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Facets of Russian Irrationalism between Art and Life

Mystery inside Enigma

Edited by Olga Tabachnikova



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Irrational Elements in Ivan Bunin's Short Story 'The Grammar of Love'

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The aim of the present study is not to discuss irrationalism as a philosophy but to analyse elements of a literary work that, although ostensibly realistic, turn out to involve a number of irrationalities. This analysis also provides an opportunity to examine the unique place occupied by Ivan Alekseevich Bunin (1870–1953) in the Russian literary and artistic world of the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Research to date has principally explored his place in literary history and the structural elements of his short stories, finding in him a follower of Chekhovian realism and impressionism.

This essay argues that the rational-irrational dichotomy appears at various levels in the plot throughout Bunin's short story 'The Grammar of Love' (1915). This paper analyses the roles played by the irrational elements in this work and the levels at which they function. At the various structural levels of the work the most obtrusive is the chronotope. The artistic space depicted in Bunin's works is an inseparable part of their semantic message. The actions of the main character begin in a real outer place that changes gradually, becoming ever more bleak and schematic. We are, in effect, travelling in the inner consciousness, in the world of memories and imagination. Under the influence of the spatial projection of memories, the unfamiliar countryside suddenly becomes familiar as the location of Ivlev's youthful riding experiences. We read in the first part of the story that "*такого пути Ивлев не знал*"¹ ("Ivlev knew of no such road"²), then, not much later, Bunin continues: "*Ивлев вспомнил места, вспомнил, что не раз ездил тут в молодости верхом*" (301) ("...and suddenly Ivlev recalled the locality and remembered that as a youth he had often ridden in this area on horseback" (7)).

1 Ivan Bunin, *Sobranie sochinenii*. 9 vols. Edited by A.S. Miasnikov, B.S. Riurikov and A.T. Tvardovskii. Moscow. 1966. iv. 300. All the Russian citations are taken from this edition, with page number references in the text.

2 Ivan Bunin, *Night of Denial: Stories and Novellas*. Translated from the Russian and with notes and an afterword by Robert Bowie. Northwestern University Press. 2006. 6. All the English citations are taken from this edition, with page number references in the text.

Throughout the story, we tread on the narrow path bordering dreams and reality, that is, irrationality and rationality. Already at the beginning of the work, the narrator himself has already conjured up the lulling effects of the cadenced beating of the horses' hooves and the rhythmic tinkling of the troika's bells. The carriage driver is unhappy and melancholic, disinclined to engage in conversation. His passenger therefore surrenders himself to peaceful, purposeless contemplation, perhaps even to the type of sleep that occurs when the consciousness is dulled. Later, during the course of the journey, the unfamiliar countryside suddenly becomes familiar, conjuring up in Ivlev a dreamlike landscape, a scene that his conscious mind had guarded from his dreams and whose existence was therefore also tied to memories.

The author keeps the spatial-time modality under a veil of uncertainty – we never do find out whether Ivlev actually did ride on that land, since the rest of the countryside remains unfamiliar to him. The oscillating spatial-time modality is in elemental connection with the fact that Bunin shows every occurrence in his short story in diverse contexts, value perspectives and temporal viewpoints at the same time. As a result of the artistic portrayal of space, the richly detailed descriptions of nature one came to expect from Bunin are all increasingly absent; moreover, the outer landscape is completely cleared, “becoming ever more impoverished and more remote” (6). In ‘The Grammar of Love’, the changing spatial location reveals the time travel occurring in the depths of the protagonist's consciousness, and traces his process of self-recognition and self-interpretation to the end – just as in Bunin's other works of the 1910s, *Siblings* or *The Dreams of Chang*.

If we study the temporal structure of the short story, we find that, instead of the rationally categorised, linear recorded time, various planes of time alternate. There appear also, together with the narrator's objective present and the story's past, the concepts of timelessness, eternal life and the inner, experiential time of the conscious mind. If we try to reconstruct and organise chronologically what happens in the story, or arrange in a linear fashion the fabular causality line, the following story evolves:

Twenty years before Ivlev's journey (marking this as the time we relate to), a chambermaid, Lushka, dies on the Khvoshinsky³ estate, leaving her squire, who is madly in love with her, the gift of a young son.

3 In this paper we follow the transliteration of the names *Khvoshinsky* and *Khvoshino* used in the English translation (Robert Bowie, 2006) of the short story.

Ivlev is still a child when he first hears of this 'oddball' who had idolised his maid all his life. Influenced by the squire's obsessive love, he himself at a young age almost falls in love with the girl, who by that time has died long ago. On numerous occasions, he rides along the shores of the lake where the girl supposedly drowned.

Khvoshinsky dies in the winter of the year of Ivlev's travels. Ivlev arrives in Khvoshino in the summer, meets Lushka's son, checks out his old room and purchases the squire's heavily guarded book. Upon arriving on the estate, he becomes fascinated by the unfolding secret environment and feels that Lushka had lived and died a very long time ago. On his way home, he thinks only of Lushka and feels that this woman had now become a part of his entire future life.

Due to Bunin's artistic method of observation, his virtuoso prose style and the rapid changes in the time planes, the story's rational time structure becomes difficult to follow and is pushed into the background. Moreover, its measurable temporal boundaries become increasingly vague, suggesting the timelessness of the world of fables.

The characters in the short story are full of rational-irrational contradictions, making the reader wonder where the boundary between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible might be. An example is the main character in this story, the one-time estate owner, Khvoshinsky, whom, some critics have claimed, Bunin modelled on his grandfather, Nikolai Dmitreevich.⁴ The story, in line with Bunin's other works, contains autobiographical aspects.⁵ The author, when still young, had heard a confusing story from his father concerning a poor landowner in their neighbourhood who had lost his mind over his love for one of his serf girls. Khvoshinsky's character changes continually, depending on the person in the story who conjures him up or tries to explain for the reader his personality or behaviour. He is a central figure and yet it is never clear whether he had in reality lost his sanity or whether he had, as his son claimed, died with a sound mind. Only one thing is certain: that he kept the little book, *The Grammar of Love*, with him constantly, even going so far as to put it under his pillow at night.

Ivlev's travelling companion, the coach driver, is also an ambiguous character. At the beginning of the journey he is depicted as grouchy, uncommunicative and passive. Then, at one point during the course of their travels, he takes over the role of the leading figure, making decisions regarding the course they

4 See, e.g. Serge Kryzyski, *The Works of Ivan Bunin*. Mouton. The Hague. 1971. 116.

5 See Bunin, *Sob. soch.*, IX. 369.

should take. In fact, he determines the purpose of their entire journey and, while Ivlev is laid back, passive and introspective, becomes not only the driver of the *troika*, but also Ivlev's guide and helper. He is the one who diverts Ivlev from his original course onto another. He is familiar with his surroundings and their past, and with the people's stories and their souls. His character, like that of the fairy-tale peasant lad who overcomes obstacles, is also irrational. Even so, he is the one who tries to find a rational explanation for Khvoshinsky's story: "Нет, утопилась, – сказал мальй. – Ну, только думается, он скорей всего от бедности от своей сошел с ума, а не от ней..." (301). ("No, she did, she drowned herself", said the lad. "Only they figure he most likely went crazy from being so poor, not on account of her" (7)).

The title of the story is also contradictory. Grammar describes a language system, a logically constructed, rational collection of rules. In contrast, love is an irrational force depicted, even in Greek-Roman mythologies, as coming upon men incomprehensibly and out of the control of the human mind and will; it is something imposed upon them by the gods (cf. Cupid's arrow). The lovesick landowner turns Lushka, previously his maid, into the lady of the house and her room into a hallowed place. He idolises her to the extreme and weaves fanciful dreams around her, whereas, in reality, she is quite homely. The cause and circumstances of Lushka's death are never really clarified – she drowned, drowned herself, or perhaps died suddenly, quite young, in some other way – no clear explanation is ever given in the short story.

In his works of the 1910s, Bunin describes love as an irrational, cosmic force which to the rational mind is just as incomprehensible as death or nature itself. Love itself is a secret, its subject puzzling, incomprehensible and its consequences unforeseeable – a fateful force, suddenly and unexpectedly coming upon a person, dominating and changing destinies. This passion, according to Bunin, is followed by devastation and tragedy, which the main hero experiences as either a loss or a punishment. It is always a life-altering, exceptional occurrence, which appears in his works of the 1920s as a force inherent in the unconscious.⁶ In the stories of the 1910s, the main characters' tragedy is that of not understanding fatal love's basic characteristic: infinity. The cause of their destruction is not recognising that love as an infinite natural force cannot be realised within the finite boundaries of man.⁷

In 'The Grammar of Love' Bunin makes a parallel comparison between Khvoshinsky's *Codex of Love* and the eccentric squire's unusual behaviour:

6 Cf. Mitia's Love, Sunstroke, The Elagin Affair.

7 See N.M. Kucherovskii, *Ivan Bunin i ego prosa*. Tula. 1980. 207.

Любовь не есть простая эпизода в нашей жизни. (306)

(Love is no Mere Episode in our Lives (13)).
It follows us to the grave.)

Khvoshinsky idolised Lushka and wove crazy dreams about her all his life. After her death, he shut himself up in her room, and lived the rest of his life in its confines, never leaving it.

Разум наш противоречит сердцу и не убеждает оно. (306)

(Our Reason gainsays the Heart, but the Latter is not persuaded (13)).

По рассказам стариков-помещиков, сверстников Хвощинского, он когда-то слыл в уезде за редкого умницу. И вдруг свалилась на него эта любовь, эта Лушка, потом неожиданная смерть ее, – и все пошло прахом... (300)

(According to the stories of old-time landowners, the contemporaries of Khvoshinsky, at one time people in the province considered him a man of rare intelligence. But all at once he was stricken with this love, this Lushka; then came her sudden death and everything went to pieces (5–6))

Женщину мы обожаем за то, что она владычествует над нашей мечтой идеальной. (306)

(We worship Woman because She holds Dominion over our Ideal Dream (13))

Lushka became Khvoshinsky's ideal whom he respected as wife and, even more, as a goddess:

выделялся и величиной и древностью образ в серебряной ризе, и на нем, желтея воском, как мертвым телом, лежали венчальные свечи в бледно-зеленых бантах. (303–304)

(Prominent among them, both for size and for antiquity, was an icon in a silver mounting; on top of it, all waxy yellow like dead flesh, lay some wedding candles tied with pale green bows (10)).

Тщеславие выбирает, истинная любовь не выбирает. – Женщина прекрасная должна занимать вторую ступень; первая принадлежит женщине милой. Сия-то делается владычицей нашего сердца: прежде нежели мы отдадим о ней отчет сами себе, сердце наше делается невольником любви навеки...(306)

Vainglory chooses, True Love never chooses. The Woman of Beauty is relegated to a secondary Station; first belongs to the Woman of Grace. She becomes the Sovereign of our Hearts; ere we ourselves take Cognizance, our Hearts have become Thralls of Love for All Time...(13).

Оттого, что этот чужак обоготворил ее, всю жизнь посвятил сумасшедшим мечтам о ней, я в молодости был почти влюблен в нее, воображал, думая о ней, бог знает что, хотя она, говорят, совсем нехороша была собой. (299)

(Because of the way that eccentric worshiped her and dedicated all his life to insane dreams of her, I was almost in love with her myself as a boy; God only knows what fancies came into my head when I thought about her, although they say she was certainly no beauty (5)).

The writer's conception of love that appeared first in this short story⁸ was a determining factor in his artistry for several years. It was enriched with further significant nuances in the decades that followed.

I have mentioned above the fairy-tale parallel found in this short story and the similarity to the tales of its time structure in terms of its timelessness. The short story's fairy-tale quality can be explained by Vladimir Propp's theory of fairy-tale functions.⁹ In his analysis of Russian fairy-tales, Propp differentiates the so-called *functions* from the plot and the motives, itemising the constant and sequentially determined contextual elements that play an important part in the course of the plot's development and determine the fairy-tale's structural framework.

Fairy-tales usually begin with: 'Once upon a time...' – a phrase referring to the set spatial-temporal structure showing that the story is not under the constraints of either space or time. The tale then usually continues with the hero travelling to a place for a period of time. Bunin's story begins with: "*Некто Ивлев ехал однажды в начале июня в дальний край своего уезда*" (298).

8 See V.N. Afanasiev, I.A. Bunin. *Ocherk tvorchestva*. Moscow. 1966. 231.

9 V. Ya. Propp, 'Volshebniie skazki' in *Russkaia skazka*. Leningrad. 1984. 173–201.

(“One day in early June a certain Ivlev was travelling to a distant region of his province” [3]), with neither space nor time precisely determined, nor the main character concretely identified. Propp calls this function “temporal absence” which might be linked with “set on his way” or “search path”. The reason for the journey might be the absence or lack of something, and the hero is either sent away or leaves on his own in order to find or bring home that thing. At the beginning of the fairy-tale all goes well, in marked contrast to the later misadventures or trials.

Bunin’s short story also contains these elements, although the absence or lack is not knowingly manifested at the beginning. It is only later that the true purpose of the journey is made clear. Bunin makes skilful use of changes in weather to describe the contrast between the initial fortunate situation and the later difficulties. He writes: “Ехать сначала было приятно” (298), [The drive was pleasant at first (3)], then later:

погода поскучнела, со всех сторон натянуло линючих туч и уже накрапывало [...] когда поехали дальше, дождь разошелся уже по-настоящему (299–300).

The weather had turned bleaker, discoloured clouds had gathered on all sides, and now it was sprinkling [...] when they started off again, the rain came down in torrents (4–5).

A set structural element of the fairy-tale is the spatial structure built around two simultaneously existing worlds: one, the world that the protagonist leaves on embarking on his journey, and which the introductory words refer to; and the other, a world found far away both in space and time, where various difficulties have to be overcome in order to enter, since it is guarded by a witch or by similar characters in other versions of the fairy-tale. Entrance to this other world, where real space completely disappears and the irrational, fantastical world of fairy-tales exists, is through the witch’s hut or other versions thereof, such as castles or mountains. The witch is not easily definable. She is a very complex character. She guards the entrance to the mysterious world, deciding who is worthy to enter. She continually puts the protagonists to the test and, when one succeeds, she takes on the role of giver by either handing him a magic tool or giving advice or directions. The meeting with her is an element registered beforehand, a part of the canonical unfolding of the plot. The witch’s hut is where the dark forest begins and beyond which the other world opens up to where the hero intends to go.

In Bunin’s story, Ivlev, the discoverer of an old secret, is also a hero in search of something. The spatial-temporal structure of the work results in the

portrayal of two different simultaneously existing worlds – Ivlev's journey begins in the real outer dimension on a particular day in June, then leads into the past, into the land of memories, the inner fields of consciousness. The catalyst setting in motion the process of remembrance and, at the same time, the one guarding the world of secrets, is the Countess who, in Bunin's short story, assumes the role of the witch. When Ivlev passes the test, she takes on the role of giver and provides him various pieces of information directing him towards Khvoshino. Beyond the Countess's palace (a variant of the witch's hut), he finds himself on a strange road which leads him through a forest to Khvoshino, to the residence of the late landowner.

In the fairy-tale, the function of the helper is also set. The earliest, zoomorphic helper is the bird, a cult animal that transported the souls of the dead. Later on, this role was taken over by the winged horse whose main duties were to transport the hero from one world to the next. The helper may be anthropomorphic and extraordinary, with super-human physical capabilities, capable of anything, or else an all-knowing character who helps the protagonist by giving advice or through craftiness. In the fairy-tales, the hero with a helper is entirely passive; the helper takes over his obligations and even fights the enemy.

In 'The Grammar of Love', instead of Ivlev it is the "lad" who not only drives the carriage and cares for the horses, but also defines the route and the journey's purpose. He takes the hero to see the Countess, easily orients himself in surroundings unfamiliar to Ivlev, takes on the pack of angry dogs and, with the help of his horses, delivers his passenger to the Khvoshinsky estate so that he may obtain and take home the object of his search, the book of love. He also assumes the role of the all-knowing helper, for whom the animals are also companions, and beside whom, apart from when purchasing the Khvoshinsky book, Ivlev stays passive. Bunin remained true to the fairy-tale's structure here, too, since the role of acquiring, abducting or stealing the sought-after object and then returning home with it is always the function of the hero, while the helper may only advise as to the manner in which this might be achieved.

There is also one more essential archetypal element in fairy-tales which is also found in Bunin's short story: the role of the accidental. The structure of the fairy-tale is not based on logic. The accidental turn of events affords imagination the opportunity to flow freely, thus allowing the rational world to open its doors to the world of the fantastic and the irrational.

The references indicated in the short story take the reader into the world of superstition, interpretation of dreams and the esoteric. Among the books in Khvoshinsky's library, Ivlev finds the following obscure, old tomes: *The Accursed Demesne*, *The Morning Star and Nocturnal Daemons* and *The Latest Dream Book*. Demonic beliefs also appear on the plot level in the story focusing on Lushka's character, as well as in the accounts of her mysterious death. Bunin

describes Lushka as a legendary and mysterious figure, who upon her death is revered even as a saint, whose necklace is guarded as a relic, and whose wedding candles receive a place on the icon shelf. Yet the only thing we know about her for certain is that she served as a maid in Khvoshinsky's household and that she died quite young and unexpectedly. The unwritten tradition has it that she drowned, moreover, that she intentionally drowned herself. In Slavic mythology¹⁰ the girl who drowns herself is called an *utopenitsa*; she later turns into a *rusalka*, a 'water fairy' or 'mermaid', who may appear to humans in the form of animals (for example, frogs or rats). The *utopenitsa* drowns herself because of a broken heart, and the legends surrounding the *rusalka* also concern a very deep yearning for love.

Why might Lushka have drowned herself? We only know that for Khvoshinsky she did not stop existing following her death:

...Лушкиному влиянию приписывал буквально все, что совершалось в мире: гроза заходит – это Лушка насылает грозу, объявлена война – значит, так Лушка решила, неурожаем случился – не угодили мужики Лушке...(300)

...he ascribed literally all phenomena in the world to Lushka's influence. If there was a thunderstorm, it was Lushka who had visited this affliction upon them; if war was declared, it meant Lushka had so decided; if the event of a crop failure, the peasants had incurred the displeasure of Lushka (6)].

Upon her death, Lushka became one with the universe's unpredictable and irrational forces, part of the cosmos, even as love itself. She became its equal and, having enclosed Ivlev within her powers, she entered his life forever.

By examining the intertextual relationships of Bunin's work, we can determine that citations have an important role both at the composition and at the fabular level, enriching and exposing the plot with new denotations. From 'The Last Death', a poem written by one of Bunin's favourite poets, Evgenii Baratynskii,¹¹ he copied the following first few sentences:

10 See A.N. Afanasiev, *Poeticheskie vozzreniia slavian na prirodu*. 3 vols. Moscow. 1995. II. 339.

11 Russian poet, short story writer, and essayist, who lived between 1800 and 1844. Baratynskii holds an important place among the poets who contributed to the Golden Age of Russian poetry. He is best known for his sensitive elegies dealing with loss and despair and for the personal, revelatory tone of his love poems. Baratynskii and his works were rediscovered

*Есть бытие; но именем каким
Его назвать? Ни сон оно, ни бденье;
Меж них оно, и в человеке ум
С безумием граничит разуменье. (304)*

There is a state but by what name
shall it be called? Nor dream is it, nor wake,
it lies somewhere between. Through it the
mind's dementia may verge upon the truth (11)]

The enlightenment occurring at the fine line between the sound mind and madness, between “*son*” (dreaming) and “*bden'e*” (being awake) that Baratynskii alluded to in his poem, serves Bunin as explanation and justification for Khvoshinsky's fateful story. There is, then, an existence between the rational and the irrational, where the mind falls under the spell of inexplicable higher powers. The irrational natural forces found in the story, such as love even, or its embodiment in the form of a woman in the person of Lushka, “в какое-то экстагическое житие превратившей целую человеческую жизнь, которой, может, надлежало быть самой обыденной жизнью...” (304–305) [had transmuted a whole human life into some rapturous state of existence, a life destined to be most commonplace...(11)]. The short story's original title, *Nevol'nik lubvi*, that is, ‘The Thrall of Love’, also alluded to this obsessive condition.

The citations taken from the little book, *The Grammar of Love*, bought by Ivlev from Khvoshinsky's son have become part of the story's text. As discussed above, the rules of the *Codex of Love* accorded point by point with the eccentric landowner's behaviour, as described by Bunin. Khvoshinsky's own quatrain, together with the book it is found in, plays an accentuated role at the end of the short story, with its contents projecting back to the course of the entire story, thus, enlightening some previously ‘hazy’ situations.

That we are dealing with an existing book becomes evident from the notes the author wrote concerning the writing of the story:

Мой племянник, Коля Пушешников, большой любитель книг, редких особенно, приятель многих московских букинистов, добыл где-то и подарил мне маленькую старинную книжечку под заглавием *Грамматика любви*

BUNIN, *Sob. soch.*, IX. 369.

at the end of the nineteenth century by the Russian Symbolist poets, and a complete edition of his works was published for the first time in the early twentieth century.

My nephew, Kolia Pusheshnikov, a book collector who especially likes old books and who has several friends who are antiquarian booksellers, acquired somewhere a small old book entitled *The Grammar of Love*, which he gave to me as a present]¹²

In his short story, Bunin sets the book's publication in the nineteenth century. Literary historians, however (Vladislav Afanas'ev¹³ among them), were of the opinion that the citations referred to were taken from an eighteenth century book. The reason for this was that the form and content of the citations drawn from the *Codex of Love*, and especially their linguistic terms, were very similar to those of the works written in the eighteenth century. Some commentators have also assumed that they were mere stylisations, that is, that Bunin here imitated the writing style of the eighteenth century.

It was Arlen Blum¹⁴ who, on the basis of his bibliographical research, succeeded in finding the book described by Bunin and who published his discovery in *Nauka i zhizn* (*Science and Life*) in 1970. The book figuring in Bunin's short story was published in Moscow in 1831 under the title *The Grammar of Love, or the Art of Loving and of Being Loved in Return...the Work of Molière*. The question arose as to whether it really is the work of the great seventeenth-century French writer that we are dealing with here. Through further research, Blum discovered that the book's original author was the French writer Jules Demolier, who lived between 1802 and 1877, and who under the pseudonym Moleri published the book entitled *Code de l'amour* to which Bunin alluded. The Russian version appeared in Moscow in 1831, a copy of which Kolia Pusheshnikov gave to Bunin as a present. We know nothing of the translator, only that he published under the alias "SZ. S". The book is indeed a "magnificent publication" and "full of witty anecdotes" just as Bunin described it. From Blum's article we learn that Bunin cites accurately from the book, though, for artistic effect he occasionally puts in close proximity to each other two statements that, in the original work, were found far apart and in different paragraphs. Stylistically, the book resembles the 'gallant' eighteenth-century works that were quite prevalent in the century previous to its publication.

¹² Translation is mine.

¹³ See V.A. Afanasiev, I.A. Bunin, 233.

¹⁴ Arlen Blum is a bibliographer and academician who works at the St Petersburg Academy of Culture and has published a bibliographical "*Index librorum prohibitorum* of foreign authors (in Russian translation, 1917—1991)", which lists books by foreign authors that were banned after being published in Russian and removed from libraries. (Online at: <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2008/92/su43.html>).

In fairy-tales the realm of secrets can only be reached with the help of some kind of incantation. According to Bunin's story, this may be through books or having knowledge of the contents of a certain book. In his quest, Ivlev the hero comes upon a secret of the past and, in the course of his travels, falls under the spell of the irrational forces that ruled the sometime landowner Khvoshinsky's fate. This story, like Bunin's *The Dreams of Chang*, contains two truths. One is the truth of Khvoshinsky's environment: his neighbour, the countess or old friend, Pisarev, only know his figure and life story from the outside, and judge him rationally. The other is the truth of the traveller, Ivlev, who tries to understand Khvoshinsky's personality from the inside, in such a way that he almost identifies with him. Thus Ivlev's journey in search of the truth leads him into the irrational world: the outer spatial changes display a process occurring in the deep inner consciousness and memory. This timelessness conjures up the fairy-tale world, where the character of heroes is not altered and the early harmony is ultimately restored. By contrast, in Bunin's story the main hero goes through inner changes. The early harmony cannot be regained, since understanding the secret, Khvoshinsky's truth, entails the start of a type of new existence for Ivlev.

The central theme of the story is deciphering a secret which, in itself, is already irrational. Moreover, this is a secret that accompanies the protagonist throughout his entire life and whose roots can be traced back to his childhood (cf. *Mitia's Love*). The fluctuation of the interpretation process (the explanation of a secret) is illustrated by Bunin by changes in the weather, which is at times cloudy, indicating the dark side of consciousness, and at times clear, illustrating the conscious mind's enlightenment. At the beginning everything is covered by a haze, then the weather clouds over and only upon arrival at Khvoshinsky's estate, in Lushka's room, does the twilight sky clear. But it is not the secret that gets revealed; on the contrary, Ivlev falls under the secret's spell.

By analysing the structural levels of the composition, we find that two mental processes coincide in the short story. On the one hand, we try to expose and explore something irrational in a rational manner, and, on the other hand, the solution to the secret coincides with the protagonist's process of self-interpretation, the projection of which at the level of the plot is again twofold. On the one hand, there is the journey completed in the real outer dimension, and, on the other hand, we have the journey through time, arriving in the depths of the protagonist's memory. The purpose of his voyage, the act of understanding ("razumen'e"), cannot, according to Bunin, be realised simply through rational means, by knowing or interpreting Khvoshinsky's stories. For this, Ivlev must identify with the by now legendary world of past heroes possible only irrationally, through empathy and intuitive experience. It means

that clear understanding – as Bunin alluded to it in citing Baratynskii's poem – cannot be attained either through a simple rational search for reasons, or by means of irrational identification only. It happens namely between the state of dreaming and of being awake, at the fine line bordering rational and irrational modes of cognition.

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