

# OBĚRIU's Absurd Object and the Poetics of Daniil Kharms

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## POST-FUTURIST ART AND THE PROCESS OF DENIGRATION

IN April 1930 the last performance of the avant-garde group Obedinenie Real'nogo Iskusstva (OBĚRIU) [The Association of Real Art] took place in a residence at the State University of Leningrad and was met with hostility from the proletarian student body. In the following days, articles highly critical of the members of the group appeared in the press. In contrast to prior derogatory articles which had criticized the young artists' eccentric comportment and rebellious theatrical performances, this new criticism was explicitly political. Literary scholar Graham Roberts says of these avant-gardists: "Their refusal to conform to accepted notions of good taste earned these writers the opprobrium of the Soviet press, which branded them all manner of things from 'Dadaists' to 'the class enemy'"<sup>1</sup>. In an article in the student newspaper "Smena" dated April 9 entitled *Reaktsionnoe zhongl'erstvo. Ob odnoi vylazke literaturnykh khuliganov* [Reactionary Juggling: Concerning an Attack by Literary Hooligans], the poetry of OBĚRIU members was called a "rudimentary poetic joke", "protest against the literature of the proletariat", "counterrevolutionary poetry", "poetry of the enemy of class", while its creators were labelled "hooligans of literature"<sup>2</sup>. The author of the article wrote:

The Obereuty [...] despise the struggle in which the proletariat is engaged. Their withdrawal from life, their nonsensical poetry, their *zaum'* trickery – all this is a protest against the dictatorship of the proletariat. Their poetry is therefore counterrevolutionary.

It is the poetry of people alien to us, the poetry of the class enemy<sup>3</sup>.

Two other articles, published in the magazines "Studencheskaia Pravda" and "Leningrad", stigmatized OBĚRIU members as enemies of socialist construction and of revolutionary Soviet literature. These insults and negative evaluations played the role of a true denunciation, and the group began to be drastically criticized by the authorities.

Three OBĚRIU members were known for writing books for children, namely Daniil Kharms, Aleksandr Vvedenskii, and Iurii Vladimirov. In fact, children's literature was the only remaining domain where these writers could remain active. Because of censorship, almost none of them were able to publish during their lifetimes anything other than children's books. Thus, children's literature became for them "a means of subsistence and subterfuge"<sup>4</sup>. However, censorship operated here too: accusations of anti-Soviet activity and condemnation aimed at OBĚRIU members incriminated even books for children.

Beyond the three above-mentioned authors, four more participated in OBĚRIU: Nikolai Zabolotskii, Konstantin Vaginov, Igor' Bakhterev and Doibver Levin. In addition, close to the group but not declaring themselves members of the group were the writers Nikolai Oleinikov and Evgenii Schwartz, the philosophers Iakov Druskin and Leonid Lipavskii, the artists Kazimir Malevich and Pavel Filonov, as well as two of Filonov's students, the artists Tatiana Glebova and Alisa Poret. Officially, the group founded by Kharms and Vvedenskii was in opera-

<sup>1</sup> G. Roberts, *The Last Soviet Avantgarde: OBĚRIU – fact, fiction, metafiction*, Cambridge 1997, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> L. Nil'vich, *Reaktsionnoe zhongl'erstvo. Ob odnoi vylazke literaturnykh khuliganov*, "Smena", 1930, 81, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> According to G. Roberts, *The Last Soviet Avantgarde*, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> D. Culcer, *Prefață* [Preface], in D. Harms, *Un spectacol ratat*, Bucharest 1982, p. XVII. Here and henceforth, the provided translations are my own, unless indicated otherwise – C.D.

tion approximately only two and a half years (from the end of 1927 to the beginning of 1930), but the relationship among the member is complex. The nucleus had constituted itself much earlier in 1920 in the context of an informal group called “Chinari” which had no publications or official recognition. By way of contrast, OBÈRIU was the result of a deliberate and programmed literary process with a solid theoretical and conceptual vision.

After the earth-shaking events of World War I, the October Revolution, and the Russian Civil War in the first decades of the twentieth century, Russian Futurism was beyond its peak and had played itself out by the period 1918-1922. During this same period, the leftist affiliated avant-gardist groups, such as LEF [Left Front of the Arts] and Imaginism, had come to the end of their political importance. After the October Revolution of 1917 the Russian avant-garde experienced the utopia of a heroic communism for a maximum of four years. By the early 1920s the movement had become exhausted, after which the balance of forces among the orientations, groups and organizations shifted. Interest in experimental forms was replaced by ideological networks and the utopic visions imposed by the Soviet regime. Toward the end of the 1920s the main aim of those in power was the proliferation of the principles of social realism which would become the single official direction by 1932<sup>5</sup>.

After the effervescent and heterogeneous phase of the avant-garde during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, OBÈRIU published its aesthetic manifesto *Deklaratsiia OBÈRIU* [Declaration OBÈRIU] in 1928. Here they defined themselves as promoters of contemporary art and of a new artistic vision: “Who are we? And why us? We,

the OBÈRIUts, are honest workers in our art. We are poets of a new sense of the world and of a new art. We are not only creators of a new poetic language, but also the founders of a new apprehension of life and its objects”<sup>6</sup>. Although OBÈRIU appeared in a monopolizing Soviet literary context, its poetics, constituted by the remnants of futurism, developed on a diverse and non-uniform basis.

Despite the daring objectives formulated in the *Declaration*, this youthful group from Leningrad, born of the agonizing spirit of the avant-garde and constituted during the dark years leading up to Stalin’s Great Terror, had little chance to evade the ever-intensifying censorship. Most of the members came into the crosshairs of the Soviet authorities and were persecuted, accused of anti-Soviet activity in their public spectacles and their children’s books, and subsequently liquidated. Yet the group remains important in the history of literature and in Russian culture because, as literary scholars have pointed out much later and after the fact, the OBÈRIUts’ creations anticipated the poetics of both surrealism and the modern European literature of the absurd.

Many researchers – Jean-Philippe Jaccard, Leonid Katsis, Aleksandr Kobrinskii, Anna Gerasimova, Mikhail Meilakh, Aleksandr Nikitaev, and Aage A. Hansen-Löve, among others – have placed OBÈRIU poetics in the historical and aesthetic context of its time, within the larger phenomenon of modernism and the avant-garde. These researchers have discussed the influence that symbolism, acmeism and modernism had on the group, highlighting the absurdist elements that the group promoted. Overall, the interest of these researchers has focused on the role of humor and metatextuality (the status of the author in the text) in OBÈRIU creations. Given the Kobrinskii’s recent work<sup>7</sup>, as well as the recent study of Anna Gerasimova<sup>8</sup>, it is clear that OBÈRIU remains an active subject in Russian

<sup>5</sup> I delineate the ideology and aesthetic coordinates of the Russian avant-garde in my book *Avangarda literară rusă. Conștigații și metamorfoze* [The Russian Literary Avantgarde. Configurations and Metamorphoses] (Bucharest 2011). In Chapter Two, *The Nucleus of the Russian Avantgarde*, I discuss the avatars of Russian futurism. Similarly, I discuss the ways in which the Oberiuts both continued the aesthetic of the Russian avant-garde and departed from it in my book *Cazul Daniil Harms. Supraviețuirea avangardei ruse* [The Case of Daniil Harms. The Survival of the Russian Avant-garde] (Bucharest 2019) in the chapter *OBÈRIU – arta reală, cuvântul, obiectul și universul* [OBÈRIU – Real Art, The Word, Object and Universe].

<sup>6</sup> D. Kharmis, “*I Am a Phenomenon Quite Out of the Ordinary*”: *The Notebooks, Diaries and Letters of Daniil Kharmis (Cultural Revolutions: Russia in the Twentieth Century)*, Boston 2013, p. 159.

<sup>7</sup> A. Kobrinski, *Poëtika OBÈRIU v kontekste russkogo literaturnogo avangarda XX veka*, Moskva 2000.

<sup>8</sup> A. Gerasimova, *Problema smeshnogo: vokrug OBÈRIU i ne tol’ko*, Moskva 2018.

literary criticism. The present study begins with a holistic vision of the phenomenon of 'real art' (a central concept of OBĚRIU poetics) then turns to the particular case of the absurdist-surrealism of Daniil Kharms and an examination of his work in the context of OBĚRIU. That is, the first part of the study engages with the group's manifesto and analyzes its most important concepts: 'real art', 'the artistic word', and 'the artistic object'. These concepts are relevant not only to the literature of the absurd but also to elements of the surrealist vision. The second part of the study examines to what degree OBĚRIU principles are recognizable in the prose of Daniil Kharms and to what degree his definition of 'the artistic object' reflects a dimension of the art of the absurd appearing toward the end of the 1920s in the semiotic experiments of the late Russian avant-garde.

#### THE OBĚRIU DECLARATION AND THE CRITIQUE OF PROLETARIAN CULTURE

The artistic manifesto edited by the poet Nikolai Zabolotskii describes the organization of the group divided into four departments: literature, the plastic arts, theater, and cinematography, while a fifth, namely music, remains a work in progress. The thematic sections are: *The Social Face of OBĚRIU*, *The Poetry of OBĚRIU*, *Toward a New Cinema*, and *The Theater of OBĚRIU*. The manifesto categorically formulates the members' artistic position in relationship to their predecessors: "OBĚRIU does not skate along the themes and across the heights of creativity: it seeks an organically new sense of the world and approach to things"<sup>9</sup>. And again: "The new artistic method of OBĚRIU is universal: it can find a way to represent any theme whatsoever. It is precisely on the strength of this method that OBĚRIU is revolutionary"<sup>10</sup>. OBĚRIUts implicitly challenge both the influence of classical realism and its mimetic mechanisms to reflect reality ("experience") and the influence of neoromantic and symbolist idealism ("emotion"):

Our will to creativity is universal: it overflows all types of art and bursts into life itself, enveloping it from all sides. Meanwhile the world, beslobbered by the tongues of the multitude of fools, entangled in the slime of "experience" and "emotion," is now being reborn in all the purity of its concrete and virile forms<sup>11</sup>.

The group's new artistic vision thus offers an aesthetic universalism and a more direct and firm relationship "to reality".

OBĚRIUts explicitly separate themselves from *zaum'*<sup>12</sup>, an artlang invented by Russian futurists and theorized to be a modality reflecting the link between psychic processes and the poetic imagination. Although theorized and popularized at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, transrational language has archaic origins and signified for the Russian futurists the artistic transfiguration of popular curses, incantations, and shamanic and pathological glossolalia; of religious ecstatic states and esoterica from a variety of popular religions. The theory and practice of *zaum'* as transrational language are directly tied, in the context of the Russian avant-garde, to the activity of two protagonists of futurism: Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh. Using *zaum'*, not unlike dadaist experiments, the Russian futurists replaced natural language with anti-words, combining elements and creating extravagant constructions in an emotional-intuitive manner. These new words assigned novel sensations to the phonetic structures and oral combinations already existing in the language. When OBĚRIUts occasionally used *zaum'* in children's books — such as rhythmic counting, invented words, playful baby talk — their creations were seen by censors as dangerous to soviet ideology. Indeed, any form of hermetic poetry was deemed dangerous, and the resulting obscurity was received as an intentional encryption of an anti-Soviet message. In any case, the OBĚRIUts pit themselves against *zaum'*, one of the most significant and original contributions of the Russian futurists to international avant-garde experiments, and it becomes the

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>12</sup> The Russian word *zaum'* is composed of the preposition *za* [beyond] and the noun *um* [mind; intellect]. This composition shows the most important trait of transrational language: the capacity to partially or totally eliminate elements of natural language and to replace them with analogical constructions. In the case of *zaum'* the *za* puts it beyond reason and logic.

<sup>9</sup> Ivi, p. 159.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

OBĚRIUts' principal indictment. For them, "There exists no school more hostile to us than zaum' – trans-sense poetry"<sup>13</sup>.

In the first part of the *Declaration* the OBĚRIUts also position themselves against some fundamental principles of proletarian literature. Their first objection relates to the state-sponsored rethinking of classic works of art and to the imposition of new ideological grids on proletarian art:

We have not yet fully understood the indubitable truth that, in the sphere of art, the proletariat cannot be satisfied with the artistic methods of yesterday's schools: that its artistic principles go much deeper and undermine the old art to its very roots. It's absurd to think that the Repin who painted the Revolution of 1905 is a revolutionary artist. It's even more absurd to think that every "Association of Revolutionary Artists" carries within itself the germ of a new proletarian art<sup>14</sup>.

They criticize the way in which the proletarians annihilate the culture of previous epochs and then develop a new one in service of ideology.

Opposed to the theory of collectivism, they also criticize the idea of the Proletkult (*Proletarskaia kul'tura*) which deems that every work of art must respect and reflect the interests and perspectives of a single class. In contrast, the manifesto encourages artistic individualism as well as free and original thinking:

This work is carried out in different directions: each of us has his own creative persona and this circumstance often confuses some people. People speak of an *accidental* union of *different* people. Apparently, they assume that a literary school is something like a monastery, in which the monks all look alike. Our association is free and voluntary: it is a union of masters and not apprentices, artists and not house painters. Each knows himself and each knows what connects him to the rest<sup>15</sup>.

Belonging to an artistic group does not mean an annulment of the members' individuality, nor does it mean the allegiance to a unique and depersonalized artistic conception but rather it means the stimulation of each member's artistic personality. Given this artistic flexibility, Igor' Vasil'ev, for one, acknowledges that OBĚRIU was an uncomfortable group precisely because it opposes the ascetic minimalism

of Soviet art and promotes instead a pluralism of creative possibilities<sup>16</sup>.

The OBĚRIUts furthermore question the goal of proletarian art to be accessible to the masses. They explain why this objective is incorrect, false and duplicitous:

We welcome the demand for an art that can be understood by everyone, accessible in form even to a village schoolboy, but the demand for only such an art leads into the thickets of the most terrible errors. The result is heaps of remaindered books from which the warehouses are bursting at the seams, while the reading public of the first Proletarian State is left with nothing but belles-lettres by Western bourgeois writers<sup>17</sup>.

They show that the accessibility of art that the proletarians promote does not really educate the masses given the "heaps of remaindered books" in the warehouses and the fact that readers are then left only with products of Western culture. In the manifesto these discrepancies are cataloged as ideological anomalies: "The immense revolutionary shift in culture and everyday life, so characteristic of our time, is being hampered in the sphere of art by many abnormal phenomena"<sup>18</sup>.

In compensation the OBĚRIUts offer contemporary directions which, in their opinion, would lead to true artistic innovation and which should be supported by Soviet public opinion rather than marginalized by it. They recommend, for instance, the paintings of Pavel Filonov, the suprematism of Kazimir Malevich and the futuristic stagecraft of Igor Terentiev. The OBĚRIUts consider ignorance in the face of new artistic directions to be a major pretense of proletarian art:

We simply do not understand why any number of artistic schools working persistently, honestly, and resolutely in this sphere are relegated to art's backyard when they ought to be supported by all of Soviet society by all possible means. We don't understand why so-called left art, despite its not inconsiderable services and accomplishments, is accounted as hopeless refuse and, even worse, as charlatanism. How much hypocrisy, how much artistic bankruptcy, is concealed in those who take this savage approach?<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> D. Kharms, "I Am a Phenomenon", op. cit., p. 159.

<sup>14</sup> Ivi, p. 158.

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, p. 160.

<sup>16</sup> I. Vasil'ev, *Russkii poeticheskii avangard XX veka*, Ekaterinburg 1999, p. 176.

<sup>17</sup> D. Kharms, "I Am a Phenomenon", op. cit., p. 158.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>19</sup> Ivi, p. 159.



Unfortunately, the three artists recommended by the OBÈRIUs would suffer greatly from retaliation. In the 1930s Filonov was accused of formalism and subjected to harsh persecution, Malevich was accused of spying, and Terentiev was arrested, spent several years in prison, was arrested again in 1937 then shot by the Soviets.

The manifesto, on the one hand, vehemently critiques proletarian ideology and its negative cultural effects and, on the other hand, includes clichéd pronouncements intended to fend off censure. The OBÈRIUs leverage discursive practices from proletarian literature – a looming socialist realism not yet officially formulated at the time – and insert into their manifesto complacent formulas in apparent consensus with official literary directives: “Today OBÈRIU steps forward as a new detachment of left revolutionary art”<sup>20</sup>. They also proclaim: “We believe, and we know that only the left path of art will lead us out onto the road of a new proletarian artistic culture”<sup>21</sup>.

#### THE THEORY OF REAL ART AND ARTISTIC ALOGISM

In the *Declaration*, after the general social and artistic positioning, the OBÈRIUs include a description of their aesthetic visions in various domains. Both the manifesto and the declarations of individual members express a profound preoccupation with three key concepts: ‘real art’, ‘the artistic word’, and ‘the artistic object’. These three concepts are firmly grounded and intimately interconnected.

First, the adjective “real” which figures in the acronym OBÈRIU, should be understood as “authentic from the artistic point of view”. It should also be understood as “free in expression and reception”. According to OBÈRIU principles, the decision to receive depends to the same extent on the investment of the liberty of the author and on the investment of the interpretation of the receiver. In this sense, when explaining the polyvalence of avant-garde texts, literary scholar Valerii Tiupa states that “avant-gardist

writing, as the exteriorization of the aesthetic subject, is a discourse of liberation”<sup>22</sup>. Similarly, for OBÈRIU this “discourse of liberation” means a re-arrangement of hostile social, artistic and cultural realities. Literary scholar Maria Zalambani wonders, then, how artists could survive after the leaders of the October Revolution had proclaimed the death of art, and she offers a pertinent response: “If socialist society doesn’t accept the cultural inheritance of the past, if bourgeois art is rejected as a ‘flight from reality’, then avant-garde art should become the recreation of reality”<sup>23</sup>.

As we have just seen, the OBÈRIUs define the artistic object in consensus with the avant-gardists, whose direction they continued. In the *Declaration* they extend their discussion of the real to include the “word-object” which is to be understood as an entity beyond common sense which should be purified of cultural and mental stereotypes. Put another way, the word-object is disconnected from all its usual contexts, yet this disconnection does not represent a compromise of communication but rather a way of liberating the word from standard forms of communication. As a result, the OBÈRIUs propose to extend the senses of a word, not to reduce them: “We expand the meaning of object, word, and action”<sup>24</sup>. The theory of real art sees in the artistic word-object an aesthetic object, an autotelic creation:

Real and concrete to the very marrow of our bones, we are the first enemies of those who would geld the word and turn it into a powerless and meaningless mongrel. In our work we expand and deepen the meaning of the object and the word, but in no way do we destroy it. The concrete object, cleansed of its literary and everyday shell, becomes the property of art<sup>25</sup>.

OBÈRIU “Realism” revitalizes the artistic word-object as an elementary reality of the universe. The OBÈRIUs aspire to invent a new reality, edified by spiritual life and a return to the primordial sources of literature:

You seem ready to object that this is not the same object that you see in life? Come closer and touch it with your fingers. Take

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>22</sup> V. Tiupa, *Postsimvolizm: teoreticheskie ocherki russkoi poezii XX veka*, Samara 1998, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> M. Zalambani, *Iskusstvo v proizvodstve: Avangard i revoliutsiia v Sovetskoi Rossii 20-kh godov*, Moskva 2003, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> D. Kharms, “*I Am a Phenomenon*”, op. cit., p. 160.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

a look at the object with naked eyes and you will see it for the first time cleansed of antiquated literary gilding. Perhaps you will assert that our subjects are “unreal” and “not logical”?<sup>26</sup>.

They pose the problem of artistic reception through its relationship to the opposition logic/illogic and explain the non-functionality of this opposition in the artistic domain. A key passage synthesizes their conception of the contradictory and permissive logic of art:

But who said that “mundane” and “everyday” logic is necessary for *art*? We are astounded by the beauty of a picture of a woman even when, contrary to anatomical logic, the artist has turned the shoulder blade of his subject out and twisted it to the side. Art has its own logic, which, rather than destroying the object, helps us to know it<sup>27</sup>.

They also recommend that the absence of everyday logic is valuable in the domain of painting and theater:

You want to find that customary, logical necessity that you think you see in life. But you won't find it here. Why? Clearly because object and action, once transferred from to the stage, lose their “real life” logic and acquire a different logic, the logic of the theater<sup>28</sup>.

The OBĚRIUts' new vision for the artistic object contains a strong dose of the irrational and nonsense with respect the traditional landmarks of artistic reception. As literary scholar Matvei Iankelovich explains: “The main tenets of the OBĚRIU manifesto emphasize that it is precisely art's domain to operate outside these rules of logic, to create access, or holes in the fabric, between our world and the other”<sup>29</sup>.

The prominent nonsense element of artistic production has prompted researchers to explore OBĚRIU's aesthetic influences. Literary scholar Jean-Philippe Jaccard places an equal sign between the OBĚRIUts' ‘real art’ and the European theater of the absurd<sup>30</sup>, and he demonstrates the overlapping principles of normative communication in the texts of Daniil Kharmis and Eugène Ionesco. Literary

scholar Graham Roberts goes even farther with the connections, leading OBĚRIU influence all the way to postmodernist literature:

OBĚRIU was more, much more, than just a Russian version of Futurism, Dadaism, or Surrealism, however. Many of the artistic devices employed by members of the group prefigured those used by subsequent aesthetic movements, such as the Theatre of the Absurd, Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, the French New Novel, and Anglo-American postmodernism<sup>31</sup>.

Indeed, we can identify numerous elements of the literature of the absurd in the creations of OBĚRIU members: ignoring the rational and logical landmarks in relationship to reality; a preference nonsense, be it phonetic and semantic nonsense (exercised through the intermediary of *zaum'*), phraseological (free combination of words), or compositional (absence of the determinants of cause-effect, dislocation of spatio-temporal coordinates or the absence of such); the mixing and permeability of gender and species traits, as well as the parody of them; a predilection for modern aesthetic categories such as the grotesque, the tragicomic, and black humor. Literary scholar Aleksei Medvedev speaks of “the poetics of alienated forms” in the OBĚRIUts' creations, stating that “the word stops being an instrument for adding signification and dissolves into the mass of language”<sup>32</sup>. In other words, for the OBĚRIUts, endangering the mimetic function of art, destroying the usual ties among words and their meanings, among objects and their functions, between events and their causes, is an obligatory condition for stabilizing a more truthful, more authentic connection among these elements.

OBĚRIU, a manifestation of the late Russian avant-garde, pushed at the same time the poetics of the absurd into twentieth-century European literature. Nonsense was a favorite category. However, since the OBĚRIUts did not exploit a hostile end or demobilize their aesthetic category, nonsense for them was not negative but rather positive. They argued for a logic that was upside down or reflected in a mirror<sup>33</sup>. Literary scholar Mikhail Aizenberg ob-

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>28</sup> Ivi, p. 163.

<sup>29</sup> D. Kharmis, “*Today I Wrote Nothing*”: *The Selected Writings of Daniil Kharmis*, New York 2007, p. 30.

<sup>30</sup> J.-Ph. Jaccard, *Daniil Harms: teatr absurda – real'nyi teatr*, “Teatr”, 1991, 11, pp. 18-26.

<sup>31</sup> G. Roberts, *The Last Soviet Avantgarde*, op. cit., pp. 1-2.

<sup>32</sup> A. Medvedev, *Skol'ko chasov v miske supu? Modernizm i real'noe iskusstvo*, “Teatr”, 1991, 11, pp. 128-138.

<sup>33</sup> See A. Rymar, *Poëtika D. Kharmisa i A. Vvedenskogo v kontekste*

serves that the deconstruction of discourse practiced by the OBĚRIUts was not a gratuitous and formal procedure but rather profoundly innovative:

The poetic practice [of the OBĚRIUts] does not reduce itself in any case to purely destructive experiments [...]. Clearly it is a question of a new system, a new connection realized through semantic discontinuity [...]. The single logical tie is substituted through a bunch of possibilities, among which not one become preferred [...]. After the destruction of the direct logical ties among words, they remain themselves, as if in a void<sup>34</sup>.

This vision of overturned coherences could also serve to argue that the OBĚRIUts' aesthetic was surrealist – an intriguing argument, surely, given that no group of surrealists functioned in Russia.

Turning now, in particular, to Kharms and his colleague Vvedenskii, several fundamental surrealist principles can be found in their work: the metamorphosis of the artistic object through the modification of size, form or quantity; the inclusion of the object in a bizarre configuration not specific to its natural state; the presentation of the object in its pure, unmediated state without any given context; and the decomposition of the object to the laughable point when it becomes its opposite, a non-object.

In sum, most avant-gardist groups in the 1920s were discredited and considered opponents of the working class. Little by little avant-garde public performances were forbidden, and their organizers were marginalized and persecuted. Beginning in 1929 Soviet authorities established that futurism could no longer be tolerated under any form, not even a 'communist' one, since all forms were destabilizing. Party ideologues also forbade the formation of any cultural group, and through the Resolution "O perestroike literaturno-khudozhestvennykh organizatsii" [On the Restructuring of Literary and Artistic Organizations], adopted by The Central Committee of the Communist Party in April 1932, all writers were obliged to adhere to communist ideology and to involve themselves in the construction of socialism.

Toward the end of the 1920s the Russian avant-garde went underground but did not completely

disappear after 1930. Instead, it hung on, in part, through its late manifestation in the activity of the OBĚRIUts who conserved the avant-garde's last vestiges. Later, it functioned clandestinely in non-conformist and unofficial art circles of the 1950 and 1960s and carried over into the neo-avant-garde and then later into Russian postmodernism, which remained an underground movement up until Perestroika.

#### ILLOGICAL REALITY AND LOGICAL IRREALITY IN THE POETICS OF KHARMS

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the work of Daniil Kharms began to circulate, and this writer came to be known as one of the most important representatives of Russian literature from the 1920s to the 1940s. In his opposition to the vision of official Soviet literature, he produced rich and revelatory literary creations which have attracted interest as much from the reading public as from literary critics.

Accused of subversive activity in his children's books, Kharms lived at the limit of existence and died of hunger in an NKVD asylum in 1942 during the first year of the Blockade of Leningrad. In the 1960s, during the period of Nikita Khrushchëv's Thaw, Kharms was rehabilitated, however only as a children's author. After his formal rehabilitation, his other creations, which had never been published, continued to be officially ignored. These texts, conceived in parallel with his children's books, nevertheless had circulated clandestinely in the USSR, disseminated by underground groups. Actively popularized in samizdat, Kharms acquired an almost mythic aura and had a major influence on postwar Russian literature. He came to be considered the precursor of absurdism in modern European literature because his aesthetics resonated with noted representatives of the theater of the absurd such as Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco. Literary critic Neil Cornwell notes Kharms's relationship to theater:

*ikh filosofskikh iskanii*, "Vestnik Samarskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta", 2002 (25), 3, pp. 90-100.

<sup>34</sup> M. Aizenberg, *Vzgliad na svobodnogo khudozhnika*, Moskva 1997, pp. 9-10.

In the modern idiom, apart from the theatre of the absurd and theatre of cruelty, Kharms's fictions anticipate in some primaevial way almost everything from the animated screenplay and the

cartoon strip to the video nasty<sup>35</sup>.

Cornwell correctly extends Kharms's influence into other forms of fiction.

The foundation of OBĚRIU was fundamental in Kharms's evolution. The declared aesthetic positions of its members, despite the inconsistencies determined by the pressure from the proletarian culture, intersected at many points with Kharms's artistic vision. At the same time, his aesthetic-philosophical solidarity with OBĚRIU had certain limits. Over time he established his own artistic principles which appeared in numerous compositions of a theoretical characters (also not published during his lifetime but much later). Even though each OBĚRIU adapted the group's general aesthetic in his own way, there was one notable common element in their work: the comic and ludic dimension, the use of the absurd.

Kharms produced a series of 'scientific treatises', miniatures: *Predmety i figury, otkrytye Daniilom Ivanovichem Kharmsom* [Objects and Figures Discovered by Daniil Ivanovich Kharms, 1927], *Sablia* [The Sabre, 1929], *Myr*<sup>36</sup> [The World, 1930], *Nul' i nol'* [Null and Nil, 1931], *O kruge* [On the Circle, 1931], *Sila, zalozhennaia v slovakh, dolzhna byt' osvobozhdena* [The Force Stored in Words Must Be Released, 1931], *Beskonechnoe, vot otvet na vse voprosy* [The Infinite: That Is the Answer to All Questions, 1932], *Chisla ne sviazany poriadkom* [Numbers Are Not Bound by Order, 1932], *O vremeni, o prostranstve, o sushchestvovanii* [On Time, Space and Existence, 1935], and *Traktat bolee ili menee po konspektu Emersona* [A Treatise More or Less Following Emerson, 1939]. These represent a key to understanding the writer's logic, gnoseology and aesthetic. The most important philosophical-abstract notions proposed and exploited by Kharms are 'the object', 'the word', 'the miracle', 'the mystery', 'the number', 'the infinite', 'the nothing', and 'the circle'. Each offers a perspective on the dimension of the absurd. We are most

interested here in the first two notions – 'the object' and 'the word' – which derive directly from OBĚRIU.

In the section of the *Declaration* that introduces the group's individual members, Kharms is described as a writer who conceives of disputes among objects, disputes which have the effect of detaching the 'normal' signification of the artistic object in favor of a new signification, upended from usual logic. Of him it is said:

Daniil Kharms is a poet and dramatist whose attention is focused not on the static figure, but on the collision of a series of objects, on their interactions. At the moment of action the object takes on new concrete outlines full of real meaning. The action, its face turned inside out in a new way, retains in itself a "classical" imprint and, at the same time, represents the broad range of the OBĚRIU sense of the world<sup>37</sup>.

He explores these collisions in a series of his so-called scientific treatises, precious miniatures that may be only ten lines or even three pages long. In all of them specific absurd-surrealist elements stand out: the paradox; the undermining of normality; the comedy of conventions, of social regulations and of natural laws; the grotesque presentation of several aspects which do not fit in the usual logic of everyday life. Over time he collected these mini treatises into various volumes, the most important being *Sluchai* [Events, 1939].

In the miniature *Objects and Figures Discovered by Daniil Ivanovich Kharms*, Kharms identifies four usual significations belonging to an object: geometry, use, emotional and aesthetic. He adds another essential one: "determined by the very fact of the existence of the object: it happens outside of the relationship between the object and the person who uses it. This fifth signification is the free will of the object"<sup>38</sup>. Kharms also calls it "the thinking of the object world"<sup>39</sup>. He refers here to an intrinsically motivated or a self-determined object. Commenting on the degree of assumption of the fifth signification, the writer shows how a person, become a part of the "thinking of the objectual world" where usual human logic, i.e. "meaning", no longer functions. This fifth,

<sup>35</sup> D. Kharms, *The Plummeting Old Women*, Dublin 1989, p. 10.

<sup>36</sup> The title of this text in Russian is *Myr*: a neologism formed from the combination of *my* [we] and *mir* [world].

<sup>37</sup> D. Kharms, "I Am a Phenomenon", op. cit., p. 161.

<sup>38</sup> Ivi, p. 109.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem.



additional signification grounds Kharms's poetics of the absurd: if there exists no exterior landmark in the universe, one which is objective and logical and can delimit the coherent from the incoherent, then the absurd is perceived and lives as something natural and intrinsic logic of existence. The four usual significations define the relationship of the subject with the object through coherent-logical connections. The fifth permits the liberation of the object from logical norms, after which it acquires its complete and true reality. (Besides Kharms's objects often liberate themselves from gravity and then fly.). Kharms theory of objects undermines the very notion of 'reality' dependent on logical and objective factors.

Another miniature, remarkable for its artistic vision and programmatic character, is the first treatise in *Events*. It is entitled *Golubaia tetrad' № 10* [Blue Notebook № 10, 1936]:

There was a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears. He didn't have hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily. He couldn't talk because he had no mouth. He didn't have a nose either. He didn't even have arms and legs. He had no stomach, he had no back, no spine, and he didn't have any insides at all. There was nothing! So, we don't even know who we're talking about. We'd better not talk about him anymore<sup>40</sup>.

Who is this redheaded individual who eventually disappears? On the one hand, he is a utilitarian and grotesque-ergonomic creature, constructed of substitutable elements; on the other hand, he is a 'literary object' as an artefact, more precisely, literature itself. We have here a concise parabola-text about the writing, about the annulment of the text itself, of narration itself. The redhead who evaporates before our eyes could be 'The Character' itself who loses his traditional, classic traits. In truth, after the successive annulment of the elementary physical characteristics of the character (eyes, ears, hair, mouth, nose, hands, legs, stomach, spine, and innards) we are left with the beginning and the end: "There was a redheaded man [...]. We'd better not talk about him anymore". The redhead represents in this case a hypostasis of the absurd object. He is pure speculation, an encounter with nonsense, and the encounter could be understood in

the sense of 'case', 'incident', 'occurrence', 'opportunity', 'occasion', 'chance', 'hazard', 'event'. To repeat, Kharms's most important collection is called *Events*, and his choice of title is, indeed, either entirely incidental or no coincidence at all.

Literary critic Mikhail Iampol'skii comments on the motif of disappearance in Kharms's work. He calls it "negative transcendence" and relates it to the alogical representation of the object, a permeable and relative reality: "One of the principal subjects for Harms is the disappearance of objects, the dilution of reality, the attaining of transcendence. The creation of the world by God begins with nothing and is described as a phenomenon of 'objects.' Harms seems to reverse the process, is a creator in reverse"<sup>41</sup>. The redheaded man who is asserted then disappears is Kharms's quintessential act of reverse creation.

The miniature *Chetveronogaia vorona* [The Four-Legged Crow, 1938] parodies a fable and reflects Kharms's adherence to the concept of relativism, shows up at the beginning: "There once lived a four-legged crow. Properly speaking, it had five legs, but this isn't worth talking about"<sup>42</sup>. The relativism shows up again at the end: "And the crow climbed down and went on its four, or to be more precise, five legs to its lousy house"<sup>43</sup>. This crow with its four or (we're not certain) possibly five legs, is far from any veridical representation of a bird, any norm, and is thus an absurd object.

The importance of relativism or the disruption of objective landmarks (space, time, logical succession, cause-effect relationship, solid social relationships, etc.) is often played out in Kharms's work through the motif of amnesia, of loss. Characters forget and constantly lose things or have false memories. In the miniature *Poteri* [Losses] (date unknown), Andrei Andreevich Miasov, when returning from the marketplace, loses: the wick, the buttermilk, the Poltava salami, the French *boule*, and breaks his pince-nez, and later "when he did fall asleep, he had a dream: he had lost his toothbrush and had to brush his teeth

<sup>41</sup> Ivi, p. 314.

<sup>42</sup> Ivi, p. 246.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>40</sup> Idem, "Today I Wrote Nothing", op. cit., p. 45.

with some kind of candlestick”<sup>44</sup>. The final image definitively disrupts logical landmarks, placing the character’s comportment on an absurd-surrealist level.

The miniature *Sonet* [Sonnet, 1935] is a lapidary text about an inconvenience which confronts the narrators and those around him: “A peculiar thing happened to me: I suddenly forgot what comes first – 7 or 8?”<sup>45</sup>. The character-narrator confused by the dilemma of the logical succession of numbers addresses himself to a cashier in order to resolve the problem. Although the cashier should be able to answer the question of numbers and their order, she offers an absurd solution: “In my opinion seven comes after eight, but only when eight comes after seven”<sup>46</sup>. And what happens next? “The cashier extracted a small hammer from her mouth and twitched her nose slightly”<sup>47</sup>. This scene reifies the relativity of numerical logic, its contestability, and even more, its ability to disintegrate or be suppressed. The conclusion is sarcastic: “We would have argued very long, but, luckily, just then somebody’s child toppled off a park bench and broke both of its jaws. This distracted us from the argument. After that, everyone went home”<sup>48</sup>. This lucky (or is it unlucky?) event confirms chance as the universal law, that is, the opposite of the rational and reasonably understood sequence of events.

Logical mathematical certitude is also put in doubt in other compositions. In the dramatized miniature *Matematik i Andrei Semënovich* [The Mathematician and Andrei Semënovich, 1933], a mathematician pulls out of his head a sphere which symbolizes the schematic design of the cranium and the elements of correct reasoning. Andrei Semënovich insistently advises the mathematician to: “Put it back. Put it back. Put it back. Put it back”. But the mathematician refuses and seems to revolt against logical operations. Andrei Semënovich thinks of him as an idiot, precisely because the mathematician compromises his own basic ability, the

study of deductive reasoning: “You may be a mathematician but, the truth is, you’re not too smart”<sup>49</sup>.

In Kharms’s work in general, the sphere can be understood as the symbol of definitive perfection, closed in a way that it can no longer evolve or be reborn, and it is the most frequently encountered abstract figure. A case in point is the miniature *Makarov i Petersen № 3* [Makarov and Petersen № 3, 1934] where Makarov tells the story of a mysterious and dangerous book called *Malgil* in which “is written our desires and about the fulfillment of our desire”<sup>50</sup>. Further, “This book is such, that it is necessary to speak of it loftily. I take off my hat just thinking about it”<sup>51</sup>. As soon as Makarov utters the name of the book, Petersen, who comments skeptically on Makarov’s defense of the book, becomes invisible. Makarov, horrified, finds out in the book that Petersen has been transformed into a sphere.

Similarly, in the miniature *O tom, kak rassypalsia odin chelovek* [How One Man Fell to Pieces, 1938], an individual loudly declares his erotic opinions: “They say all the good babes are wide-bottomed. Oh, I just love big-bosomed babes. I like the way they smell”<sup>52</sup>. The individual pays a strange price for these impudent thoughts: “Saying this he began to grow taller and, reaching the ceiling, he fell apart into a thousand little sphere. Panteley, the janitor, came by and swept up all these balls into the dustpan, which he usually used to gather horse manure, and took the balls away to some distant part of the yard”<sup>53</sup>. This indecent individual is transformed not into only one sphere but rather into many spheres, which metamorphosis indicates the possibility of access to a higher plane, one that is spiritual and detached from earthly tentacles. Thus does Kharms deconstruct the ‘healthy’ moral on which the text could have ended and offers instead a random and comic moral concerning the impassiveness of the universe and the permanence of femininity: “All the while the sun continued to shine as before, and puffy ladies continued, as before, to smell en-

<sup>44</sup> Ivi, p. 65.

<sup>45</sup> Ivi, p. 48.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>49</sup> Ivi, p. 60.

<sup>50</sup> Ivi, p. 66.

<sup>51</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>52</sup> Ivi, p. 231.

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem.

chantingly”<sup>54</sup>.

Kharm's characters move through space by walking, fleeing or flying. A typical motif is flying, experienced not only by humans, but also by animals, particularly dogs, and usually combined with the motif of any kind of falling such as tripping or collapsing, which usually implies death. As characters moving through space, their bodies are subjected to forceful and violent twists and metamorphoses and are jerked around like marionettes. They take on bizarre forms as in dual optical illusions images. Or, in the miniature *Son* [A Dream, 1936] the character Kalugin is folded and thrown in the trash as a useless object:

Kalugin slept four days and four nights in a row and on the fifth day he woke up so skinny that he had to tie his boots to his legs with twine so they wouldn't slip off. They didn't recognize him at the bakery where he always bought millet bread and they slipped him half-rye. The sanitary commission, making its rounds from apartment to apartment, set eyes on Kalugin and, deeming him unsanitary, ordered the co-op management to throw him out with the trash. Kalugin was folded in half and they threw him out, like trash<sup>55</sup>.

Similarly, in the miniature *Pakin i Rakukin* [Pakin and Rakukin, 1935], Rakukin's body becomes distorted to the point where it is unrecognizable:

Rakukin stopped blinking and, hunching over, pulled his head into his shoulders. Still hunched over, Rakukin bulged his stomach and stretched his neck out. Rakukin stretched his neck out even farther and his eyes went blink-blink again. In order not to blink, Rakukin screwed up his jaw and stretched his neck out even further, tipping his head back. If one were to look at Rakukin from Pakin's perspective, one would think that Rakukin is sitting there without a head at all. His Adam's apple stuck straight up. One couldn't help thinking that it was Rakukin's nose<sup>56</sup>.

The disarticulation through loss of a body part or an organ is an element borrowed from folklore and exploited by surrealism. The OBĚRIUs, too, annul the natural logic of artistic reception when they suggest in their *Declaration* the aesthetic potential of a woman depicted with a dislocated shoulder blade attached to another part of her body.

The modeling and segmenting of the human body are realized in Kharm's work through a complex process of grotesque restructuring. In the miniature *Istoriia sdygr appr* [The Story of sdygr appr, 1929], in his office, Professor Tartarelin (note the allusive significance Tartarus of hell) is sitting on the floor and arranging his wife in a strange operation of facial reconditioning:

Where are you sewing? Don't you see that one ear is higher than the other? the professor said furiously.  
His wife unsewed the ear and began to re sew . . .  
Katia, the professor said, don't sew the ear laterally anymore, better to sew it on your cheek<sup>57</sup>.

In other works, the characters are bizarre creatures, resulting from interference between animal kingdoms. In the miniature *Prikliucheniia Katerpillera* [The Adventures of a Caterpillar, 1940]:

Mishurin was a caterpillar. Because of that, or perhaps not because of that, he liked the remain stretched out under his sofa behind the wardrobe sucking dust. Because he wasn't a very tidy man, the whole day his muzzle was covered in dust as if there were fluff on it<sup>58</sup>.

Although clownish scenes of falling, injury and destruction which constantly appear in Kharm's work should provoke general hilarity, their effects are frightening, in the spirit of the surrealist grotesque. Kharm's humor is wry even when characters are devastated, their personalities minimized, and they disappear or die unannounced. He perverts and resignifies social, moral and cultural values and reflects reality distorted as if in a fun house mirror. He creates plot and situations based on inadvertences and anomalies, which provoke and perplex the reader, drawing an ugly laugh leading to discomfort and even disgust. Despite this fact the absurd in Kharm's composition function as a law of its own, however paradoxical it may be. Kharm's universe has a superior coherence, as literary critic Matvei Iankelevich explains:

In Kharm's world, absurd life is real life. Transcendent, noumenal reality can only be glimpsed in the oddest things, in the most

<sup>54</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>55</sup> Ivi, p. 43.

<sup>56</sup> Ivi, p. 86.

<sup>57</sup> Idem, *Istoriia sdygr appr*, Lib.ru – Biblioteka Maksima Moshkova, <http://lib.ru/HARMS/harms.txt> (latest access: 22.07.2022).

<sup>58</sup> Idem, *Prikliucheniia Katerpillera*, Lib.ru – Biblioteka Maksima Moshkova, [http://www.lib.ru/HARMS/xarms\\_prose.txt](http://www.lib.ru/HARMS/xarms_prose.txt) (latest access: 22.07.2022).

awkward gestures and the most senseless events. The so-called events he describes are simultaneously completely normal, even banal, and outside the norm<sup>59</sup>.

In short, Kharm's absurd is reality.

Conflicts among the characters are often strictly random and without motivation, which transforms communication into the ridiculous or leads to the failure of the message. Incredible events (dogs that fly, human beings who die and come back to life, objects that fall or appear out of the blue), violent amputations (hands and legs pulled out and put back, legs and heads cut off), and corporeal 'reconditioning' all carry aspects of the absurd-surrealist imagination. The characters are bizarre and hardly credible: they forget numeric order, shut themselves in a trunk to see if they can survive without air, pull a sphere out of their head, have a pebble in their eye, decompose into little balls, beat themselves to death with a cucumber, rip each other's limbs off, have weird dreams, disappear out of the blue, transform into partially mechano-morphic creatures. As it happens in the literature of the absurd, the characters' actions often reflect the misunderstanding between the individual and society.

In this sense, Kharm's absurd was not only a conception and an aesthetic structure but also a concealed satire aimed at the dysfunctions of Soviet society<sup>60</sup>. To give but two examples, first, the strange disappearances of Kharm's characters are euphemisms for the non-stop arrests and executions practiced in Soviet Russia; and second, the dystrophic appearance of the characters, their rush throughout the city to find food, the long lines outside of the shops show the penury and lack of food in this period. Thus, Kharm used the strategy of the literature of the absurd to reveal the profound social and existential crisis of Russia of the 1920s-1940s. The aesthetic absurd was for him a way of reflecting and counteracting the lived absurd of the era. If the

OBÈRIUs anticipated the aesthetics of the absurd through their theories, later manifested in European literature, Kharm used the absurd aesthetic as a way of reflecting and counteracting what we could call today the real absurd of the period. The aberrant reality in which Kharm and his fellow OBÈRIUs lived, during the period of the Great Terror, fatally marked their lives and their work. Investigating the relationship between the aesthetic absurd and the absurd social and political realities in Kharm's work open onto an exciting research direction which cannot be developed without examining the representational of the 'absurd object' in the aesthetic ideology of OBÈRIU.

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<sup>59</sup> Idem, "Today I Wrote Nothing", op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>60</sup> I developed this idea in the chapter entitled *Sub lupa nonsensului social. Leningradul anilor '30* [Under the Magnifying Glass of Social Nonsense. Leningrad in the 1930s] (pp. 378-427) in my book *Cazul Daniil Harms. Supraviețuirea avangardei ruse* [The Case of Daniil Kharm. The Survival of the Russian Avant-garde] (Bucharest 2019).



◇ *OBĚRIU's Absurd Object and the Poetics of Daniil Kharms* ◇

Camelia Dinu

**Abstract**

By the 1920s the Russian avant-garde was played out, various branches of the artistic movement achieved a balance of power, and leading organizations shifted in favour of the ideological and utopian recipes imposed by the Soviet state. In this monopolizing Soviet cultural context, the group OBĚRIU appeared, reconstituting remnants of the avant-garde and anticipating the modern European poetics of the absurd and surrealism. The first part of the study analyzes the OBĚRIU manifesto and its most important concepts: 'real art', 'the artistic word', and 'the artistic object', and relates them to the literature of the absurd as well as some elements related to the surrealist vision. The second part demonstrates, first, to what degree OBĚRIU principles are recognizable in the work of Daniil Kharms, the founder of the group, and second, to what degree the concept of 'the artistic object' in the theory and practice of Kharms reflects a dimension of the art of the absurd, which appears toward the end of the 1920s within the context of the semiotic experiments of the late Russian avant-garde.

**Keywords**

Russian Avant-garde, Futurism, Zaum', Absurd, Artistic Object, OBĚRIU.

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