Peter HENRY, *A Hamlet of his Time: Vsevolod Garshin, the Man, his Works and his Milieu*, Oxford: Willem Meeuws, 1983, VII+408 pp.

Like all great works of art, Sheakespeare's tragedy allows for many interpretations. In 19th century Russia, Hamlet came to symbolise, in Prof. Henry's words, "A noble, self-sacrificing figure concerned for social justice and the elimination of evil from public life ... aware that his private conscience is in conflict with his public duty... to act decisevely and if need be ruthlessiy incurring private guilt" (p. 286). In the eyes of the Russian revolutionary *intelligentsia*, autocracy was the embodiment of evil, and civil duty demanded its overthrow by any means including terrorism and regicide.

It is in this context that Henry situates Vsevolod Garshin, a poet and short story writer (1855-1888). Garshin was introduced to radical ideas by Zaslavsky, a left-wing student, who taught him to read using Chernyshevsky's *Sovremennik* as textbook. Zaslavsky believed in women's lib with the result that Vsevolod's mother "broke the shakles of her bourgeois marriage" (p. 30) and left with him for St. Petersburg. The break-up of the family deeply affected a sensitive and mentally unstable little boy.

Garshin came into prominence with the publication of *Four Days*. He had volunteered and had been wounded during the Russo-Turkish war (1877-1878). *Four Days* tells the agony of a Russian soldier lying next to the body of a Turk he has killed. While dying from loss of blood, heat and thirst alongside the decomposing corpse, the soldier begins to wonder why he killed this unknown man, apparently some Egyptian drafted into the Turkish army to kill and be killed, senselessly. Like the painter V.V. Vereshchagin (reproductions of whose paintings are among the illustrations of the book) and the future Emperor Alexander III who swore never to involve Russia in any war and kept his promise during the 13 years of his reign, - so, too, Garshin came to abhore war and, furthermore, and violence. Loving and compassionate, Garshin could not remain indifferent to the evils of his time exacerbated by industrialisation and urbanisation. Redemption payments on land and demographic factors (the rural population nearly doubled between the 1858 *revizitya* and the 1897 census) were increasing rural poverty and driving peasants to seek work in towns. The sight of crippling industrial work, exploitation, ignorance, slums and prostitution stirred the conscience of writers and artists. Inevitably Garshin sided with committed literature as against art for art's sake. Yet, while he never shirked depicting the distressing reality of life, his artistic sense enabled him to transcend naturalism or what he called 'protocolism' and give an allegoric meaning to his stories. This is particularly true of the most famous, *The Red*

Flower. It combines a realistic description of a lunatic asylum (Garshin had twice suffered mental break-downs) with the delirious dreams of a Patient. The latter sees himself as called to save mankind from all evil and to achieve this he must destroy a red poppy growing in the garden. The medical staff notice merely his insomnia, pathological excitement and loss of weight. They fail to understand the greatness of his heroic endeavour while the other patients brush him aside. Eventually, he breaks out of his cell, tears down the flower and dies of exhaustion.

The story was written after the assassination of Alexander II which did not spark off the Revolution. The Patient's heroic obsession may symbolise that of the terrorists. The asylum is like a prison and, by extension, Tsarist Russia, the staff as insensitive as its bureaucracy and its inmates as unresponsive to the lofty deed as the population outside. Henry devotes an entire chapter to the many interpretations of this story and of the ambiguous symbolism of the Patient's ravings.

Henry is at his best in the last chapters where he gets away from the sociological type of criticism all too prevalent among Russian and especially Soviet critics and proceeds to apply more modern types of literary analysis. His extensive konwledge of 19th Russian and European literature and attention to detail enable him to draw many perceptive parallels and discern imponderable influences. He notes Garshin's early use of stream of consciouness and shifting points of view devices, the Byronic romanticism of *Attalea princeps* and the Christian folklore element in the *Legend of the Proud Haggai* and the *Signal*. The 54 pages of Notes tightly packed with a wealth of information and the extensive bibliography are testimonies of the author's impressive erudition.

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