

“A very ugly story”

Fiction, non-fiction, and mimetic desire in Ivan Bunin’s *The Case of Cornet Elagin**

Abstract

The paper offers a close reading of *The Case of Cornet Elagin* (*Дело корнета Елагина*, 1925; published in 1926), which is so far lacking in Bunin scholarship.

The Case was written as a semi-documentary, semi-fictional account of the 1891 trial of Aleksandr Bartenev (in the story renamed Aleksandr Elagin), accused of murdering Maria Wisnowska (renamed Marija Sosnovskaja). This paper is an attempt to distinguish between its fictional and non-fictional components by showing how *The Case* fuses real facts with various ready-made sub-plots taken from Russian and French literature. What is more, intertextual analysis of these fictional episodes reveals the implicit message of the novella.

Several months before his death Bunin inscribed the following enigmatic words on a copy of *The Case* published decades before: “This whole story is a very ugly story”. The paper is an attempt to understand what is so ‘ugly’ about this novella. The answer is sought by contextualizing *The Case* within Bunin’s poetic world and within the intellectual context of the Silver Age. *The Case* emerges as the author’s masterful commentary on traditional and modern themes involving mimetic desire and post-Puškinian “Cleopatromania”. Bunin subjects the worship of a femme fatale, so pervasive in the Silver Age, to radical subversion.

Introduction

There is an understanding, although not widespread, that *The Case of Cornet Elagin* (*Дело корнета Елагина*, 1925; published in 1926) is not a typically Buninian piece. Ivan Bunin was the first to admit it. The opening paragraph of *The Case* identifies its plot as “pulp fiction” (*bul’varnyj roman* in the original, where *roman* means ‘novel’ as well as ‘romance’).¹ Moreover, several months before his death

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¹ In what follows, I cite the original text from (Bunin 1993–2000, 5, 364–399), and in my discussion, I combine two of its English language translations, *The Elagin Affair* by Bernard Guilbert Guerney (Bunin 1969, 3–59) and *The Case of Cornet Elagin* by Robert Bowie (Bunin 2006, 462–506).