild rural area called Paradise after accidentally getting lost here, and it takes many years for the narrator in "The Country House" to seek and realize his dream of a house in a remote village with an old garden and sauna, surrounded by a river and a forest. That self-sufficient life is close to nature. Not only Eastern people who are supposed to have a mindset of living in harmony with nature, but also people from the Western world (regarding geographical location, half of Russia belongs to the West), who desire to conquer nature, all towards nature. They want to live in harmony with pristine, pure nature; especially when humans increasingly destroy nature through conquest. That ecology, in this context, is nature in harmony with human culture and has expressed its intrinsic values based on satisfying human feelings. That satisfaction just comes from a fragrance at times, like the scent of ylang-ylang in "In the Ylang-Ylang Shade," and the scent of Antonov apples in "Antonov Apples." In short, though distant when it comes to year and place of publication, both these literary works demonstrate the beauty and immutability of nature, in which nature has been transformed and

harmonized with human culture in the context of urbanization. Such interpretation is particularly potent in the context of the 21st century when people seek ways to build farms and get back to nature (Pannell D.J. 2000: 70). Is that a way to honor ecology, albeit late and quite phony? An example to illustrate is that the Natural History Museum in the United Kingdom held an exhibition of the Urban Nature Project on June 22, 2021 to help people reconnect with the natural world and find practical solutions to preserve our planet's future. In this event, Duchess Kate Middleton from the British Royal family also brought honey from the Anmer Hall estate of her family for school children. (Perry, Simon. People.com 22/6/2021. See more at <https://people.com/royals/kate-middleton-natural-history-museum/>).

V. Conclusion

Both Bunin and Thach Lam spent such a long time living and forming a strong attachment to the countryside. In adulthood, they started living and working in urban areas, leaving their homeland behind (Thach Lam living in Hanoi, Bunin living abroad), but most of their works are about their homeland with wild rural nature and people. To them, the pure rural natural world is really a paradise of the soul. Moreover, it is a memory store that preserves people and nations' cultural, moral, and religious values. By their writings, the two authors affirm the value of connecting ecology with human feeling and spirit. That value helps nourish people in this contemporary and modern society. It is the ideal world and the paradise that people of modern societies are looking for. By their writings, the two authors also suggest that fragrance (in relation to femininity) has the value of eternalizing nature and associating it with people instead of degenerating them. By juxtaposing the two works, examining images of the countryside in these two works, the readers could learn more about literature and people of the past. It turns out that people at the beginning of the industrial era desired an eternal world in harmony with nature. Besides criticizing the consequences of civilization (bourgeois habits, greed for money, disruption of urbanization to harmonious nature), humanity has always longed for a world in which people live peacefully and in

harmony with nature. It also turns out to be the most original and beautiful desire of humans.

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