

# Reflection of Revolutionary Environment in the Ontology of I.A. Bunin's Poetry of the Pre-Emigrant Period

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## ABSTRACT

The paper explores I.A. Bunin's sentiment towards the revolution as well as reflection of his social and political views through poetry in 1915-1919 and letters to N.A. Nilus alongside excerpts from Bunin's non-fiction articles that have a distinct correlation with his pre-emigrant poetry ("I have no words", "Notes", "Mission of the Russian Emigration"). The author's poetry works are riddled with genre fusion, convergence between lyrics and non-fiction, narrative manner and apocalyptic motives – all contributing to the imprint of the time period and imbued with the apprehension of the upcoming revolution. Application of chronological method provides for vivid reconstruction of the 1917 atmosphere from Bunin's viewpoint and for tracing the shift in his social and political views during the creation of the 1915-1919 poetry. Comparative and typological approaches alongside the literary method are used to reveal mythologemes and images of Bunin's revolutionary lyrics that appeared to be inherent part of the cultural ontology.

**Keywords:** *I.A. Bunin, Poetry, Ontology of poetry, Genre fusion, Revolutionary period and environment, Russian culture.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Any piece of fiction is created not through the sole act of will and sentiment of its author, but rather emerges as part of reality, that can fuse various new purposes and interpretations, broadening/straightening the expanse and extending/shrinking the time required for a thorough reading of texts. The language expanse contributes to the sequencing of the author's mindset, including verbalization of those political, social, religious and other issues and events of public life that tend to be continuous in time and having profound impact on the creator of fiction. One can observe emergence of a whole brand new world of poetic reality with its own canon of genre and style evolution, linguistic properties etc. This is essentially the ontology of poetry, that should be rightfully considered within the holistic framework of the coherent approach, i.e. the ontology of culture.

It is not by chance that this paper was titled: "Reflection of revolutionary environment in the ontology of I.A. Bunin's poetry of the pre-emigrant period". The writer resented the events of the Revolution that can be traced through his non-fiction, diaries, letters and fiction (both prose and poetry). The Revolution had a powerful impact not only on the public life and the ontology of Russian mundanity, but also on the collective consciousness that translated in the mental transformation of the Russian community. The superindividual and historical genesis of the country was transfigured on the essential level and, following the law of polarity, the fate of its citizens was subdivided into the pre- and post-Revolutionary period. The ensuing Civil War and emigration aggravated the pessimistic and existential sentiments of the future Nobel laureate. The gateway to the Nobel Prize was long and vexatious.

The 1915 saw a bifurcation point in the poetical consciousness of Bunin: his lyrics started to reflect the images and motives that were concordant with

the revolutionary environment. The author attempts to reconstitute the coming Russia through stylistics of the Russian folk and epic tales (“Svyatogor and Ilya”, 1916; “Saltimbancos”, 1915), mythologems from the Old Testament and biblical prophecies (“The Leper”, 1915; “The Shroud of Christ”, 1916; “The years passed, and the walls of Heaven fell...”, 1916). And the emerging picture was far from being mirthful: the author used images of serf-corpses, crucified Christ, Babylon instead of Heaven, epic heroes, buried for eternity. Such stark images were called upon to amplify the apocalyptic and existential motives, to stir up the state of anxiety and misery, loneliness in the world of chaos. The poetical works start having a life of their own, that is separated from the will, life and sentiment of the author. Having polarized comprehension of and attitude towards the revolutionary environment, the witnesses to the historic events created new concepts in the poetical expanse. It is through these events that the hermeneutical field of the poetical ontology experiences a broad expansion, accompanied by bipolar models, dichotomy and other relevant discursive and semantic forms that tend to emerge alongside human history. Thus, the advent of new interpretations of fiction is driven by the sheer existence of the reader.

The author of this paper does not aim at covering the whole spectrum of Bunin’s ontology of poetry, as this should be the subject matter of a separate study. We attempt to explore a single aspect of the whole palette of challenges that is most unlikely to be fully covered in a single study due to absence of Bunin’s complete works and plethora of understudied poetical works (including different versions and editions).

## **2. I.A. BUNIN SENTIMENT TOWARDS THE REVOLUTION**

There is a great number of academic studies that cover the sentiment of I.A. Bunin as non-fiction writer: [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8]. The fact that one can confidently determine a solemn similarity between the artistic and non-fiction viewpoints of Bunin was outlined in the works of contemporary researchers.

It is widely accepted that the “Cursed Days” (1925-1927) is the most prominent work that reflects the author’s sentiment towards the Revolutionary time and is broadly covered in various research papers. However, we would like to explore the pre-emigrant period, that is revealed

through diaries and notes of 1917-1919 and which became the crucial source for the creation of the “Cursed Days”. Bunin used different stark epithets and metaphors to depict the Revolution: “Crimson mayhem”, “Pushkin’s riot”, “Giant crimson slapstick” [9], “the grand fever” [10] etc. The colour pallet of the depiction of the events of 1917-1919 is dominated by red and black.

Nevertheless, I.A. Bunin’s sentiment toward the Revolution was ambiguous and evolved alongside the writer’s professional maturity that can be easily traced through a multitude of alterations and correction made subsequently to the already completed works.

It is common knowledge that in 1915 Bunin was not a keen supporter of the Revolutionary ideas, however he was not totally against the idea of overthrowing the ruling elites (similar to the protagonist of his novel “Gentleman from San-Francisco”). The romanticized halo of the Revolution was soon dimmed by the ignorance and moral frailty of the masses that were granted freedom in 1917. In his letter to P.A. Nilus on May 27, 1917, Bunin wrote: “The masses act like filthy children. There is a total “Anarchy” and assertiveness in our district, stupidity and idiotic misunderstanding of not only the slogans of the Revolution, but even of plain human words. Our intellectuals will definitely recall this sordid time, as they have absolutely lost touch with the real life and were promoting the changes on behalf of masses that remained fully obscure....” [11].

Similar to the verse “The Leper” (1915) the author expresses a deep pessimistic view on the “bright future” advocated by the Bolsheviki in the article “I cannot speak” (1919). He uses biblical images and apocalyptic motives to advance the idea of the city of the dead. Yahve (who casts down glorious tsardoms), the prophet Isaiah (who calls the imbecile masses to repentance), righteous Job (whose “dreadful chronicle” represents in Bunin’s works the chronicle of a nation that has lost its Motherland). It is but a small list of the images from the Old Testament that is used to translate the spirit of the Revolutionary time.

However, Bunin tended to remain neutral while he lived in the “red” Moscow and during the first months in Odessa, even though that neutrality did not impact his attitude towards the Bolsheviki.

The environment reconstituted by Bunin in the “Cursed Days” and his non-fiction works was of anthropocentric nature and resonated with the ideas

of I.Kant. The categorical imperative of the German classist is voiced as a call to be true to the sense of moral judgment and never look upon a fellow human being as means to achieve one's own goals, even though the latter might be of public importance. Creation of the "bright future" (as noble cause) inevitably destroys the axiological model of the classic rationality. Therefore, the key idea of the Bolsheviks – annihilation of everything old for the sake of building up a new world – does not echo with I.A. Bunin. The utopian idea of the "kingdom of freedom", that had multiple origins and precedents in history (from works of Diodorus Siculus and Thomas More, Russo and Voltaire and up to the works of Karl Marx about the ultimate way for the human development through revolution) was unacceptable to the writer. It is for that reason that Bunin turned to the works of G. Lenotre – a French historian who gave a profound depiction of the French Revolution, where the portraits of André Chénier, Voltaire, Robespierre and other revolutionists were riddled with dark humour.

"The darkness would consume the earth and blackness – nations... And the generation would have a canine image..." [15]. Bunin conceptualizes the Revolution as partially driven by the forces of doom of the historic process and partially by the destructive and cruel instincts that prevail in the soul of the Russian people. The laws of the philosophy of history act in unison with the phenomenology of the human spirit.

In his letter to P.A. Nilus dd March 12, 1917: "... please, do not blame me for not writing, - the reason is in unbelievably unpredictability of life which I have to lead in Moscow during the last three months ... My, friend, such things are happening! The extent of events is such that my "tongue goes numb!" [16]. The contents of the letter correlate with the article "I cannot speak". "I have no words, I cannot speak. From the bottom of the senile heart that is teeming with tears due to the cruel necessity of the human communal life... May it repose in peace, born to the Old Russia and unaware that those, who are promoted as the builders of the New Russia, are crapping on its grave while laughing and popping sunflowers. May it repose, devoid by God of the dreadfulness of the Old Testament filth of our times, when even the voice of Isaiah and Job would be petrified!" [17].

I.A. Bunin considers Revolution to be the devastating beginning, evil, that has attained ecumenical scale and impinges upon the sacred,

universal values and the culture itself. The author was of opinion that all revolutions lead to the devaluation of a human life and abasement of human dignity.

The distinct and complex world of I.A. Bunin is quite real and simultaneously infused with mythic reminiscences, symbols and archetypical images, which provide for thorough consideration and comprehension of the symbolic and social and psychological nature of the author's epoch.

### **3. REVOLUTIONARY ENVIRONMENT IN THE POETRY OF I.A. BUNIN IN 1915-1919**

During the First World War I.A. Bunin created a number of poetical and prose works that had peculiar interchange between the genre evocation and the shaping of the plot and image. The novel "Gentleman from San-Francisco" (1915) and the poem "The Leper" (1915) share many commonalities in the model of genre and image that might appear at first glance. "Old Testament filthy desolation" infuses an American city, while the city of the dead in the poem has no name and hence becomes genericized as a holistic depiction of all capitalistic cities. The main protagonist in the novel can be viewed as "walking corpse", while the poem shows the leper among the "cypress tombs". The protagonists are surrounded by wasteland, studded with bones of the dead. The metaphysical triumph of evil is the result of both physical and spiritual wars. The filth of soul (that resides in the spiritual world) of the gentleman from San-Francisco creates a new (on material level) essence – the city of the dead, which is allegorically compared with the biblical sin city, Sodom and Gomorrah.

*Amid the charred ruins my donkey  
Is crying out in weary low...  
And I – I, the leper, am delighted  
To breath in spring through all this filth...  
Empty, destroyed and numb,  
This city henceforth belongs to me...  
[18]*

These lines were inspired by the events of the First World War; however, one can feel the prophetic voice of the poet that heralds the Revolution. It is not by mistake that biblical images of the prophets and the ill-fated Job recur to a reader's memory. Assimilation of the image of the

leper and the poet has a number of semantic correlations which appear gradually. This poem was published a number of times during the poet's lifetime. The unpublished versions of the poem had different titles, that reveals intellectual flexibility and multi-layer nature of Bunin's thought process on the subject matter of the leper and the city of the dead. The first title - "After the siege" – was struck out by the author in his notes and therefore it was published under the title "The Leper" in the newspaper "Stock market bulletin" (1915). This poem was later published in the collected works titled "Gentleman from San-Francisco" (1916), lifetime edition of Collected works (Petrograd, 1918), and, after expatriation from Russia, in Paris (1920) and Berlin (1935). The notebooks from the emigrant period of the poet contain new entries to the text of the poem as well as significant alterations. New titles: "In the Devastated City", "The Leper in the Devastated City", "War" shift the emphasis from the Revolutionary time to War. Bunin, who always gave a thorough consideration to his fiction in order to tailor lexical morphology, was prone to axe the lines of his poems. "The Leper" was one of the examples. In his notebook of 1915 Bunin removes the closing sextain that distinguished cultures: the Eastern vs the European; existing dichotomies: padishah vs "slave", seraglio vs city of the dead, rose almonds vs crimson tree of Judah. In the latter dichotomies the rose almond symbolizes spring, renewal of life, while the crimson tree reflects the sign of the man, damned for eternity. "Almond-shaped halo" or nimbus has been the symbol of "Maestas Domini" (i.e., transfigured Christ) as well as of The Virgin Mary since the Middle Ages. Therefore, the latter dichotomy bears crucial message throughout the closing sextain by aggravating the tragedy. Nevertheless, Bunin removes the sextain and there are no lines about the Judah since 1915. The new version is closed with the line "Where sound of the sea is fresh and heavy!". These lines reek with hope that everything was going to change for the better and the world would, finally, be restored to new life.

*And I – I, the leper, am delighted*

*To breath in spring through all this filth,*

*That thaws in the turquois skies...*

[19]

Turquois colour appears polysemantic in various cultures. For instance, the Persians considered turquois to be capable of saving a man

from death, while the Egyptians used it to decorate the tombs of their rulers. This colour is viewed as symbol of love and creativity in many eastern cultures. Therefore, one can speak of the symbolism of colour in the context of Bunin's works.

Poem "The Leper" gains renewed sense of purpose in 1919 when the author, having recovered from the "grand fever", starts to re-experience the unfolding events. The leper is not merely a biblical character, who bears resemblance to the ill-fated Job. These are Russian people that are being besieged by the legion of daemons. The generation of the "gentlemen from San-Francisco" is being taken over by the generation of the new "builders of earthly heaven, sponging and frigid ..., rabidly cursing wars between nations and even more rabidly calling for wars..." [20].

War is always two-dimensional and dualistic: material and spiritual. Though the former leads to visible, most frequently local devastation, the latter is much more powerful and can expand on the ecumenical scales. Even though the outcomes of the First World War were drastic, they didn't strike at the core of the Russian existence; the Revolution had a much more grasping demolition impact and people of Russia transformed into the "crimson tree of Judah" under the leadership of the "villain of planetary scale" (who is described in the following poem):

*I will roam from hall to hall,*

*Crunching with the broken glass,*

*Scavenging though piles of garbage, -*

*As padishah I'll enter the Seraglio*

*Where pink almonds are mixed*

*With crimson tree of Judah*

[21]

Bunin does not make any distinction between the faces of the Bolsheviks, the Red Army Men and their sympathizers. Those are the faces of bandits, spearheaded by the "villain of planetary scale". "The villain of planetary scale, who blessed himself with the mockingly appealing call to freedom, brotherhood and equality, scrounged off the Russian savage and was summoning the whole world to throw dirt at conscience, shame, love, mercy..." [22]. Each and every revolutionary is a bandit and a savage in the eyes of Bunin. The image of the rabid dog, with rampant and puddled gaze, that whirls away through the barton into the

heath (the poem “The master’s dead, the house abandoned...”, 1916) reflects the non-fiction depiction of the nature of civil riot and the “mayhem of evil” to the utmost.

The apocalyptic paradigm is defined by such mythologems as “dog”, “beast”, that has dark and destructive meaning. The dog is depicted in the following manner:

*He flies with husky hips,  
And foam is pouring from the tongue.  
Darts like an arrow through the yard,  
And through the garden further into heath,  
With crimson and paddled gaze,  
With bare fang, and a chained neck.*

[23]

The dog resembles the metaphysical conflict between good and evil, light and darkness. This mythologem “dog-beast” forms part of dichotomy and correlates to the bipolar oppositions in Bunin’s essay on the Revolution: the beast, that is overwhelmed by the “thirst for hypocrisy”, lives in the chaos and soulless environment, is distinguished from the image of order, that is symbolized by benevolence, truth, spiritual development.

All the poems, dedicated to the Revolutionary period and containing certain moral judgement of the events preceding the Revolution and those occurring in 1917 can be supposedly subdivided into three groups. The first one is represented by the poems “The Leper” (1915), “At the exodus” (1916), “The years passed, and the walls of Heaven fell...” (1916), “From the book of the prophet Isaiah” (1918), “Paradise lost” (1919), “The Shroud of Christ” (1916, 1919). Biblical characters, mythologems, plots from the Old and New Testament are used to reflect the perception of the upcoming tragedy; the artistically aligned picture of the Russian history is shown and metaphysically reflected upon.

A separate group is composed of poems that narrate the images of the Russian saints, whose ministration coincided with the social upheaval, historical “dismantlement” and “twists” of time, which, in their tragic tonality and essence, resemble the events of the First World War and the Revolution. “Sanctifier” (1915), “Mathew the All-knowing” (1916), “Saint Procopius” (1916), “Dream of Bishop Ignatius of Rostov” (1916). Such

poems, styled on the Church Slavonic texts, would transform (starting 1922) into the stylistic dominant narrative of Bunin’s poetry.

The second group of poems, which genre can be attributed to the non-fiction works of Bunin of that time, includes such works as “Kazan” (1915), “The master’s dead, the house abandoned...” (1916), “You won’t ever be resurrected, never rise...” (1916), “22 December 1918” (“And pain and shame and happiness...”, 1918), “Moscow” (“Darkness, cold, pre-dawn...”, 1919). “The ancient tenement opposite the Moon” (1918) is the poem in which the image of an orthodox church is presented as a sacred expanse, where a man embraces the lost paradise. The church’s reach is associated with the vertical ascension, where earthly life transcends into Heaven. The harmonical law of dialectics (unity of polarities) is translated into poems in the form of unity between earth and Heaven and (as often seen in Bunin’s artistic works) through the philosophy of colour: “pale-blue whitening of her walls”, “sky marble, white, with blue openings”. Churches of the ancient tenement shimmer “in this sky, among these clouds”, becoming part of the “depth of the skies” [24]. The poem was part of the cycle of stories in “Traveler’s log” (1921) and was published without subdivision into stanzas within the cycle titled “Rus’ ” (1924), in “Jericho Rose” (1924) and in the “Selected poems” (1929).

The poem expounds on the spiritual growth of the orthodox faith of Bunin’s protagonist within the revolutionary upheaval and social and political chaos, when the sheer foundations of religion and culture are crushed by the environment. He affirms to the protection of higher and eternal values. Faith in God was instrumental in Bunin’s ability to survive through the tragedy, to triumph over hatred, righteous anger, to come through spiritual and physical torments.

Finally, the third group of poems is styled on the traditions of the Russian folk and epic tales. “Saltimbancos” (1915), “Svyatogor” (1915), “Svyatogor and Ilya” (1916).

“Baba-Yaga” (1907) is an early work which became the foundation for the poem, written later during emigration. In her commentary to the Complete poetic heritage of I.A. Bunin T.M. Dvinyatina outlined other titles of this poem: “Russian tale of the days of Lenin” and “In Lenin’s tsardom”. The destiny of the Russian people is shown in allegoric image of the witch (Baba-Yaga) as the people pinned their faith on the Bolsheviks in

bringing about the “bright future” and voluntarily surrendered themselves as “slaves to the devil” [25]. The raven, that is having a discussion with the witch, resembles malicious bearer and servant to the Satan.

Dichotomies and binary polarities: chaos and order, earth and Heaven, life and death, inner and out worlds, contrast between “new” and “old”, “celestial” and “bestial” create new concepts (at the level of interpretation), broadening the associative field of poetical ontology and binding it with the works of the emigrant period.

It is important to consider “Saltimbancos” (1915) that is a poem, stylistically written in accordance with the folk vocal traditions of the XIV-XVI centuries. The text teems with archaic terms and vernacular poetical sayings, with the couplets suffering from complexity and heaviness. It is through the pasticcio of the folk motely song and images of the saltimbancos that Bunin satirizes reality of the Russian life, exposing not only social, but rather national taints of the Russian people; reveals savagery as one of the national traits of the Russian character. Such savage traits are deliberately emphasized in the image of “boyar”:

*There he braced up!  
Eyes are narrow, side-looking,  
Illuminated,  
All his taut face  
Scrunches up with laughter,  
Teeth roots from the mouth  
Are blackening...  
[26]*

The acute generality and symbolism of the image of the “boyar” and his acolytes-saltimbancos assigns specific philosophical sense and makes this piece of art perpetually relevant<sup>1</sup>.

It is very unfortunate that a significant number of poems still remain without proper scientific interpretation. The Collected poetic heritage that is referenced in this paper is the first ever scientifically-based collection of I.A. Bunin’s poems [28]. As we pointed out above, many lyric and epic works of the author remain understudied and require comprehensive and systemic analysis. On the one hand there exist different versions and

editions that are stored in the archives of England, USA, France and private collections, with no or limited access for the researchers. On the other hand, Bunin’s poetical works tend to become tough for the scholars. One should not put aside the social and cultural environment that created the personality of the author and his contemporaries. Ontology of I.A. Bunin’s poetry comprises letters, diaries, non-fiction and critical commentary to his works of both emigrant and pre-Revolutionary periods.

It appears crucial that any scholar/researcher must adhere to the unity of historical, literary, comparative-typological and textological methods. Profound research into Bunin’s poetry in the context of late XIX – first half of the XX centuries (that would reveal artistic and poetical system and incarnation of the author’s worldview) require a synthesis of various fields of knowledge: from socio-academical to scientific. All this calls upon application of new methodology and new principles which would take into account the ontological affinity between the text, the inner world of the author and social and cultural environment, which would definitely lay foundation to the holistic approach in the field of literary studies. The ontology of poetry is constantly evolving by absorbing new sense-triggering texts with inherent peculiarities of language and would be subject to the universal laws of dialectics alongside the laws of genre, style and measure.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

I.A. Bunin’s sentiment and ideas about Russia, its past, present and future (that coincide with such non-fiction works as “I cannot speak”, “Mission of the Russian emigration”, “Notes”) are incorporated into the structure of poetical ontology and bond with the themes of memory, philosophy of history, character of Russian people, apocalyptic motives, the eternal idea of clash between good and evil and the nature of the revolutionary force. Thus, the boundaries of the continual spatiotemporal logic of the events of the Revolution are blurred and replaced by the topoi of dreams, memories, phenomena of folk and epic tales. Contemporary time (“grand historic time”) bonds with other epochs, space-time of ancient realms and cultures (with “minor historic time”).

The entanglement of biblical, historical and social and ethical vectors in the works of 1915-1919 aggravates the issues of philosophy of the Russian history and, in reality, meets the challenge

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1. Please refer to [27] for detailed commentary regarding the poem “Saltimbancos” and its later versions.

I.A. Bunin faced as an artist: to find answers to controversial issues of the day. Images of Baba-Yaga, the Raven, saltimbancos are called upon to help the revealing of peculiar traits of the Russian people, whose past includes both Sergius of Radonezh and Emelyan Pugachev. The image of the hero of the epic folk tale who failed to raise from the coffin (poem "Svyatogor and Ilya") is an allegorical reference to the tragedy of the tsarist Russia. The force of the Revolution dominates the world, breeding chaos and gradually demolishing the foundations of life of the Russian people.

Bunin was very particular with use of words and painstakingly selected word forms that is testified by the sheer number of versions and editions of his poetic texts and everchanging titles. I.A. Bunin's poetic imaging is characterized by certain coherence. It is not only through the unity of the ontological attributes: expanse, time, movement; but also, through the unification of artistic categories which were applied for the creation of vivid poetical images, such as the "leper", "rabid dog", saltimbancos", "boyar", "baba-yaga" and others. Huge talent and ability to reveal the sound of time within the regular routine of life as well as identify lexical units (which are closely related with the idea of derivational morphology) within the cultural and historic environment are peculiar traits of Bunin's eon. The poet's intellectual thought, appared in the derivational morphology becomes a new sign and symbol of the epoch. The image assumes new senses in different historical reality and continues to survive after the death of its creator. Indeed, this is what the poem "Word" (1915) is about.

Mirroring of Bunin's poetical images and the genre transformation of his works within cultural expanse occurs on different ontological levels (both in form and sense-creative ways). Bunin's word, arrayed in matter, exercises its eternal strive for existence. Therefore, it is insufficient to be familiar with the author's non-fiction, letters and diaries to be able to comprehend the meaning that he tried to convey in his works. As we outline, Bunin was prophetically naming the events which were yet to come. His lyrics are addressed to us, the people of XXI century, as we struggle to comprehend the events of 1917.

## **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

This paper is independently completed by Yuliya Morozova.

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