

**MSC 2020****International Scientific and Practical Conference «MAN. SOCIETY.  
COMMUNICATION»****IMAGES OF WORLD CULTURE IN V. Y. IRETSKY'S BOOK  
«INTRIGUE AND LOVE»**

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**Abstract**

Viktor Yakovlevich Iretsky (1882-1936) is one of the half-forgotten writers of the first half of the XX century. Iretsky was a well-known literary critic and journalist of St. Petersburg, then Riga and Berlin, author of several books of short stories, novels and plays, a member of the writers' organizations of St. Petersburg and Berlin, and left many works of art that received a friendly assessment of his contemporaries. The literary heritage of the writer, especially of the emigrant period, is insufficiently studied. This article analyzes the last lifetime collection of the prose writer "Intrigue and Love" (Berlin, 1936), which includes texts from different stages of creativity published in the periodicals of the 1910s and 1930s. The main attention of the authors of the article is focused on the identification of echoes with classical European literature and the analysis of their functions in the stories of Viktor Iretsky. The publication considers the connection with "bourgeois drama" in Friedrich Schiller, plays by George Bernard Shaw and Anton Chekhov and poetry of Alexander Pushkin, the prose of Ivan Turgenev, with the tradition of the fable prose of the 1920-1930-ies. Thus, Iretsky's work is examined in the context of Russian classical literature, including the literature of emigration, and outstanding examples of foreign literature, eternal images and plots. It is shown that the use of classical plots, images and quotations (mythological, religious, literary) gives the stories of an emigrant writer a depth of understanding of the problems of the modern world.

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*Keywords:* Images of world culture, literature of Russian emigration, the Russian prose of first third of XX century, the story, timeless themes, V. Y. Iretsky



## **1. Introduction**

V. Ya. Iretsky (1882-1936) is a prominent St. Petersburg critic, prose writer, journalist, one of the organizers of the Petrograd branch of the Union of Writers of Russia and the House of Writers, who belonged to the first wave of Russian emigration. The heyday of his creative and social activities fell on the period of residence in Berlin from 1922 to 1936. Iretsky's artistic heritage has not yet become the subject of a comprehensive understanding. An exception to the rule was the article by one of the authors of this publication, which for the first time in the last 15 years raised the question of the role of Iretsky's work in the literary process of the 1900-1930s. (Semenova, 2017, 2018). And although Iretsky does not belong to the first literary series, his prose deserves attention because it fits into the history of world culture.

## **2. Problem Statement**

As you know, literature of the Russian diaspora protected the “hereditary gene” of Russian and European classics. The article needs to identify the spiritual and aesthetic searches of the emigrant writer.

## **3. Research Questions**

The study of the artistic originality of prose by V. Ya. Iretsky is seen as relevant in the context of the search for a contemporary writer of literature and in projection on world cultural experience.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The aim of the study is to identify the intertextual connections of the collection “Intrigue and Love” by V. Ya. Iretsky, who until now has not been subjected to scientific comprehension, although he was the subject of review. The writer’s book is considered for the first time in the prism of this problem.

## **5. Research Methods**

The article uses historical and literary and intertextual research methods.

## **6. Findings**

### **6.1. Interpretation of eternal plots and images of the art world V. Ya. Iretsky**

Reviewers repeatedly indicated on the secondary creativity of works by V. Ya. Iretsky. So, the review of V. F. Khodasevich to Iretsky’s novel “The Prisoner” (1931) is notable, in which he says that the writer's works are not characterized by new thoughts, but update old “artistically healthy and deeply moral” that conceal “eternal youth and eternal artistic usefulness” (Yakovleva, 2008). It is known that Iretsky was fluent in the German language and professionally oriented in foreign, in particular, German literature. In addition, eternal plots and timeless images were widely used in his early works. Iretsky openly points out his internal connection with the drama of F. Schiller giving the title to the last lifetime collection “Intrigue and Love”. Iretsky, of course, not only attracts the attention of the public to the publication, but also includes

modern material in the context of eternal literary archetypes with a direct quote. This quality is characteristic of emigre literature, which used the “unique historical opportunity to test in practice the ability of Russian culture to “universal humanity” (Antoshina, 2016, p. 113).

## **6.2. Theme of the stories of the book “Intrigue and Love”**

The collection “Intrigue and Love” includes 20 works published earlier in the Russian periodical press of the 1910s, as well as in the Riga newspaper “Today”. They can be divided into several thematic groups: a part is dedicated to Russia, a significant group tells about modernity on European material. Finally, the book included texts stylized as medieval literature or French prose of the 17th – 19th centuries. According to reviewers of the collection, the book contains “a variety of everyday, historical and fantastic stories” (RGALI, n.d., p. 132).

## **6.3. Iretsky's stories in the context of the artistic searches of his contemporaries**

The mastery of constructing fascinating stories, noted by critics since the publication of Iretsky’s first stories, was also emphasized in the responses to the collection “Intrigue and Love” (RGALI, n.d., p. 132). Let us recall that many Russian prose writers felt the attraction to fabulous prose, dating back to Western literature (O. Henry, A. Conan Doyle, R.L. Stevenson, etc.), in the 1920s and early 1930s., including those related to literary Berlin: A. Tolstoy and M. Bulgakov, I. Ehrenburg, I. Ilf and E. Petrov, the “serapion brothers” L. Lunts and V. Kaverin (Semenova, 2017).

On the other hand, the writer also turned to various ways of introducing oral speech into the narrative: third-party narrations made it possible to objectify the events described; first-person narration (tale) made the story more confessional, giving sincerity to the personal experience of the storytellers; the appeal to stylization emphasized the “literary”, playful character of the works (such are the novels “The Chevalier's Trip”, “The Adventure with the Marquise” written in the spirit of M. Kuzmin). Iretsky in his work paid tribute to both acute plot action and the diversity of types of narration in a situation of the debate that erupted among writers of the 1920s. about the development of the novel – fabulous or “fantastic”. His work reflected the desire to fit into the context of European literature and emigre literature, “which took on the mission of preserving the national language and culture abroad ...” (Khatyamova, 2017, p. 93).

## **6.4. Functions of the legendary heroes in the book “Intrigue and Love”**

The collection “Intrigue and Love” opens the programmatic story “Parting words”, in which the narrator has autobiographical features of Iretsky: occupation – writing – and the upcoming expulsion from St. Petersburg, which emphasizes the lyrical tone of the narrative. Comparing forced emigration with a journey to the bottom of the sea, the writer continues to search for Russian thinkers who sought to understand “the philosophy of the October Revolution in Russia < ... > through the phenomenon of Russian folklore” (Nalepin, 2016a, p. 324). A similar choice was characteristic of a situation where “it was folk culture in general and Russian folklore in particular that became that spiritual dominant and aesthetic bond” that made it possible “to maintain even an illusory connection with the abandoned Motherland” (Nalepin, 2016b, p. 327). In the story, there is a clear parallel with the epic of the Novgorod cycle about Sadko, who

preferred loyalty to his talent over all riches. It is significant that the janitor Arkhip, an old man and an excellent storyteller reminds the hero of the epic image. This quite everyday character unexpectedly reveals a penchant for being a scomorokh and sees a man of “the same artel of good-naturedness” in the writer as he himself: “in the old days there were buffoons, gusellers and squeals, then blind men and pipers, and then those that spiritual verses say and they also walk in the name of Christ” (Iretsky, 1936, pp. 13-14). Recognizing the kindred nature of his and writer's “languor” and trying to support the narrator, who is forced to leave the country, Arkhip recalls the poetic image of the folk singer: “He had thirty rich ships, with gold and silver, but he only regretted one property and he took him with him to the sea: his gusli sounded! Because, he could not part with them. They were soldered to the heart. He couldn't. And you can't, dear. Never give up. They will do you a great service as they did for him, and they will rescue you from all trouble” (Iretsky, 1936, p. 13). And the hero keeps this testament of Arkhip: “I remember, old man, I do not forget” (Iretsky, 1936, p. 15), – he says in the finale.

Thus, the image of Arkhip acquires mythical features: his name (Greek: “the chief over the horses”) indicates the role of a guide along the hero's path to emigration, which is comparable to sinking to the bottom of the sea. The old man by symbolical image of “guselki” speaks of the salvation of fiction in the world of reality. Iretsky puts in a capacious formula in the mouth of the narrator: “The power of the word is irresistible and miraculous” (Iretsky, 1936, p. 10), which echoes Pushkin's line “Darkness of low truths is dearer to me /Deception raising us ...” (Pushkin, 2015, p. 824). Arkhip sees the strength and the main task of creativity in preserving the eternal truths, transforming the world: “We are all God's careless skomorokhs and are committed to grabbing a man's heart by surprise and pitying him out of the blue. And each one has its own gusli. So it was in the old days, and in the pre-dwelling ones” (Iretsky, 1936, p. 14). It is as if the Iretsky himself echoes the hero, subjugating the subject and the figurative series of the book to this thought. Thus, the “Parting word”, opening the book, reflects the emigrant's understanding of the task of writing and at the same time highlights all further stories with a timeless light.

The stories of the collection are united by the idea of the power of illusion over a person – eternal truths saving him, preserving and maintaining harmony of the world of noble deception or calming the conscience of fiction. This thought was expressed by the narrator of the work “Sin”: “Almost every person builds for himself a ghostly, non-existent world and, depending on his mentality, either lives amusing himself or is tormented by his whole life” (Iretsky, 1936, p. 83). Iretsky portrays the collision of reality and wonderful fiction, illusions, fantasies creating memorable atypical heroes, as well as ordinary heroes in unusual circumstances or borderline state. They can be between two worlds (“Agasfer”, “Parting words”), be obsessed with passion (“Mr. Brush, bibliophile”, “Sin”), tempted by the desire to become creators of a miracle (“New Year's entertainment”, “Love for one's neighbor”) and etc.

Iretsky raises timeless philosophical questions drawing images of two intersecting worlds – the real and the eternal. So, in the story “Agasfer”, he reinterprets the medieval West European legend of the Eternal Jew, referring to its German version. The action is transferred to the present, and unlike its predecessors, for which the image of Palestine was fundamental (Ayzikova, 2015, p. 97), Iretsky develops the plot in the vicinity of Berlin, where the storyteller met with a stooped old man who relied “on a rude, makeshift stick, reminiscent of a staff” (Iretsky, 1936, p. 128). According to the version of an unusual interlocutor with “gloomy” eyes, he is Agasfer. The hero is waiting for a meeting with Jesus, so that his wanderings, ordeals,

sent by people, and not Christ, come to an end. The old man unfolds the centuries-old history of the existence of the legend in front of the narrator-listener, recreates a galaxy of historical and literary images, attracting both oral evidence and book sources, including referring to Dante's "Divine Comedy".

Turning to the widespread literary plot of the 19th – 20th centuries, Iretsky makes it recognizable from the very beginning – from the name and literary context – and offers a different interpretation of both the myth itself and its role in modern culture. The purpose of the story of Agasfer is to refute the legend. According to the hero, this story is "slander against Christ himself. For the meek Christ could not be so vengeful and cruel to doom someone to eternal torment" (Iretsky, 1936, p. 129). Thus, the opposition of truth and fiction is created in the legend told by Agasfer: "untruth has been spreading for centuries, and many venerable people resorted to this lie" in order to provoke "hatred of his (Christ – A.R., M.S.) opponents" (Iretsky, 1936, p. 130). That's why the hero is waiting for a meeting with someone who will bring "... the kingdom with Him not from this world, which casts out all unrighteousness and injustice" (Iretsky, 1936, p. 134).

The ending of the story is unexpected: as it turned out, Agasfer called himself a professor of history, who lost the department, and the reason with it. On the one hand, with the help of this ending, the reader learns that truth and fiction are mixed in the consciousness of the hero. On the other hand, their boundaries are difficult to distinguish: for example, the old man's profession does not contradict the myth that he passes to the listener, he earned his living by "stories about antiquity", since "the whole history of mankind passed" (Iretsky, 1936, p. 132) before his eyes. The composition of the story is structured in such a way that the paradoxical denouement is separated graphically from the old man's narrative – as if two layers of reality intersect, and the reader is invited to draw a conclusion about where the fiction and the truth are. The possibility of both interpretations makes the denouement dramatic: the eternal wanderer is not recognizable in the new world, an attempt to justify Christ is impossible in modern times, and the blessed is destined to end his days in a madhouse. Like in other expatriate works, here the "Agaspherian" mythosymbol <...> is an important formative element of the narrative ", < ... > connecting the times < ... >, indicates the repeatability of fate: restless pilgrimage is connected with the emigrant attitude" (Glushakov, 2005, p. 22).

### **6.5. The symbolism of religious images and plots of world culture in the book "Intrigue and Love"**

Rethinking eternal plots, and including references to religious works in the texts, the use of spiritual concepts in their names – "Sin", "Confession", "Love for one's neighbor" make it possible for Iretsky to re-evaluate the present in the context of world history. This feature connected the author with other "older" emigrants, whose work was influenced by biblical discourse.

The last days of the life of the rabbi who first left Soviet Russia and then returned back are given symbolic meaning in the story of Golgotha. Using the eternal story of the crucifixion of Christ and references to the Third Book of Kings, the Bible and Christian legends, Iretsky affirms the closeness of the spiritual truths of world religions, their timeless relevance. The plot, comparable to the biblical one (crucifixion and resurrection on the third day) and numerous quotes indicating the source or presented as a hero's speech without reference to a fragment of Scripture, allow the author to comprehend the problem of

preserving universal spiritual values in times of ideological persecution, in the era of destruction of ideological foundations.

The action taking place in a Polish hospital, described as quite real, is symbolic at the same time: it is a transition from modernity to eternity, from the everyday, the mundane to the existential, from the physical to the metaphysical. This time becomes a moment of remorse and actions for the protagonist, which are thought to be the acceptance of their cross and are compared with the ascent to Golgotha.

Iretsky depicted past of the rabbi, in which the everyday and mystical plans of his life intersect more clearly and expressively. What happened is interpreted as the existential experience of a person who has fallen into specific historical circumstances: “a minute happens to a person when he suddenly becomes taller and smarter than himself”, “a person lives from flash to flash and this flash is Divine touch” (Iretsky, V.Ya., 1936, 97). The starting point for testing the hero is the struggle of the new government with religion, headed by his nephew: “Gedaliah, the son of my brother, the grandson of my father’s rabbi and the great-grandson of my grandfather’s rabbi” (Iretsky, 1936, p. 98). Given the depreciation of spiritual and moral principles, the hero advocates the unity of Jews, Catholics, and Orthodox: “Now there are only those who believe in the Almighty. On the contrary, there are atheists. There are no third ones” (Iretsky, 1936, p. 99).

7. So what is happening takes on Old Testament meanings in the mind of the rabbi, and is associated with apocalyptic paintings. He sees crosses and torii rising into the air that “left the sinful earth”, foresees the calamities and trials that befall man: “... we are again crying on the Babylonian rivers, but this time we are not only Jews, but others as well. And then again, the same thing will be said about in the book of our prophet Amos: believers in God will be sifted through a sieve, chaff and litter will pass through it, and a strong grain will remain. But how many will survive? ... ” (Iretsky, 1936, p. 99). Iretsky gives the story a high spiritual meaning using the gradation technique in the story of the rabbi, saturating it with quotes from the Psalms, from the speeches of the biblical prophet, who spoke about the equality of all peoples and the Lord's Court, where the faithful are saved. The hero is faced with a choice – to save his life or follow the example of Christ, sacrificing moral values.

The rabbi does not pass the test right away: he succumbs to despondency and allows himself to be transferred across the border with Poland, forgetting that he should be there “where anger burns and lawlessness occurs” (Iretsky, 1936, p. 101). The spiritual death of the hero is embodied through physical weakness, because of which he ended up in the hospital.

Repentance brought physical strength for spiritual resurrection. Realizing the temporality of earthly life, the hero is ready to give it, following the Lord: “And my last joy will be that I tell my nephew Gedaliah in the face: the grass dries up, the color fades, and the word of our God abides forever” (Iretsky, 1936, p. 102). Quoting the lines from the Book of Isaiah, the hero also implies the context in which they are located. The temporality, finiteness of the material world, the vanity of human life are contrasted in the sacred text and, consequently, in the speech of the rabbi, the eternity of moral law.

The hero chooses to follow the example of Christ, preserving the centuries-old faith passed down to him by generations of ancestral rabbis in troubled times: “And I will go back to my own in the bestial cave. This is what my conscience wants” (Iretsky, 1936, p. 102). The image of the animal cave, associated in the context of the expected death with the trials that the first martyrs underwent, or with the apocalyptic images

of the beast and hell, allows us to show the hero's commitment to his convictions, the true scale of this, at first glance, private act.

Rethinking the plots and images of world culture allows Iretsky to create a gallery of portraits of non-standard heroes obsessed with passion, the principles of which are opposed to the philistine interests of others and are therefore perceived as eccentricities. In the story "Mr. Brush, bibliophile", Iretsky's narrator complains about the endangered species *Homo sapiens*, for which books are more valuable than reality, and solves the conflict of living life and book reality with a spiritual priority over everyday life, redemption of greed and deceit with high passion. A rare edition of *Praise of Nonsense*, given to the narrator by the widow of Brush, illustrating Holbein, a fragment of a lost priceless library, is a symbolic illustration of the story told.

The juxtaposition of rationalism and idealism is the basis of the work "The Man with the Sword". The hero's philosophy of romance about the connecting power of objects of art "with the past and the future," that "things are consolidated ideas" is close to the Platonic world of ideas and things. References to Shakespeare's play "Hamlet" also support the thought of the invaluable importance of objects of the past: "... Great Caesar is now dust, and the cracks are covered with him" (Iretsky, 1936, p. 140).

The inconspicuous English clerk Mokkey, the protagonist of the story "New Year's Entertainment", has a strange pleasure – make happy a poor girl languishing in beautiful things in store windows unselfishly on a festive night. He seems himself Pygmalion. The ending of the story about the hero's return to his homeland after recognizing his friends revealed a joke arranged on him is equally unusual: his beloved wife, Galatea, met on the eve of the New Year, turned out to be a film actress invited by a friend to play an eccentric clerk. Recognizable from the first lines of the work, the plot of B. Shaw's play turns into a finale typical of Greek myth and continues with the disclosure of a double. Thus, the image of a revived statue (a vase in the story "A Man with a Sword" or a faceless girl in "New Year's Entertainment") and the associated "motive of duality, substitution", brings Iretsky's stories closer to the romantic tradition of his predecessors, for example, Heine's interpretation of "one of the later versions of the ancient myth of Pygmalion, in which the living statue appears as the embodiment of the goddess of love itself" (Kotaridi, 2020, p. 54).

The true meaning of everyday stories is highlighted by Iretsky due to their correlation with the plots of world culture. Biblical references allow the author to depict the eternal nature of the conflict in the story of "Golgotha" and to praise the private and at the same time timeless choice of the hero. In other works, modern humanity appears before the eyes of the reader, wingless, philistine, rational, mired in vices. And therefore, living passion, a passionate feeling, an obsession with art – albeit strange, inherent in Brush, Krause, Mokkey – are perceived by others as a kind of abnormality. The eccentrics encountered in this life evoke more sympathy in the author than sober-minded philistines.

## **6.6. The ironic rethinking of literary quotes in the book "Intrigue and Love"**

Even before emigration, Iretsky created comic prose – for example, a parody of K. I. Chukovsky (Fedotova, 2019, p. 248), feuilletons, satirical tales. Iretsky reproduced anecdotal situations in his latest collection exposing the depreciation and vulgarization of the high and the beautiful in life (*Miracle*, *Dogs*, *Parrot*). Cruelty, treachery, cowardice, greed, deceit introduce the motive of deceit and love into the book.

The epigraph to the story “Tomorrow” about the separation and correspondence of the spouses separated by the emigration of the husband was a line from the “Gabrieliad” by A. Pushkin: “Let’s talk about the oddities of love”. The parody of the situation is emphasized by the ironic tone of the story, especially if you recall the stanza, the beginning of which the quoted line is: “... When we forgot the suffering of love / And we have nothing more to wish, – / To revive the memory of her, / With a intimate friend we love to chat” (Pushkin, 2018, p. 8). Created on an important topic for the author, related to personal experience of separation from the family, the story nevertheless has an ironic connotation: the characters arrange their lives far from each other, continuing to carry on their epistolary dialogue. There is a reference to the tragedy “The Mean Knight” in the work. The high passion of the Pushkin hero is parodyfully reduced in the story of the “deprivations” of the emigrant husband in the name of love for his wife: “So far, he, like the Stingy Knight, has been saving up money, doesn’t go to theaters and cafes, doesn’t drink beer and even quit smoking ...” (Iretsky, 1936, p. 17). The story also has intertextual connections with the works of A. Chekhov and I. Turgenev. A direct quote from the ending of the play “Uncle Vanya” – “We’ll Rest” – expresses the unpreparedness of the heroes, like Chekhov’s characters, to act decisively. Voynitsky’s phrase that “when there is no real life they live in mirages” (Chekhov, 2017, p. 24) clarifies the meaning of the conflict: love, marriage become only a mirage, and each hero alone adapts to life circumstances. The image of the Turgenev sparrow in comparison with the heroes of Iretsky emphasizes that they do not demonstrate the courage with which the bird sacrifices its life for the sake of his beloved creature, and the unworthy behavior of people is exposed in this comparison.

He develops the theme of “the imperfection of our plans”, “the power of illusions over man” (Iretsky, 1936, p. 83) and the story “Sin”, which opens his literary joke about the meeting of Heine with Goethe, prepares the reader for the perception of history. High expectations, according to the author and narrator, are often replaced by prosaic reality.

The heroes of the story “Intrigue and Love”, like Schiller’s characters, are separated by social inequality: the girl works with a company of robbers, the young man lives with a wealthy aunt, for whom the theft of paintings by Van Dyck and Ostade does not become a disaster. Both the return of the paintings and the girl’s promise to quit the criminal activity did not dispel the disappointment of the hero deceived by her beloved: “< ... > his first genuine passion < ... > he placed in a brazen thief who fooled him so subtly. Intrigue and love! Love and intrigue!” (Iretsky, 1936, p. 170). The eternal plot moved to modern Iretsky reality appears to be reduced, parody, because over time the hero is frustrated with himself because he “missed, lost something so vivid that it happens once in a lifetime and never comes back again” (Iretsky, 1936, p. 173). Apparently, this meeting was the most significant event in the empty life of the hero.

The story “Intrigue and Love” did not accidentally give the name of the whole book: it expressed the author’s thought that life, on the one hand, is a “philistine drama”, an eternal clash of love and cunning, and on the other, a timeless journey filled with a search for high meaning.

## 7. Conclusion

So, like Schiller’s drama, Iretsky’s stories use a romantic contrast between the two worlds, symbolizing the clash of fiction, fantasy, ideals with non-poetic reality or sober bourgeois ideas. Cultural and historical references, translating everyday plots to the rank of timeless ones, allow the author to



ascertain the substitution by modern society of sacred concepts and eternal values. And yet his goal is not only to emphasize the loss of humanity of elevated and genuine feelings, but also to remind readers of the need for ideals. So, romantic passivism, characteristic of the era of the beginning of the 20th century, manifests itself in the work of an emigrant writer.

The inclusion of modern characters in an “eternal” context leads to the creation of a real and at the same time symbolic space, where an entertaining plot, sometimes bordering on science fiction, installation on a game with a reader, ironic rethinking of literary and wider – cultural – images find connection with the artistic search for Russian literature of the first third of the twentieth century in the heritage of V. Ya. Iretsky.

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