

Title: Journey to the “Kingdom of the Ill”: Childhood Illness in Writings of Bunin and Nabokov

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Ivan Bunin and Vladimir Nabokov relocated to Western Europe to escape the nascent Bolshevik regime. A matter of survival rather than of choice, emigration for many Russian intellectuals seemed more like involuntary exile. Bunin’s *Zhizn’ Arsenieva* and Nabokov’s *Dar* both contain depictions of childhood illness in which themes of exile and identity are confronted. Illness functions symbolically in these scenes, reflecting the authors’ own experiences. This paper examines how childhood illness links as well as distinguishes these works, considering the authors as artists with unique agendas and as members of a collective community in exile.

For both protagonists, illness is an unexpected voyage from the familiar world into a different realm – like exile, a terrifying and amazing journey that raises concerns about family, consciousness, identity, and mortality.

Illness as metaphor occurs most often in literature in the form of terminal adult disease (Sontag). By placing illness in childhood, Bunin and Nabokov shift the symbolic emphasis from the approach of death towards one of recovery and survival. This emphasis on recovery echoes the strong sense of responsibility for the survival of the Russian literary heritage shared by the émigré community at the time.

While these works are largely autobiographical, the depictions of childhood illness are aesthetically rather than factually motivated. The protagonists of *Zhizn’ Arsenieva* and *Dar* quickly return from their voyages to the “kingdom of the ill” (Sontag 3), but their experiences in sickness and recovery reveal much about their creators and their one-way journeys to the West.

Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Farrar, Starus and Giroux, 1978

Wachtel, Andrew Baruch. *The Battle for Childhood: Creation of a Russian Myth*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990