

Lest some of the studies in this volume appear of limited relevance for their focus, or the book as a whole seem dated as a snapshot of human rights issues in Russia at the start of the millennium, this informative book remains of interest for researchers and retains its relevance – as does the fundamental question of human rights in Russia.

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Mark Stanley Swift, *Biblical Subtexts and Religious Themes in Works of Anton Chekhov*, Middlebury Studies in Russian Language and Literature, 18 (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), xi + 196 pp.

In its scope and intent, Mark Swift's useful study is more modest than its title might suggest. Wisely sidestepping the question of Chekhov's personal religious beliefs, it focuses on faith (or the lack of it) as a factor in the life of his fictional characters. Its elucidation of biblical subtexts relates for the most part to the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes ('the most unorthodox book in the Bible', 78–9), and its exposition of religious themes concerns itself with those adduced as evidence of Chekhov's affinities with this and the other books of the Solomonic tradition: the quest for meaning in the face of the 'vanity' of life and existential despair, the nature of evil, suffering and love. It confines itself (almost by definition) to works (as opposed to *the works*) of Chekhov's 'mature' or 'serious' period, devoting closest attention to a relatively small number of stories of the late 'eighties and 'nineties ('In the Ravine', 'In Exile', 'The Bishop', 'A Dreary Story', 'The Steppe', 'Happiness', 'An Attack [of Nerves]', 'Ward No. 6'), with passing reference to other prose works and to some of the plays.

Within these parameters, Swift constructs, defends and illustrates a strong case: that both Chekhov and Ecclesiastes 'presented a radical challenge to literary and ideological convention of their respective times':

With the same skeptical outlook and the same method of objective observation, Chekhov and the biblical sage made similar observations: changing circumstances make rigid truth difficult; much depends on chance; the world can be described, but not explained...[;] human beings often fall short of their capabilities (179).

There are perceptive analyses of a number of stories – those of ‘The Steppe’ and ‘In the Ravine’ should be singled out – and the contrastive study of ‘A Dreary Story’ and ‘The Bishop’ is especially valuable as an illustration of Chekhov’s view of the common humanity of the unbeliever and the believer. On the other hand, the lack of any but the most cursory mention of ‘The Student’ seems a curious and regrettable omission in any discussion of Chekhov’s understanding of the religious experience.

Swift is not always well served by his editor, as witness a number of unfortunate typographical errors (most egregiously ‘Крижовник’ for ‘Крыжовник’, 177). There are too a few solecisms that should not have survived the transition from doctoral dissertation to published monograph: ‘the dominate (sc. *dominant*) mood’ (77), ‘forced (sc. *enforced*) idleness’ (12), and ‘shamen’ as the plural of *shaman* (116). Such blemishes notwithstanding, Swift writes with commendable succinctness and lucidity.

The serious study of the biblical subtext in Chekhov’s work (to quote Swift quoting Robert Louis Jackson) ‘certainly is one of the major tasks of Chekhov criticism’ (2). In its modest way, Mark Swift’s book shows us how illuminating and suggestive such a study can be.

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Sarah Oates, *Television, Democracy and Elections in Russia* (London and New York, Routledge, 2006), xv + 222 pp. ISBN 0-415-38134-7

In the light of the recent Duma and the upcoming Presidential elections and the worrying developments in Russian political life, namely the departure from any semblance of support for the concepts of plurality and debate by the Putin administration, this book provides timely and illuminating coverage of the role of the most popular mass medium, television, in the post-Soviet Russian political process, a topic pioneered by Ellen Mickiewicz in her ground-breaking studies *Split Signals: Illusion and Politics in the Soviet Union* (1988) and *Changing Channels: Illusion and the Struggle for Power in Russia* (1999). Divided into ten chapters, the book charts ‘what the interplay among the media, parties, candidates and the electorate has meant for the development of democracy in Russia’ (9).