

Title: Epiphany Exposed (but not Invalidated): The Aesthetics of Religious Experience in Chekhov's "Khudozhestvo"

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Chekhov's 1886 story "Khudozhestvo" details preparations for the Russian Orthodox Feast of Epiphany, narrating the artist Serezhka's construction of a figurative "Jordan" (the Biblical site of Christ's baptism) as setting for the liturgical Blessing of the Waters. Whereas Orthodox Epiphany commemorates the disclosure of Christ's divinity, Chekhov's story enacts a different "epiphany," revealing the material substrate of liturgy, and the aesthetic basis of religious experience. As elsewhere in Chekhov, Orthodoxy is rendered from a human, phenomenological perspective, consistent with the writer's sociological approach to religion (de Sherbinin 1997: 5). The story "bares the device" of Orthodox Epiphany, demythologizing the event to the reader, even as Serezhka's audience, the congregation, stands in the thrall of religious edification.

Yet, while exposing the aesthetic nature of the liturgy, "Khudozhestvo" does not efface the efficacy of the experience itself, opting simply to situate and explain the phenomenon. Proceeding from Chudakov's emphasis on the primacy of the physical world in Chekhov's poetics (Chudakov 1971: 157-8), this paper identifies the aesthetic transformation of material reality as integral to the story's characterization of religious ritual, investigating how this transformation is induced in the sensory experience of Serezhka's audience. The paper also explores how Serezhka and his artistry alternately subvert, and exemplify, Orthodox conceptions of the artist and art, framing each in relation to iconography. In foregrounding the material basis of Serezhka's artistry, the narrative revokes the transcendental reference point of religious experience; yet, the effect produced by Serezhka's display aspires to an aesthetic immediacy analogous to divine presence. The effect corresponds to that of the icon, as the latter, in its "performative," liturgical context, saturates the senses to such a degree as to enable the transcendence of materiality itself, providing access to "the intangible, invisible, and noetic" (Pentcheva 2006: 231). Chekhov's story reveals this aesthetic approximation of the transcendental to be integral to religious experience.

References

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