ALICE STONE NAKHIMOVSKY

LAUGHTER IN THE VOID

An introduction to the writings of Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedenskii

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SONDERBAND 5

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For Sasha

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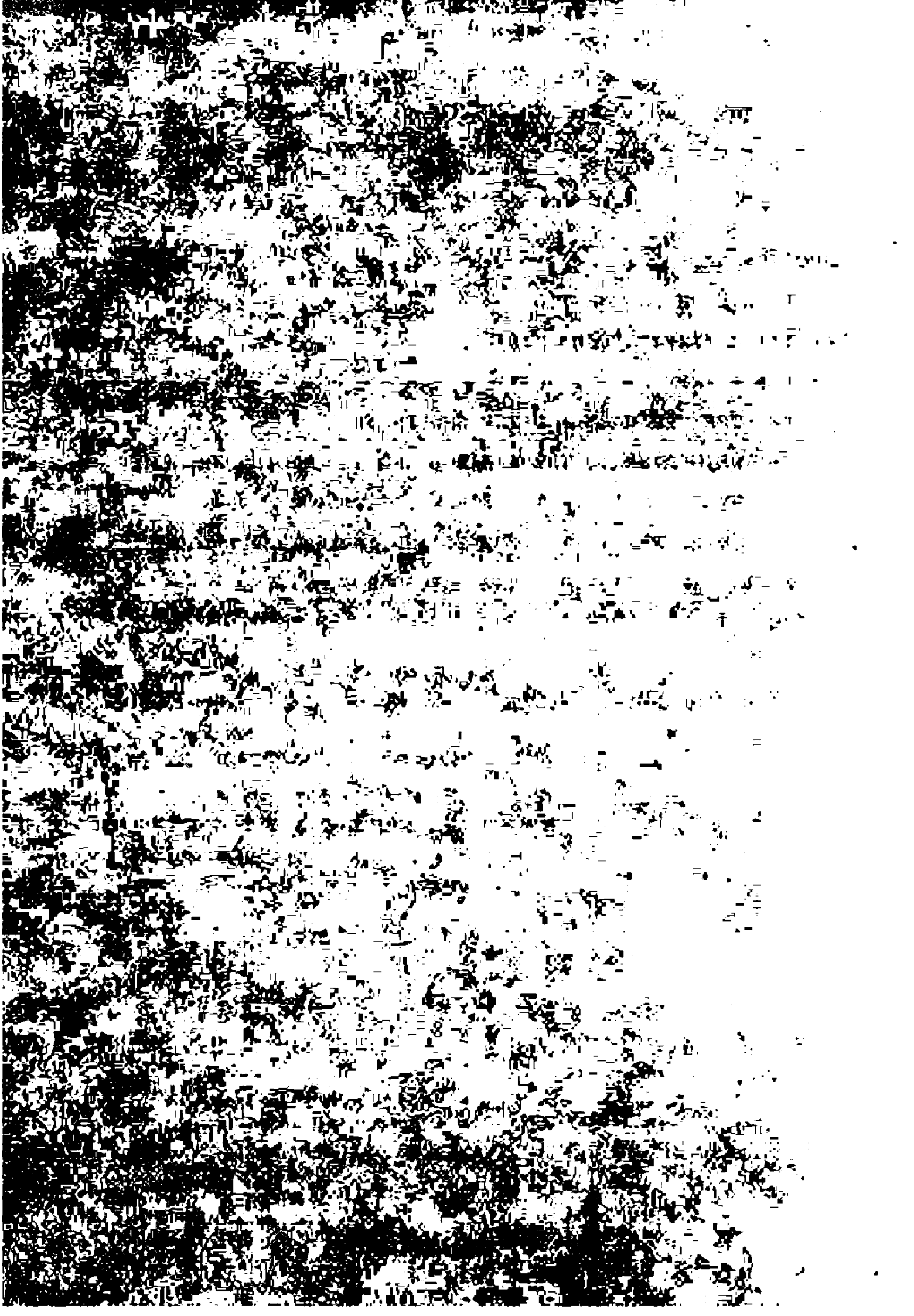

INTRODUCTION

The odd and brilliant works of Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedenskii were lost to both Russia and the West for some thirty years. It was the misfortune of these writers to be nurtured in a period of literary experiment that was cut off suddenly just as they were starting out. Their first steps, taken under the aegis of an antic literary group called Oberiu, turned out to be the only public testament of their career, and to this day Oberiu remains the touchstone of their notoriety in the West. The connection is unfortunate, because the silence that was forced on the group became paradoxically the silence under which Kharms and Vvedenskii matured as writers. Their later works, masterpieces of black humor with an infusion of the sacred, are firmly rooted in the Russian tradition, and bear comparison with the finest works of the European theater of the absurd.

Leningrad first became aware of Kharms and Vvedenskii in the late twenties, when a series of theatrical evenings was put on by the outlandishly named Oberiu. The title was more or less an acronym for Объединение реального искусства, or the Association for Real Art. The group, which began in 1926 although it received its name and published its inevitable manifesto two years later, proclaimed an art that would combine "real" words and objects in a way that was not imitative of life. Many works of the period have been lost, though the legend of the literary evenings, with their poetry readings, happenings, and dadaistic pranks, stayed vivid for a long time. During the period of Oberiu, Kharms and Vvedenskii concentrated on poetry and drama, genres suitable for declamation from a stage. To a listener not attuned to small (but crucial) differences, much of what they wrote might have recalled the futuristic dramas of Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh. The experiment in any case was just as daring. Words were freed from the

constraints of conventional syntax and imaginative sequences denied the logic of cohesive form. Most of these works do not transcend the immediate impact of their language, though in some of them, notably in Kharms's *Elizaveta Bam*, odd turns of language and structure become an alogical reflection of the outside world. In fact, *Elizaveta Bam*, the first really absurdist piece produced by either writer, marks a watershed in the history of Oberiu. Its performance in January 1928 was enough of a spectacle to attract the wrath of the official press, which by then was growing more conservative in its tastes. Within two years, Oberiu was forced to disband.

With the end of Oberiu, the work of Kharms and Vvedenskii began to change direction. For whatever reason -- the lack of an audience, the growing sense of isolation in a hostile world, or perhaps the knowledge that they had reached some boundary of impenetrability -- both writers began to move toward great clarity. The cacophony of words and objects that characterized their early work gave way to an atmosphere of unusual sparseness. "Respect the poverty of language. Respect impoverished thoughts," wrote Vvedenskii in the late thirties and his exclamation was paralleled in the narrowing of Kharms's vision to the tiny details of the ordinary world around him. Though their later works are no more rational, violations of logic and language are carefully motivated. Distortions of a recognizable reality in Kharms and of history and philosophical ideas in Vvedenskii can be called grotesque. The spontaneity of their early works has been replaced by precision; something like dada has grown into the absurd.

Beginning in the early thirties, the writings of Vvedenskii and Kharms take on a distinct and individual character. Vvedenskii's poetry and his wildly unstageable plays focus on the related themes of time, history, God, and death. The idea of absurdity (бессмысленность) becomes double-natured for him, connoting both the meaninglessness of everyday life and a profundity beyond the reach of reason. At the same time,

Kharms's poetry and prose turn to the question of meaning in the perverse and often violent disorder of everyday life. If for the most part the perversity of life overwhelms its meaning, the author of the black humor sketches called happenings was also a believer in the possibility of a miracle, and in many of the poems and stories the grotesque is replaced by or combined with a surprisingly traditional faith. The works of this period must count as the finest things that Kharms and Vvedenskii wrote. A short list would include Kharms's *Sluchai i rasskazy* (Happenings and Stories, 1936-1941), his novella *Starukha* (The Old Woman, 1938), and his poetry; and Vvedenskii's plays *Krugom vozmozhno Bog* (There May Be God All Over, 1931), *Nekotoroe kolichestvo razgovorov* (A Certain Quantity of Conversations, 1936-1938), *Elka u Ivanovykh* (Christmas at the Ivanovs, 1938), and his poem "Elegiia" (Elegy, 1940). Much has been lost, including a late novel by Vvedenskii, *Ubiitsy vy duraki* (Murderers You are Fools).

To what extent do these late works prefigure the ideas and methods of the European theater of the absurd? Though the sources are obviously different, there are striking similarities between the two. Both schools reject psychological realism, preferring to portray the human condition through distortions that become grotesque. The banality and emptiness of life is presented in both through the deliberate use of banal and empty language. The connection is apparent in much of Kharms's prose, but it is especially valid for Vvedenskii, whose *Conversations* come close to realizing Ionesco's declaration that the theater should avoid characters, plot, action, and a time element.

The chance that Kharms and Vvedenskii might become part of a general European movement was, of course, precluded by the political situation in the Soviet Union. Vvedenskii died in a prison convoy in December 1941; Kharms in prison two months later. Neither lived to be forty, and almost nothing that they wrote except for children's poems and stories had been published

during their lifetimes. That their writings survived at all was due to the dedication of a very few close friends, who salvaged what they could and kept the archives over the years when this was a dangerous thing to do.

By the 1960s, the works of Kharms and Vvedenskii had begun to circulate in typescript, becoming a part of samizdat literature and exerting a strong influence on a new generation of undeground writers.[1] Some scattered pieces by Kharms and two poems by Vvedenskii appeared in Soviet journals, but most of the publications -- a volume of translations, two volumes of collected works, and numerous isolated pieces -- were in the West. As was bound to happen, many of the published texts were flawed, so that it was not until the recent appearance of a complete edition of Vvedenskii and two volumes of a scheduled nine volume collection of Kharms that a silence imposed some fifty years ago has been to a small degree overcome.[2]

If the works themselves have finally appeared in print, very little has been published critically. The aim of this study is to provide an interpretive framework for an art which, being anti-rational, is too often taken for nonsense. The book is based on texts, some still unpublished, which became available to me in 1974. It begins chronologically with the experiments in language, but its focus is on later works, where the absurd is either a parodic vision of life or a glimpse of a truth beyond reason.

Chapter I
HISTORICAL SKETCH

The background of Oberiu as a group, and of Kharms and Vvedenskii as individuals, lies in the heightened atmosphere of artistic experiment that characterized Russia in the opening decades of the century. From the Futurists they inherited a penchant for provocation and change, an orientation they described as "leftist" long after the government had lost its taste for modern art. More specifically, they received from certain strains in Russian Futurism their insistence on irrationality as the supreme element in art. Their attempt at constructing a new poetic language, so important for their early work, was also Futurist in origin, even though the poetry itself developed along different lines. Other traits, this time without historical basis, link the Oberiuty to the European Dadaists. The most striking similarity is certainly the circus atmosphere of the Oberiu dramatic evenings, though there is a theoretical congruence also in the use both movements made of extraneous and random elements. Beyond this point, the parallels with both predecessors fall apart. The Oberiuty never shared the strain of nihilism that is part of Dada: they cannot be described as "anti-art." And despite their reverence for Khlebnikov, Vvedenskii and Kharms soon broke free of his concept of a transrational language. By the mid-thirties, with Oberiu itself a part of history, Kharms and Vvedenskii had struck out on their own.

The most fateful role in the development of Kharms and Vvedenskii was played by time. When the two writers began their activities in the early twenties, it was an unpropitious time for experiment of any sort, making Oberiu the very last of the literary groups. Time is another factor that separates them from the Futurists, for both Kharms and Vvedenskii deal with matters that would have been unthinkable for leftist artists of an earlier, more optimistic decade: Vvedenskii with

questions of God, death,and the absurdity of life; Kharms with the horror of the everyday and the question of faith. The grotesque that began to invade the works of both writers was in part a reflection of external circumstances that were changing rapidly for the worst. The element of grotesquerie grew stronger as the two writers matured, which, of course, they did not have long to do. In a very short time, at the beginning of the 1940s, both Kharms and Vvedenskii lost their lives.

Daniil Ivanovich Kharms, then Iuvachev, was born in Petersburg in 1905.[1] The name Kharms was the last of a series of pseudonyms which he assumed almost from childhood. It appealed to him, he told a friend, for its imbalance between the English "charm" and "harm." The latter he understood more autobiographically as "neschast'e" -- unhappiness or bad luck.

Kharms to the end was a character "not of this world," a self-created eccentric who wanted to be in life "what Lobachevskii was in geometry." A tall, thin redhead, stooped over, with an ever-present pipe, he liked to affect outrageous dress and attract the attention of crowds. Given the time and place, the exploits recorded in his friends' memoirs are more than mere bravado. One well-known story has him perched on an upper-story parapet of Dom knigi, the former Singer building on Nevskii Prospect which then housed Leningrad's editorial offices. Dressed in plus fours, spats, and bowler hat, and holding a cane, he invited the crowd below to the "literary evening of the Oberiu." Another friend recalls Kharms, on Vvedenskii's bet, walking toward Nevskii Prospect in his bedroom slippers. A huge cross was hanging on his bare chest and his hair was sticking out of the top of a cut-off hat; in his hands he held a butterfly net. The object of the bet was to walk the length of the street unnoticed and apparently the dignified Kharms was successful. No one commented except for

one old woman who called him an idiot and walked away.

An eccentric himself, Kharms was a collector of eccentrics, Petersburg characters whom he called on the one hand "monsters" and on the other, "natural thinkers." He did not make fun of them, but valued and cherished them. Among these odd types was a Dr. Chapeau, the only physician that Kharms allowed to treat him. Chapeau was ideally attentive; he would even move in with his patients. His single drawback was that he drank a great deal and tended to urinate on the floor; but Kharms, ever sensitive to others' proclivities, simply kept a mop on hand in a special disinfectant.

Kharms's room on Nadezhdinskaia, now Maiakovskaia, reflected the tastes of the inhabitant. On the door was a sign: "Drei mal Klingen." Inside were all manner of odd objects suspended from wires and strings. One writer, Vladimir Lifshits, remembers something composed of iron, boards, boxes, springs, a bicycle wheel, and empty jars.When asked what it was, Kharms answered, "A machine." "What kind of machine?" asked Lifshits. "No kind," said Kharms, "just a machine," and the dialogue, according to Lifshits, went on as follows:

> "I see. And where did you get it?"
> "I made it myself," said Kharms, not without pride.
> "What does it do?"
> "Nothing".
> "What do you mean, nothing?"
> "That's all, nothing".
> "Then why did you want it?"
> "I felt like having some kind of machine around."[2]

In addition to the objects, there were symbols: in one place a clock with a note attached ("This clock has special superlogical meaning"), in another, a sign that symbolized eternity. Kharms had a collection of Bibles also, and like the narrator of some of his prose, was always waiting for a miracle.

Kharms's life, at least in the twenties, was spectacle;

"Kharms is art," Vvedenskii said of him. But for both writers, the boundary between public presentations and private amusements was thin, and some of the latter filtered into their written work. Among these games were conversations staged between Vvedenskii and Kharms, in which each speaker would combine the most dreadful content with the politest possible style; the technique was eventually used by both writers. Another was a game in which a player was led, blindfolded, to a place that either intrigued or terrified him. It is not hard to see in this the feeling for comic or frightening displacement that informs a lot of their work, but Kharms, in a later poem, used it more directly as a metaphor for his hatred of a world that had grown hostile:

Ведите меня. С завязанными глазами.
Не пойду я с завязанными глазами.
Развяжите мне глаза, и я пойду сам.
Не держите меня за руки,
Я рукам волю дать хочу.
Расступитесь, глупые зрители.
Я ногами сейчас шпыняться буду.
Я пройду по одной половице и не пошатнусь.
По карнизу пробегу и не рухну.
  Не перечьте мне. Пожалейте.
  Ваши трусливые глаза неприятны богам.
  Ваши рты раскрываются некстати.
  Ваши носы не знают вибрирующих запахов.
  Ешьте суп - это ваше занятие.
Подметайте свои комнаты - это вам положено от века.
Но снимите с меня бандажи и набрюшники,
Я солью питаюсь, а вы сахаром.
У меня свои сады и свои огороды.
У меня в огороде пасется своя коза,
У меня в сундуке лежит меховая шапка.
Не перечьте мне, я сам по себе, а вы для меня только четверть дыма.[3]

Lead me. Blindfolded.
I won't go blindfolded.
Untie my eyes and I'll go myself.
Don't hold me by the arms
I want to free them.
Make way you stupid viewers
I'm going to start kicking.
I'll walk a single floorboard and I won't stumble.

I'll run the parapet and won't fall.
  Don't contradict me. Have pity.
  Your cowardly eyes are unpleasant to the gods.
  Your mouths open not to the point.
  Your noses know nothing of trembling smells.
  Eat soup -- that's your occupation.
Sweep your rooms -- it's your eternal fate.
But take from me your blindfolds and your wrappings.
My food is salt, and yours is sugar.
I have my own gardens and my own fields.
My own goats are at pasture there.
In my trunk is a fur hat.
Don't contradict me, I am myself, and for me you are
        only a quarter's whiff of smoke.

Alexander Ivanovich Vvedenskii was born in Petersburg in 1904, a year earlier than Kharms. In many ways, he was Kharms's opposite, more ordinary in his comportment and more radical in his art. Vvedenskii certainly had less interest in the object world. Unlike Kharms, he dressed carelessly; his clothes were rumpled and he was as often as not unshaven. His room, unlike Kharms's, had nothing in it -- indeed, a tax inspector who went there one day to find out what was becoming of Vvedenskii's literary earnings is reported to have left muttering, "It's a dog's life, worse than ours!" Both Kharms and Vvedenskii were incapable of holding onto money even on the rare occasions when they had it, but Vvedenskii, unlike Kharms, was an inveterate gambler, capable of losing his pay while still in line for it. Kharms loved music and sang well; Vvedenskii detested it. He insisted that the only sound he could stand was his own whistle, and then only after getting paid or winning at cards. Alisa Poret, an artist of the school of Filonov who worked as a children's illustrator, remembers how she and Kharms tricked the unfortunate Vvedenskii into attending a concert. The music, Mozart's *Requiem*, gave Kharms and Poret ample opportunity to play on Vvedenskii's moribund preoccupations, and the picture that emerges is entirely consonant with his poetry and plays:

> At first he sat quietly, even bragging that it didn't bother him at all. But gradually it got to him, and he started squirming in his seat in an attempt to get up and run. We pinned him down on both sides, and the music hit him. He turned pale, his eyes opened wide, and from time to time he whispered, "What is this? It's death!" "That could be," I answered. "Why did you bring me here? Let me go. It feels like it's my requiem they are singing." "That could be," said Kharms.[4]

The friendship of Kharms and Vvedenskii began in 1925. Kharms had attended the German-oriented Peterschulle, enrolling in and then leaving an engineering academy for which his talents were obviously unsuited. Vvedenskii had completed the Lentovskaia gymnasium and spent a brief time studying Oriental languages at Leningrad University. Both were already writing poetry, and Vvedenskii's talents were highly regarded by Mikhail Kuz'min, in whose diaries he figures throughout the twenties.[5]

The two young men met at a poetic circle led by Alexander Tufanov, a minor Futurist poet and the author of a tract on *zaum'*, the Futurists' language "beyond sense." His group, called Levyi flang (Left Flank), included among others a poet called Vigilianskii who later took part in some of the Oberiu theatrics. But the friendship between Kharms and Vvedenskii quickly eclipsed, at least for them, the significance of Tufanov. The two kept apart from the rest of the group, working out their own poetic platform and constructing for their own use the title *chinar'*, from the Slavic root meaning "create." The poetry they were writing at this point seems, despite all disclaimers, to skirt the borders of true nonsense; Vvedenskii even signed himself "avtor-ritet bessmyslitsy" (nonsense author-rity). Still, the four poems dating from this time that were published in the Leningrad miscellanies *Sobranie stikhotvorenii* and *Koeter* would be the only works aside from children's books to appear during the authors' lifetimes.

The beginning of the friendship between Vvedenskii and Kharms was also Kharms's initiation into another circle, which, though it bears at best a tangential relationship to Oberiu, had a strong influence on the later works of both writers. Starting in 1924, Vvedenskii had maintained a close friendship with two graduates of his gymnasium, L. S. Lipavskii, a children's writer who later published under the pseudonym Savel'ev, and Ia. S. Druskin, a musicologist and philosopher. The three met almost daily at Lipavskii's and beginning in 1926 they were joined by Kharms. The discussions at Lipavskii's reflected the training of the principals: Lipavskii, like Druskin, had studied philosophy at the university and was the author of several tracts on philosophical themes. But the dominant voice in the group belonged to Druskin, whose idiosyncratic philosophy had a strong influence not only on Vvedenskii but on Kharms as well. During the thirties, Kharms wrote for Druskin a series of mathematical-philosophical essays and a group of philosophical poems of the same period make use of Druskin's terminology.

The group of like-minded poets that eventually became Oberiu began to form in 1926 after the breakup of Tufanov's circle. An important addition was Nikolai Zabolotskii, the least radical of the group and the only one to achieve recognition during his lifetime. Kharms and Vvedenskii heard Zabolotskii at a poetry reading and, sensing the closeness of his early work to their own ideas, began a friendship with him that lasted until the early thirties.[6] Zabolotskii's collection, *Stolbtsy* (Scrolls, 1929), is generally considered the product of his association with Oberiu, and some of his longer poems of the early thirties show surprising affinities with Vvedenskii's work of the same period.[7]

At the same time as they began their association with Oberiu, Kharms and Vvedenskii became involved with a group of drama students from the Institute for Art History, organizers of an experimental theater which they called Radix, Latin for

"root." The initiators of Radix were Boris Levin, known as Boba or Doivber; Georgii Katsman, who turns up variously as Gaga Katsman and Georgii Kox-Boot; Igor' Bakhterev; and Sergei Tsymbal.[8] At their invitation, Kharms and Vvedenskii put together a montage of verse entitled *Moia mama vsia v chasakh* (My Mother's All in Watches) after a poem by Vvedenskii, since lost. The performance, complete with musucal accompaniment, was prepared under the auspices of Ginkhuk, the Institute for Artistic Culture then headed by Malevich. Not surprisingly, the numerous rehearsals led to nothing, as the project was broken off for "technical reasons." But the idea of Radix remained as an association now strongly influenced by Vvedenskii and Kharms.

Among the projects initiated by Radix was the publication of a miscellany with contributions from various leftist artistic groups. In addition to Kharms, Vvedenskii and Zabolotskii, the literary section was to include work by Konstantin Vaginov,[9] then a student in fine arts at the Institute for Art History. Filonov and Malevich agreed to illustrate, and Formalist critics including Shklovskii and Ginzburg promised articles. The book, of course, did not materialize, sharing the fate of the theatrical evening and indeed of all the works Kharms and Vvedenskii were preparing at the time. Among them were two plays, both experimental variations on a historical theme: Vvedenskii's *Minin i Pozharskii* (Minin and Pozharskii) and Kharms's *Komediia goroda Peterburga* (A Petersburg Comedy).

Radix had better luck with a series of dadaistic dramatic evenings, which were put on anywhere there was space and frequently without pay. What these evenings were like can be seen from a note in Kharms's diary outlining the plan for the performance at the Leningrad Union of Poets. The date was November 12, 1926:

> This Friday I want to organize battle positions to be as follows: after our reading Igor' Bakhterev will come out and give a nonsense speech using citations from

> unknown poets etc. Then /unclear/ will come out and also give a speech, only with a Mrxist bent. In this speech he will defend us. Finally, two unknown persons will walk up to the table arm in arm and declare: in reference to the aforementioned we can't say much, but we will sing something. And they will sing something. Finally Gaga Katsman will come out and recite something from the lives of the saints. That will be good.[10]

Accompanying the poets on other evenings were a ballerina named Militsa Popova, and a professional magician by the name of Pastukhov. Verse was recited from any of a number of unusual positions, including on or around a cupboard that figured in Kharms's favorite slogan "Iskusstvo kak shkap" (art like a cupboard). The result was a fusion of poetry and spectacle, the glorification of the irrational in art. "Stikhi - ne pirogi, my - ne seledki" (Poems aren't pies, we aren't herring) read one of the signs that they would hang in the vestibule before a performance. Their art was not meant for digestion by the ordinary mind.

In 1927, its membership more or less settled, the group which had temporarily reverted to the name Levyi flang set to work on a manifesto. An early version, written by Vvedenskii and Zabolotski, was read aloud in the Leningrad Capella as an unscheduled afterword to a poetry reading by Maiakovskii. During the debate that went on after the reading, a party composed of Kharms, Vvedenskii, Bakhterev, and Levin burst onto the stage and interrupted the proceedings. But the scandal, if one was intended, failed to materialize -- at least Viktor Shklovskii, present at the meeting, accused Kharms and Vvedenskii of not being able to make a public scene.

Nonetheless, it was the ability to make scenes, at least within a theater, that finally gained the group a significant change in status. In the fall of 1927, the director of Dom pechati (Press House), a center of avant-garde culture, invited the group to be a resident artistic company. There remained only the problem of a name. Since 1926, the group had gone through a whole series of them: Flang levykh (Flank of

Leftists), Levyi flang, for a time even Akademiia levykh klassikov (Academy of Leftist Classics). For their association with Dom pechati, they were asked to find a name that avoided the term "leftist" -- either because it was overused, or because it stood for a type of art that was growing less and less in step with the leftist government. The group responded with the outlandish-sounding acronym Oberiu.

Oberiu's debut at Dom pechati took place on January 24, 1928 as a theatrical evening called Tri levykh chasa (Three Left Hours), which included a performance of Kharms's play *Elizaveta Bam*. The first hour, devoted to poetry and incorporating the emblematic cupboard, has been described by a writer who was in the audience:

> In the very center of the stage was an ordinary cupboard of the type used for clothes, completely shabby and not in the least theatrical. Pacing back and forth in front of this cupboard was a serious young man in a glossy top hat, a curved pipe stuck in his teeth -- Daniil Kharms.
>
> He read a long poem, separating the verses with pauses during which he would stop and blow smoke rings into the auditorium. From time to time a fireman in a shining copper helmet looked out from the wings, calling forth a general animation and applause . . .
>
> . . . When Kharms finished his reading and took a bow, the doors to the cupboard opened and out came a glum figure wrapped in a scarf (or possibly a hood): Alexander Ivanovich Vvedenskii, scroll in hand. Unrolling his papyrus he began to read. By this time Kharms had mysteriously appeared on top of the cupboard, from where he continued to smoke his pipe.
>
> Vvedenskii had a low, even rumbling voice, somewhat hoarse from constant smoking. He read solemnly, chanting on one note. The captivating thing about his reading wasn't the significance of the contents, but the unbelievable fusion of lyricism and the fantastic . . .[11]

The Oberiu manifesto was written for Tri levykh chasa and published in the *Afishi doma pechati* (Placards of the Press House), No. 2, 1928. The appearance of the manifesto gives

the composition of the group a stamp of historical finality which it probably doesn't deserve. According to the manifesto, the literary members were Vvedenskii, Vaginov, Bakhterev, Zabolotskii, Kharms, and Levin; Alexander Razumovskii and Klementii Mints are named in the section on film. The list of members that was published does not, of course, reflect what happened to the group. In fact, Vaginov never became an active participant, while others who are not mentioned, like Nikolai Oleinikov,[12] a poet of immense comic talents, were spiritually much closer.

The manifesto was written by Zabolotskii and Kharms, and, like all futurist manifestos, it is radical and all-consuming. But the spirited affirmation of artistic novelty, canonical for the genre, is tempered here by a sense that the Revolution was already growing weary of its leftist art. The manifesto begins with a declaration of support for the artists Filonov and Malevich and the director Terent'ev,[13] all friends of the group who had fallen on difficult times. It was a brave gesture, and as hopelessly optimistic as the very idea of an Oberiu manifesto in the year 1928.

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of the Oberiu platform is its insistence on the appellation "real." By this the Oberiuty meant "concrete" -- nonsymbolic, nonemotional, nonliterary. "Realness" in this sense was what Kharms had in mind in his slogan "iskusstvo kak shkap," "art like a cupboard." On another level, it was a way of distinguishing their assault on rational language from the futurists' transrational language, or *zaum'*. *Zaum'* put together new combinations of sounds to create a universal language beyond meaning. In its extreme variants, proposed by Tufanov and Malevich, it denied the idea of language altogether, focusing instead on what Malevich called the "sound note."[14] The Oberiuty contrasted this approach with their own onterest in objects and words. Their nonsense is referential: it results from an alogical succession of ordinary words. It does not attempt, as does

zaum', a poetry of pure emotive sound.

The unifying idea of Oberiu is the creation of art through a collision of independent sequences. The building blocks of art - the object/word of a text or a single theatrical act -- are seen as leading their own "artistic" lives. They exist on their own terms and combine according to their own rules. These rules are not rational because art is not life, and the logic of art is different from the logic of life.

The manifesto makes its best case in its discussion of Oberiu theater, which borrows a lot from ideas developed by Radix.[15] In its accustomed sense, proclaims the manifesto, a play consists of dramatic elements subordinated to a plot. In Oberiu theater, the plot only "glimmers . . . behind the back of the action."[16] Of far greater importance are the autonomus dramatic acts that rivet the viewer's attention regardless of their function in a logically developing plot; these are the essence of theater.

> If an actor who represents a minister begins to move around on the stage on all fours and howls like a wolf, or an actor who represents a Russian peasant suddenly delivers a long speech in Latin -- that will be theater, that will interest the spectator without any relation to the dramatic plot.[17]

In Oberiu theater such elements are freed from their dependence on plot. The connections that exist between them are not logical and lifelike; they are purely theatrical in the same way as musical connections are purely musical.

These statements about plot provide an excellent introduction to Kharms's *Elizaveta Bam* or Vvedenskii's *Minin i Pozharskii*. But they are equally valid as an explanation for Kharms's and Vvedenskii's early poetry. This is more than a matter of analogy. Almost everything written by Kharms and Vvedenskii at this period has a strong dramatic bias, and theatrical acts of this sort remain an important element of Kharms's mature prose long after he has abandoned both Oberiu

and the writing of plays.

Kharms's dream of uniting all "left" artists of Leningrad is realized at least theoretically in Oberiu. The manifesto calls Oberiu a universal artistic principle, and speaks of creative sections on cinema, fine arts, and music in addition to literature and theater. The section on cinema did indeed produce a film, a short called "Miasorubka" (Meatgrinder), which began with an endlessly repeating shot of an approaching train. But if the sections on fine arts and music failed to produce independent work, the contacts between the literary Oberiuty and painters and musicians on the outside are nonetheless worthy of note.

The most striking of the musical friends is certainly Shostakovich, whose comic-grotesque "Nos" (The Nose) dates to the period of Oberiu and, in the opinion of several investigators, shares something of its alogical world view. Shostakovich knew both Kharms and Oleinikov, and his close friend Sollertinskii was a great admirer of Oberiu poetry. At one point, Kharms was invited to the Malyi Opera Theter, where there was talk of his writing the libretto for a satiric opera to be composed by Shostakovich.[19] The project, needless to say, got nowhere. One that came closer to fruition was a proposal by Shostakovich to write a comic opera based on Oleinikov's "Karas'" (Carp), a poem about the demise of a fish that is very much in the Oberiu vein. This project stood on the books of Malyi Opera Theater from March to June of 1930 before it was withdrawn by theater hierarchy, no doubt in connection with a proposed "Sovietization" of the repertory.[20]

The connections with the visual arts were more intense. There was great admiration for Pavel Filonov, whose work, now a classic, then adorned the walls of the avant-garde Dom pechati; it was there, of course, that Oberiu enjoyed a temporary home. Both Kharms and Zabolotskii took drawing lessons from

Filonov, and for a long time Kharms and Vvedenskii retained close ties with several of Filonov's students. At the oposite pole from Filonov, whose forms are for the most part suggestive of objects in the real world, was Kasimir Malevich. Malevich, the founder of suprematism and originator of abstract art, was a good acquaintance of Kharms. Their friendship is marked in two of Kharms's poems, "Iskushenie" (Temptation, 1927), a re-creation of Malevich's cubo-futurist paintings, and "Poslanie k Kazimiru" (Epistle to Kasimir, 1935), which Kharms read over the artist's grave. For a number of years, there had even been talk of Malevich and Oberiuty coming together in a joint group. In 1926, Malevich tried to draw Kharms and Vvedenskii into a literary section of his artistic group Unovis; later, Kharms tried to get Malevich to join Oberiu.[21] As Ilya Levin points out in an interesting article on Malevich and the Oberiuty, the failure of the two to reach an agreement is as important as the fact that one was contemplated.[22] Malevich, who wrote on poetics as well as on art, comes close to Oberiu (and of course to *zaum'*) in his belief that true art is independent of reason and causality. But just as in suprematism he detached form from object, so in poetry he wanted to free sounds from word boundaries and even lines along a printed page. His goal, the creation of an abstract, "suprematist" poetry of sound, went far beyond Oberiu, and it is this development, in Levin's opinion, that the Oberiuty had in mind in their glorification of the object word and criticism of *zaum'*. It is as though they decided to test the possibilities of Malevich's pre-abstract "alogical style" with its oddly intriguing juxtapositions, while he went on to explore pure space.

The period of Oberiu was also notable for another development: it was during this time that Samuil Marshak invited Kharms and Vvedenskii to write for the children's journals *Chizh* and *Ezh*.[23] Marshak, an accomplished children's poet and

translator of English poetry, was nurturing a group of immensely talented writers toward the goal of creating a new literature for children. He had the prescience to see in the poetry of Oberiu, which he himself did not value, the basis for striking and original children's works.

> I recruited a group of poets /he later wrote/ who were refining their skills in formal -- I might even say ironical and parodic -- experiments. The most I could expect from them in the beginning was their help in creating the tonguetwisters and nonsense songs that are so necessary in children's poetry. But they all turned out to capable of much more.[24]

So it was that Kharms, Vvedenskii and Zabolotskii began appearing at Detgiz, the children's publishing house known familiarly as the "Marshak Academy." Its offices on the fifth floor of Dom knigi were probably the single official place in Leningrad where Vvedenskii and Kharms found themselves surrounded by the like-minded. The company included Nikolai Oleinikov and Evgenii Shvarts, a singular pair whose antics figure in numerous memoirs. A characteristic story is told by one young writer, who remembers wandering around Dom knigi in search of what he imagined as dignified figures, only to find them marching around on all fours "pretending to be camels."[25] The most caustic tongue in the group was possessed by Oleinikov, a Cossack by birth and one of the few party members in attendance. In one characteristic account, the victim of his wit was Kharms, who together with Marshak had just completed a poem about a group of "merry siskins." The poem, which has turned into something of a children's classic, shows the birds engaged in a series of blithe domestic tasks:

Жили в квартире
Сорок четыре
Сорок четыре веселых чижа:
  Чиж - судомойка
  Чиж - поломойка
  Чиж - огородник
  Чиж - водовоз

Forty-four siskins
Living in bliss-kins
One does the dishes
One scrubs the floor
One tends the garden
One minds the store.

One day, on Kharms's appearance at Detgiz, Oleinikov informed him that his birds had fallen ill, explaining with the following:

Жили в квартире
Сорок четыре
Сорок четыре печальных чижа
Чиж - паралитик
Чиж - сифилитик
Чиж - параноик
Чиж - идиот!

Forty-four siskins
Something's amiss-kins
One's paranoie
One's syphilitic
One's idiotic
One's paralytic.[26]

The easily wounded Kharms could not find a response and took offense -- curiously, because the grotesque air of the parody is the same one he himself creates in his work for adults.

The group at Detgiz included other writers who were close to Oberiu. Doivber Levin, former member of Radix and future author of a number of novels on his Jewish childhood, was often in attendance, as was a very young and gifted poet named Yuri Vladimirov. Both died young and without reference to politics: Vladimirov of tuberculosis and Levin in the war.

Both Kharms and Vvedenskii, pressed into it through need, showed exceptional talent as children's writers. Kharms, who apparently did not like children, had the ability to see the world with the eyes of a child and the artistry of a writer. He published eight books of poems and small stories in addition to minor creations like recurrent characters who never left the pages of the journal. Kharms's children's work is connected to his adult writing by numerous coincidences of

structure and technique. His children's world is equally alogical, though never grotesquely so, and the sense of art as a game, so strong in his children's works, recurs in the more painful setting of his work for adults. Even characters seem to wander from one form to the other. Thus, the crazy old woman of Kharms's novella is, in another guise,the heroine of his children's story, "O tom, kak odna starukha chernila pokupala"(The story of how an old woman bought ink).Even the Kharms-like narrator of much of his adult prose makes an occasional appearance in his children's work. The most poignant of these instances, whether intentional or not, is the children's poem "Iz doma vyshel chelovek" (A Man Left Home). The poem is about a man who walks out of the house one day and is never heard from again; in the last verse, the children are told that if they ever find out anything about him, they must "tell us as quickly as possible." The poem was written in 1937, when Kharms's own life was getting more and more difficult. He had already been arrested and released; he was rarely published even as a children's writer and because he had no other work he often did not have anything to eat. The poem is often cited as a foreshadowing of what happened to Kharms himself, and the poet Alexander Galich even wrote a sequel to it.[27]

Vvedenskii published a lot more than Kharms, in all almost forty children's books. In comparison to Kharms's writing for children, Vvedenskii's is more removed from his other work and much of it is weak. This is hardly surprising. For a writer so interested in the absurdity of life and so fascinated by death, children's literature would seem to lack appeal. Still, there is one strain that unites his children's writing with his writing for adults: his absorption in the natural world. In Vvedenskii's adult work, nature appears as a hallowed and innocent kingdom, a repository of "profound absurdity" untainted by man and incomprehensible to him. But in these adult works, the natural world never appears for long without some sardonic intrusion from the world of men. This is of

course not true of his children's work, which consists mostly of lyric poems about nature. Here, the tranquility and beauty of the forest reign undisturbed. It is not impossible that the cynical and unhappy Vvedenskii saw these children' poems as a sort of relief. Many of them are quite beautiful. Lidiia Chukovskaia, who admires them, is not afraid to place them in the tradition of Tiutchev and Fet, noting their unexpected classical form.[28]

The relationship of Kharms's and Vvedenskii's children's work to their adult writings is a matter of dispute. Within the Soviet Union, where Kharms and Vvedenskii are officially praised as children's writers and officially ignored as writers for adults, people who admire their adult works are likely to put down their children's things as something they had to do for a living. Though true, this no doubt undervalues them. As Lev Lifshits-Losev notes, children's writing provided Kharms and Vvedenskii with the opportunity to publish works which made use of a whole range of Oberiu devices.[29] The influence seems to have worked the other way as well, with their practice under Marshak providing them with a discipline they previously lacked. Whether or not Marshak was behind it, the spontaneity of their early works begins to give way to disciplined craftsmanship around the mid thirties, after some years of working at what was, under Marshak, a very exacting genre.

Throughout the period that Kharms and Vvedenskii worked at Detgiz, the idea of a playful literature for children was under siege. As early as 1929, there were rumblings in the press about the anti-revolutionary status of fairy tales and nursery rhymes. One article called Marshak's translation of English nursery rhymes "ideologically harmful rubbish";[30] another one, entitled "Children Must be Talked with Seriously,"[31] called for an active struggle against the group at Detgiz. The latter, including Kharms, Vvedenskii, and Zabolotskii, sent a letter of

protest to *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, as did a number of already established liberal writers, including eventually, Maxim Gorky.[32] But the resulting victory was short-lived; it was considered more important to inform children about the first five year plan. For some time Kharms did not publish at all, though Vvedenskii, who found it easier to turn out things for the money, went on undaunted. The "merry genres" made a brief return in 1933 and 1934 before breathing their last in the face of a strident didacticism.[33] By the mid-thirties, Kharms and Vvedenskii were out of work.

A similar phenomenon was of course occuring in adult literature: the times were by now antithetical to fantasy and experimentation in all areas of art. The performance of *Elizaveta Bam*, which took place in January 1928, brought the Oberiuty a lot of notoriety and they no longer found it possible to hold their evenings at Dom pechati. There were plans to publish a collection called *Vanna Arkhimeda* (Archimedes' Bath), with contributions by various Leningrad formalists as well as by Kharms, Vvedenskii, Zabolotskii, and Oleinikov, but this project too did not come to fruition. As early as 1928,there had been the beginnings of a split in the group, with Vaginov and Zabolotskii no longer taking part in dramatic performances. By 1930, when Kharms suggested a performance, even Bakhterev turned him down: it was too dangerous. The last Oberiu evening took place in April 1930 at a Leningrad University dormitory. It received a virulent review in the press, and the public phase of Oberiu was over.

The remaining history is no longer the history of a group. In 1931, Kharms and Vvedenskii were arrested, put in prison, and eventually released; both spent part of 1932 in exile in Kursk. The arrests of 1931 were widespread among the writers of Detgiz, who were accused of using their nonsense verse to distract the populace from the building of socialism. It is possible that the authorities were making their first attempt, soon to be successful, to dislodge Marshak -- in any

event, Vvedenskii reported seeing Marshak's photograph on the interrogator's desk.[34]

Kharms and Vvedenskii returned to Leningrad in the fall of 1931, where they continued for some time to make a sporadic living from children's literature. In the absence of any possibility of publishing, and in the face of a clear threat of a second arrest, their work began to change direction, moving toward the precise expression of a vision that may already be termed absurd. An important influence was the philosophical discussions at Lipavskii's which maintained their intensity in the early thirties and for the first time began to be reflected in both writers' work.

As the thirties progressed, things became steadily worse. There was no work and often nothing to eat; Kharms's diaries of this period return continually to the subject of hunger. By 1935, the friendship between Kharms and Vvedenskii had weakened. In 1936, Vvedenskii moved to Khar'kov where he started a family and continued working in complete isolation. Both writers, now separated by a great distance, were arrested in the late summer of 1941. Khar'kov was then being evacuated before the German onslaught, and Vvedenskii was taken away on a prison train; the circumstances of his death are lost to history, but the official date was given as December 20th. Kharms's arrest was heralded by the janitor of his building, who called him into the yard "for a few minutes." In the yard a Black Maria was waiting for him. Half-dressed, in his bedroom slippers, he was carted away to prison where he died of starvation in February of 1942, the first winter of the Leningrad blockade.

Chapter II
ELIZAVETA BAM

Kharms is best known for two things: his late prose and his participation in Oberiu. The two come at different ends of his creative life, and though there are connecting threads, the Kharms of the early thirties was a radically different writer from the Kharms of the happenings and short stories.

In the period of Oberiu, from the late twenties through the early thirties, Kharms was the creator of alogical poetry and experimental plays. Much of what he wrote does not withstand the test of time. But there are great exceptions: the play *Elizaveta Bam* and scattered poems of remarkable verbal wit. Kharms's best works come several years later, in the period 1936-1941. It is then that he wrote the very short stories which he called *sluchai* (happenings), the poetry and prose of his Blue notebook, and the novella *Starukha* (The Old Woman). The works -- except *Starukha* -- are exceptinally short and show a precision of language common to minor forms. In many ways, they are close to Kharms's diary entries. Their world is one of ordinary experience transformed into the grotesque and occasionally illuminated by a gentle and traditional faith. The final two chapters about Kharms are a discussion of these works in terms of the delicate balance of four elements: the ordinary, the biographical, the sacred, and the grotesque. This chapter, and the one that follows, deal with Kharms's more exuberant and more experimental beginnings.

The key to *Elizaveta Bam* can be found in the Oberiu manifesto -- not surprisingly, since the declaration was written to accompany the production of the play in January 1928. "The dramatic plot," states the manifesto, "is shattered by many seemingly extraneous subjects which detach the object as a separate whole, existing outside its connection with

others."

> Therefore the dramatic plot does not arise before the spectator as a clear plot image; it glimmers, so to speak, behind the back of the action. The dramatic plot is replaced by a scenic plot which arises spontaneously from all the elements of our spectacle. The center of our attention is on it. But at the same time, separate elements of the spectacle are equally valuable and important to us. They live their separate lives without subordinating themselves to the ticking of the theatrical metronome.[1]

The dramatic plot of *Elizaveta Bam* comes in and out of focus. When it is out of focus, we perceive it as simply another event in a manic, alogical world. The "scenic" plot -- an apt term -- is composed of swiftly changing sequences which vary widely in their mood and stylistic coloration. Since this is not pure pandemonium, the "scenic" sequences are all connected, but the links are "artistic" or "dramatic" rather than logical. Actions are not motivated, and, as in so many works of the European theater of the absurd, there is no progression toward a goal.

The dramatic plot of Kharms's play concerns the pursuit of a young girl called Elizaveta Bam by a pair of police investigators. Her crime, which starts out as a mystery, is eventually revealed to be logically absurd. But despite this, or perhaps because of it, at the play's end Elizaveta Bam is arrested and taken away.

Because the play is "scenic" rather than "dramatic", a simple restatement with no mention of scenic interludes does little to convey its atmosphere. In fact, most of the dramatic plot noted above takes place in the opening sequence. When the play begins, Elizaveta Bam has locked herself into her room; the two investigators are knocking on the door and threatening to break it down. She does not know what she has done and when she asks they refuse to tell her, but her punishment is obviously going to be severe. At this point, with the dramatic tension at its height, the relationship

between Elizaveta and her accusers changes drastically. The two investigators forget all about the arrest they were about to make, and for some time the play flows along different channels. Then, just as suddenly, the crime comes back into focus: the investigators, speaking with the greatest solemnity and pomp, accuse Elizaveta of having murdered one of them. With this non-information in place, the play takes off in a different direction. The dramatic plot reemerges for a final time near the play's end in the form of a duel over Elizaveta's life. Participating in this mock-heroic battle are Elizaveta's father and her murder victim, otherwise known as the investigator Petr Nikolaevich. The duel concludes in a victory for Elizaveta's father, but, not surprisingly, it is all in vain. In the next and final scene, Elizaveta is back in her room and the investigators lead her off stage.

The "scenic" side of Kharms's play is the product of its strikingly unstable characterizations. There are five main characters: Elizaveta Bam, her Mamasha and Papasha, and the two investigators, Ivan Ivanovich and Petr Nikolaevich. Mamasha and Papasha are fairly stable throughout, if we discount Mamasha's flight into insanity at the end of the play and Papasha's heroic transformation at the time of the duel. The real instability comes in the relationship of Elizaveta Bam with her two persecutors, and it affects not only how they relate to one another, but who they are. Though this instability is present throughout the play, its dramatic value is strongest in the opening sequences, before the viewer gets used to it.

There is nothing in the opening scene that would suggest a sudden shift in dynamics. Elizaveta Bam is a victim, fearful and confused; her two persecutors are emotionless and efficient. This is the way the play opens:

A small, narrow room, simply furnished.

First Piece: Realistic melodrama

Elizaveta Bam: Any moment now, the door will open and they'll come in. I know they'll come in, they'll catch me and wipe me off the face of the earth. What have I done. What have I done. If only I had known . . . Run. But where. This door leads to the stairs, and on the stairs I'll run into them. Through the window. (Looks through the window.) Oh! It's too high. I can't jump. What am I going to do. I hear footsteps. That's them. I'll lock the door and I won't open it. Let them knock as much as they want.

(Knock on the door, then a voice from backstage, threatening)

Elizaveta Bam, open the door. (Pause)
Elizaveta Bam, open the door.

A Voice from Afar: What's she up to in there? Why isn't she opening it?

A Voice from Behind the Door: She will. Elizaveta Bam, open the door.

(Elizaveta Bam throws herself on the bed and covers her ears.)

Voices from Behind the Door

First: Elizaveta Bam, I order you to open the door immediately.

Second (softly): Tell her if she doesn't we'll break it down. Let me have a try.

First (loudly): We'll break down the door if you don't open up at once.[2]

Then, suddenly, the tension breaks. Thrown off by a remark of their victim, the two officials degenerate into mutual name-calling. Their self-importance turns into vulnerability and childishness, and they totally lose sight of their purpose:

Elizaveta Bam: Ivan Ivanovich, you have no conscience. You're nothing but a crook.

Second: Who's a crook? You mean me? Me? Me, a crook?

First: Hold on, Ivan Ivanovich. Elizaveta Bam, I order you.

Second: No, Petr Nikolaevich, tell me, am I a crook or not?

First: Lay off with your sensibilities. Elizaveta Bam, I order . . .

Second: No, wait, Petr Nikolaevich, tell me, am I a crook or not?

First: Lay off, I told you.

Second: So you think I am a crook.

First: Yes, you are.

Second: So you really think I am a crook. Those were your words.

First: Get out of here. What a jerk. And he goes out on a responsible assignment. One word, and you're already crawling the walls. What can you call yourself after this? Nothing but an idiot.

Second: And you are an impostor.

First: Get out of here.

Elizaveta Bam: Ivan Ivanovich is a crook.

Second: I will never forgive you for this.

First: I'll throw you down the stairs.

Ivan Ivanovich: Just try.

Petr Nikolaevich: I will, I will, I will.

The next shift turns Elizaveta into a child and the investigators into buffoons. As elsewhere in the play, the transformation occurs when a minor, seemingly chance element takes over and becomes the major focus of the scene. Here it is the matter of a hiccup, produced by Ivan Ivanovich to fulfill a threat made by his partner. Elizaveta, the erstwhile victim, is enchanted:

(Ivan Ivanovich hiccups loudly and overturns the posts.)

Elizaveta Bam: Do it again. Please.

(A pause. Ivan Ivanovich hiccups again.)

Elizaveta Bam: How do you do it?

(They do it again. Petr Nikolaevich again turns over a post,while Ivan Ivanovich hiccups.)

Petr Nikolaevich: There's nothing to it. Ivan Ivanovich, show her.

Ivan Ivanovich: My pleasure.

(He gets down on all fours and kicks with one leg.)

Elizaveta Bam: Oh, is that cute. (Shouts) Mama! Come see! The magicians are here!

The next transformation introduces -- with the requisite absurd overtones -- the idea of romance. Ivan Ivanovich declares to Elizaveta, his newly found love object, that she has "an extremely pleasing appearance." He calls her a forget-me-not and she (speaking through the nose) calls him a tulip and asks permission to pluck him. Finally she orders him to get down on all fours. At this point, however, the suitor decides that the game has gone far enough and backs off. Now he becomes a character out of a romantic comedy, confessing the existence of wife and children and apologizing for having been too forward:

Ivan Ivanovich: If you'll allow me, Elizaveta Cockroachovna, I'd beter be getting home. My wife is waiting for me. She has lots of children, Elizaveta Cockroachovna. Forgive me for boring you. Don't forget me. It's just my fate that everyone tries to get rid of me. Why, one would like to know. Am I a thief? Hardly. Elizaveta Eduardovna, I am an honorable man. I have a wife at home. My wife has lots of children. The children are good. Each one holds a matchbook between its teeth. Excuse me, I have to go. I, Elizaveta Mikhailovna, would like to go home.

The elements of romantic confession in Ivan Ivanovich's speech are plainly evident, even though they are undercut by all manner of nonsensical elaborations. We have come a long way

from the frightening confrontation of the opening.

The instability of characterization is accompanied by an equal instability of style. In the "production copy" of *Elizaveta Bam* - one of two copies to survive -- the styles are clearly marked. In this redaction, the play is divided into nineteen sequences, each of which is characterized by genre. The opening is a "realistic melodrama," the second sequence (with the name-calling) is designated "realistically comical genre," the play ends in an "operatic finale," and so on. Some of the sequences are marked "radix," a reference to the dramatic group that preceded Oberiu. The "radix" sequences, two of which are cited below, are closest to pure nonsense. In most cases, though, nonsense elements are inserted into sections whose meaning and genre orientation are otherwise clear. The result is a parody of style, or, in the parts that are quasi-realistic, a strong sense of the absurd.

The mixture of nonsense and realism is apparent all through the play, but it shows up with particular sharpness in an interchange from a section we have already discussed. The dialogue below takes place just before the investigators undergo their transformation into buffoons:

> Petr Nikolaevich: Elizaveta Bam, how dare you talk that way?
>
> Elizaveta Bam: Why?
>
> Petr Nikolaevich: Because you have been deprived of a voice. You have commited a heinous crime. Don't talk back to me. You are a criminal.
>
> Elizaveta Bam: Why?
>
> Petr Nikolaevich: What do you mean, why?
>
> Elizaveta Bam: Why am I a criminal?
>
> Petr Nikolaevich: Because you have been deprived of a voice.
>
> Elizaveta Bam: I have not. You can check your watch.

> Petr Nikolaevich: It won't come to that. I've placed a guard at the door and at the slightest push, Ivan Ivanovich will hiccup to the side.

The first "absurdist" element results from a pun: she can't speak because she has been deprived of a voice (or vote, Russian *golos*). From here, the dialogue becomes completely circular, both logically (Why am I a criminal? Because you have been deprived of a voice) and linguistically, through the senseless repetition of phrases and parts of phrases. The words are related to one another, and they are comprehensible to us, but they do not provide any new information. The circle ends with a statement which promises to settle the argument: "You can check . . ." But instead of the expected "papers," Kharms has "your watch." The resulting declaration, with its properly conclusive tone, is accepted by the investigator, who responds with a nonsensical-realistic amalgam of his own. If you take away the irrelevant elements, his response is perfectly reasonable:"It won't come to that. I've placed a guard at the door and at the slightest push Ivan Ivanovich will-- ." The fact that the insert is about hiccuping turns the meaningful frame into nonsense, and parodies its stock phrases.

In the section above, the underlying genre is something like a detective melodrama. Other sequences use different backgrounds. Closest to the European concept of absurd drama are the instances in which absurdity arises from elements that are abysmally banal and bourgeois. To this category belong various attempts at polite conversation begun by Mamasha, Papasha, Elizaveta, and the two investigators in their moments of comparative calm. One such instance, which Kharms glosses as "domestic radix," begins with the company sitting down for a polite meal. Elizaveta makes table conversation:

> Elizaveta Bam: Why isn't my husband here? Whatever could be keeping him?

The bourgeois dinner is destroyed by a combination of language

and theatrics. Petr Nikolaevich springs up, and the dialogue is taken over by associations from children's games:

> Petr Nikolaevich: He'll get here. (Jumps up and runs around the stage.) Ready or not, here I come.
>
> Ivan Ivanovich: Ha, ha, ha. (Runs after Petr Nikolaevich.) Where's safe?
>
> Elizaveta Bam: Right behind this line.
>
> Petr Nikolaevich (slaps Ivan Ivanovich on the back): You're It.

A different amalgam of elements, this time more straightforwardly parodic, is behind the confession that ends in an accusation of murder. The background is, in Kharms's words, "solemn melodrama": a lengthy statement by Petr Nikolaevich about the events of the night of his murder. The "radix" element here is not a matter of the insertion of irrelevant details, but of the absense of a promised content. Petr Nikolaevich's opening speech is a traditional introduction to a long and psychologically satisfying story. But the story never comes, and what we get instead is a parody of dramatic development. Suspense is prolonged through the use of music, pregnant pauses, and choral responses, but no information is forthcoming. It is an operatic recitative without content:

> Petr Nikolaevich (raising his hand): I ask you to give my words the proper attention. I mean to prove to you that every misfortune comes unexpectedly. When I was still a very young man, I lived alone in this small house. Aside from me, there were only mice and cockroaches. Cockroaches come up everywhere. When night would fall, I would lock the door and dim the lamp. I would sleep, fearing nothing.
>
> A Voice from Backstage: Nothing.
>
> Mamasha: Nothing.
>
> Penny Whistle Backstage: I-I.
>
> Ivan Ivanovich: Nothing.

Piano: I-I.

Petr Nikolaevich: Nothing. (A pause.) There was nothing to be afraid of. And so it was. Robbers could have come and searched the whole house. What would they have found? Nothing.

The expected conclusion to this tale would be a rational account of Elizaveta Bam's guilt. Given the parameters of the play, however, this can't happen. Thus, when the moment arrives, the narrative is further subverted. Ivan Ivanovich takes over the telling of the tale (though, in keeping with the fluidity of characterizations, it is not clear whether the first person is his or his partner's):

Petr Nikolaevich: Really? But once I woke up . . .
Ivan Ivanovich: And I saw: the door is opened, and there's a woman standing there. I stare at her. She's standing there. It was already quite light. Apparently it was getting to be morning. In any case, I could see her face clearly. And this is who it was (point to Elizaveta Bam). Only then she looked like . . .

(All at once)

Everyone: Like me.

Ivan Ivanovich: I speak, in order to be.

Elizaveta Bam: What do you mean. /Also possible: You don't say./

Ivan Ivanovich: I speak, in order to be. Then, I think, it's too late. She's listening to me. I ask her what she's doing it with. She said they had a sword fight. They fought honorably, and she is not to blame for having murdered him. Think -- why did you murder Petr Nikolaevich?

The formulaic beginning, "I speak, in order to be," is cut off from its logical conclusion (sure? clear?). The resulting bit of existential nonsense is further supported by the repetition of sounds in his statement and Elizaveta's response ("Govoriu, chtoby byt'. Chto vy govorite? Govoriu, chtoby byt'." I speak, in order to be. What do you speak of? I speak, in order to be)

When the narrative picks up again, the moment of the "murder" is already past.

So far, we have been looking at sections in which "radix" elements are tied to stylistically marked backgrounds. There are also sequences in which the backgrounds are muted or absent altogether, and the words, to quote Kharms, "live their own lives." An extreme example is the sequence that takes place after Elizaveta Bam is told the reason for her arrest. The switch to nonsense, motivated dramatically by the highly charged emotional atmosphere, takes place in a few steps. The first response, which is logically appropriate, melts into one which is less appropriate, and then even that slight connection is severed. For a few minutes we are lost in a pandemonium of words and disconnected gestures. (It is important to note the perfectly ordinary, even banal nature of many of these sentences; for Kharms, nonsense grows out of banality.) Then the process reverses itself. Ivan Ivanovich's offhand comments attract a response, and gradually turn into a connected, if slightly off the point, narrative:

Ivan Ivanovich: To go and stab a man. How much perfidy there was in this, hooray, you did it, and why?

Elizaveta Bam (goes off to the side): Ooohhhhhhhhhhhhh-ohhh -- ohhh --

Ivan Ivanovich: She-wolf.

Elizaveta Bam: Oohhhhhhhh ohhhh oohhh --

Ivan Ivanovich: She-wooooooooooooolf.

Elizaveta Bam (trembling): Oooohhhhhhhh purple plums.

Ivan Ivanovich: Grrrrrreat grandmother.

Elizaveta Bum: Exultation.

Ivan Ivanovich: Ruined forever

Elizaveta Bum: A black horse, and on the horse, a soldier.

Ivan Ivanovich (lighting a match): Darling Elizaveta.

. . . . . .

Ivan Ivanovich: Let's go to the lake.

Papasha: Hallooo.

Elizaveta Bam: Hallooo.

Ivan Ivanovich: Yesterday I saw Kol'ka.

Mamasha: You don't saaaay.

Ivan Ovanovich: I did, I saw him. I look and there's Kol'ka coming along carrying apples. What, I say to him, did you buy them? Yes, he says, I bought them. Then he ups and walks on.

Papasha: You don't saaaay.

Ivan Ivanovich: Yeah, and I asked him, tell me, did you buy those apples or steal them. He bought them. And he just walked on.

Mamasha: Where did he go?

Ivan Ivanovich: I don't know. That's all he said: I, he says, bought the apples, and didn't steal them -- and he walked on.

. . . . . .

Ivan Ivanovich: Friends, we are all gathered here. Hooray.

A second "radix" section (labeled "rhythmic radix") is worth looking at because its nonsense is tied to the dramatic context by various subtle connections. The sequence below occurs after Elizaveta's transformation from victim to love object to little girl, and the investigators' corresponding transformation into buffoons. Elizaveta has left to go for a walk with her mother. The stage is empty. Now the investigators return:

Иван Иванович: Где, где, где.

Петр Николаевич /вбегая/
Елизавета Бам
Елизавета Бам
Елизавета Бам

Петр Николаевич: Тут, тут, тут . . .

Иван Иванович: Там, там, там.

Петр Николаевич: Где мы оказались, Иван Иванович?

Иван Иванович: Мы с вами взаперти.

Петр Николаевич: Что за безобразие. Прошу меня не тыс.

Иван Иванович: Вот вам фунт, баста, пять без пяти.

Петр Николаевич: Где Елизавета Бам?

Иван Иванович: Зачем ее надо вам?

Петр Николаевич: Чтобы убить.

Иван Иванович: Хм, Елизавета Бам
Сидит на скамейке там.

Петр Николаевич: Бежим тогда во всю прыть.

Оба бегут на одном месте.

Ivan Ivanovich: Where, where, where's

Petr Nikolaevich (running in):
Elizaveta Bam
Elizaveta Bam
Elizaveta Bam

Petr Nikolaevich: Here, here, here.

Ivan Ivanovich: There, there, there.

Petr Nikolaevich: Where are we, Ivan Ivanovich?

Ivan Ivanovich: Under lock and key.

Petr Nikolaevich: What an outrage. Keep your distance.

Ivan Ivanovich: Here's your pound, basta, five to five.

Petr Nikolaevich: Where's Elizaveta Bam?

Ivan Ivanovich: What do you want her for?

Petr Nikolaevich: To kill her.

Ivan Ivanovich: Hm, Elizaveta Bam
Is sitting on a bench over there.

Petr Nikolaevich: Then let's run as fast as our legs can carry us.

(They both run in place)

The opening brings back the idea of the investigation, though the rhyme makes it silly. The rhyming of Bam (an expletive Bang!) with ordinarily unemphasized parts of speech like "there" and "you" is humorous, though given the situation ("What do you want her for?" "To kill her"), the humor has a sinister quality. The sequence is punctuated by various inversions of the situation laid out by the plot. "Where are we?" Petr Nikolaevich asks his friend Ivan Ivanovich and receives the answer that they are locked up. It is a reversal on two counts: first because they aren't locked up and second because they are supposed to be locking *her* up. Following this comes Ivan Ivanovich's confession that he doesn't know why they are looking for her. Finally, in a typical example of nonmovement, the two run as fast as they can while remaining in one place.

The constant shifting from one stylistic context to another results in a play that controls many widely different types of language. There are examples of blank verse and rhymed verse, iambic pentameter with a marked nineteenth-century vocabulary, and fragments of prose speech ranging from uneducated to highly literary. The alogical foundation of the play appears in the language as whimsical violations of various linguistic conventions. Often they appear at the end of a chain:

Мамаша /бежит за Елизаветой Бам/: Хлеб ешь?

Елизавета Бам: Суп ешь?

Папаша: Мясо ешь?

Мамаша: Муку ешь?

Иван Иванович: Брюкву ешь? /бежит/

Елизавета Бам: Баранину ешь?

Папаша: Котлеты ешь?

Мамаша: Ой, ноги устали.

Иван Иванович: Ой, руки устали.

Елизавета Бам: Ой, ножницы устали.

Папаша: Ой, пружины устали.

Mamasha (running after Elizaveta Bam): Do you eat bread?
Elizaveta Bam: Do you eat soup?
Papasha: Do you eat meat?
Mamasha: Do you eat flour?
Ivan Ivanovich: Do you eat turnips? (Runs)
Elizaveta Bam: Do you eat mutton?
Papasha: Do you eat meatballs?
Mamasha: Oh, my feet are tired.
Ivan Ivanovich: Oh, my arms are tired.
Elizaveta Bam: Oh, my scissors are tired.
Papasha: Oh, my springs are tired.

The substitutions are not rationally motivated, but they are clearly suggested by formal associations: rhyme (Muku esh'? Briukvu esh'?) or Khlebnikov-like play with roots (Oi, nogi ustali. Oi, nozhnitsy ustali.). The chain may be more complex, as in the following instance, where the prefix "pol" keeps moving from stem to stem. The result, in every case but one, is impermissible, and the nonsense is compounded by the interchanging and substitution of nouns:

Елизавета Бам: Иван Иванович, сходите в полпивную
И принесите нам бутылку пива и горох.

Иван Иванович: Ага, горох и полбутылки пива,
Сходить в пивную, а отсюдова сюда.

Елизавета Бам: Не полбутылки, а бутылку пива,
И не в пивную, а в горох идти.

Иван Иванович: Сейчас я шубу в полпивную спрячу,
А сам на голову надену полгорох.

Elizaveta Bam: Ivan Ivanovich, run to the half-pub
And bring us a pint of beer and peas.

Ivan Ivanovich: So, peas and a half pint of beer
To the pub and from here to here.

Elizaveta Bam: Not a half pint but a pint of beer
And not to the pub but to the peas.

Ivan Ivanovich: I'll hide my fur coat in the half pub
And cover my head with half peas.

Substitutions of this sort result in the violation of selectional restrictions, creating combinations which are illogical but not incomprehensible. Often the violations involve a switching of the categories of animate-inanimate. "Ne vytaskivaetsia" (It won't budge), says Petr Nikolaevich of Elizaveta Bam as though she were a thing, while his friend, in another section, boasts of his wife's large family in the following unorthodox terms: "She has a lot of kids. I counted them -- ten bits."

Elizaveta Bam is not simply nonrealistic and alogical; it is a play that is ultimately dehumanized. There is no place in it for empathy, because the changes in characterizations are too sudden and too unpredictable. There is no moral to it and there is no philosophy beyond a philosophy of alogical art. There is not even, as in the European Theater of the Absurd, the sense that life has no meaning. What it does have is an exhilarating onrush of sequences which metamorphose from one to the other organically (through association) rather than logically.Kharms was engaged in an assault on conventional theater, and so in *Elizaveta Bam* the language, style, and action are detached from the plot and set spinning in different directions. Their clash is frequently parodic but parody is a by-product rather than a goal. If we keep searching for the disappearing plot, Kharms's new concept of theater may be said to skirt chaos. In fact everything holds together, and the last sequence ("operatic end") is a recapitulation of leitmotifs, including the leitmotif of the plot.

Elizaveta Bam was not Kharms's only full-length drama. Another play, the slightly more conventional *Komediia goroda*

Peterburga (A Petersburg Comedy), was begun in 1926 and reworked in several variants through 1930; it survives in part.[3] A third play, *Zimniaia progulka* (Winter Walk), was written together with Igor' Bakhterev and has since been lost. It was probably circumstance rather than preference that ended Kharms's activity as a playwright: the attacks in the press that followed the appearance of *Elizaveta Bam* made it impossible to consider actually staging another Oberiu drama. But if the experiment could not be continued in the same form, much of Kharms's method in *Elizaveta Bam* appears in other areas of his work. The language of the play is to a large extent the language of his verse. This is particularly true of his completely unstageable verse dramas, some of which we will be looking at in the next chapter. Finally, it is Kharms's concept of theater that is behind his happenings and short stories, which pare down the chaos of the plays to a single outrageous event, developed to a logical extreme.

Chapter III
EARLY POETRY

Kharms's early poetry is similar in many ways to his theater. The borderline between the two is not even easy to draw: the plays include long stretches of verse and many of the poems, particularly the longer ones, are set up as conversations among various unorthodox speakers. The poems, like the dramas, are intentionally illogical. Speakers appear and disappear in a random fashion and often seem to talk past one another; the subjects, fragmented or distorted, are not always easy to retrieve. There are alogical combinations of words, grammatical violations, neologisms, nonsense words and word play of all sorts. There are even stretches of absolutely "classical" *zaum'*. Distortions of this sort are characteristic of Kharms's work until the mid-thirties, when the balance of his writing shifts to prose. His later poems, a few of which are cited at the close of the chapter, follow a different aesthetic. But the early poetry, for all its unevenness, remains an intriguing object for study, rewarding the reader with tremendous flashes of linguistic wit.

Kharms's early poems range from verbally intricate "nonsense" works to poems with a prominent narrative or dramatic focus. The nonsense-type poems, which we will examine further on, are plays on formal limitations of Kharms's own devising. The narrative or dramatic poems are more freewheeling, with few formal restraints beyond a heavily stressed rhyme and meter. As in *Elizaveta Bam*, everything is subject to flux and change. The narrative or dramatic development is unpredictable and full of logical gaps: as in the dramas, the action follows "scenic" lines. Characterizations are equally unpredictable. Characters appear and disappear with no attempt at explanation, and almost anything from insects to inanimate objects may be given a dramatic monologue.

An example of this sort of dramatic poem is "Tiul'panov

sredi khoreev" (Tiul'panov /Tulip/ among the trochess), written in 1929. Although "Tiul'panov" is clearly a poem with a plot, the action is fragmented into recurring images and hints. The poem takes place in a garden, and seems to involve a romance between the hero, who vacillates between person and flower, and a nurse, who doubles as the water. Successively commenting on the action are the rain, some birds, and a flower. But if the summary just given does little to convey the plot, it does nothing to reflect the texture of the poem. Below I cite the beginning:

Так сказал Тюльпанов камню
камень дуло курам кум
имя камню я не помню
дутый камень девы дум
в клетку плещет воздух лютень
глупо длится долгий плен
выход в поле виден мутен
розы вьются в дурь колен
лампа громко свет бросала
в пол опутан свет летел
там доска с гвоздем плясала
доску вальсом гвоздь вертел
доску вальсом гвоздь вертел
а в стену бил рукой Тюльпанов
звал напрасно центр сил
рос над камнем сад тюльпанов
дождик светлый моросил

So said Tiul'panov to the stone
it blew stone to godmothers' hens
the name of the stone I remember not
blown stone of the maiden of thoughts
air fierce lashes the cage
the long imprisonment lasts stupidly
the exit to the field is seen foggy
roses tangle in the nonsense of knees
the lamp loudly cast its light
on the floor enmeshed light flew
there a board danced with a nail
the nail whirled the board in a waltz
the nail whirled the board in a waltz
and Tiul'panov beat his fist into the wall
called vainly on the center of forces
a garden of tulips grew above the stone
a bright rain drizzled

There are a few "scenic" themes which run through here, but the main thing that holds it together is the strong trohaic meter (note the title) and the constant use of alliteration, vowel harmony, repetition, and rhyme. A second section of "Tiul'panov"is more structured. The chorus of birds which I quote below comes toward the middle of the poem; it is much simpler, and the presense of refrains brings it close to a song:

Помним сад
в саду скамейка
на скамейке с пирогом
в том саду сидел Тюльпанов
птички плавали кругом
птички плавали кругом.

Помним дом
на крыше пламя
в окнах красная заря
из дверей выходит няня
сказка длинная моя
сказка длинная моя.

Няня в сад идет и плачет
и Тюльпанова манит
а Тюльпанов как цветочек
незабудкою звенит
а Тюльпанов как цветочек
незабудкою звенит.

Подними глаза Тюльпанов
няню глазками окинь
но Тюльпанов сдвинул брови
и задумался. Аминь.
Но Тюльпанов сдвинул брови
и задумался. Аминь.

We remember the garden
in the garden was a bench
on the bench with a pie
in that garden sat Tiul'panov
birds swam all around
birds swam all around.

We remember the house
a flame on the roof
red dawn in the windows
the nurse emerges from the door

My tale is long
My tale is long.

The nurse goes into the garden and weeps
and beckons to Tiul'panov
and Tiul'panov like a blossom
rings like a forget-me-not
and Tiul'panov like a blossom
rings like a forget-me-not.

Raise your eyes Tiul'panov
cast your eyes on the nurse
but Tiul'panov lowered his brow
and fell into thought. Amen.
But Tiul'panov lowered his brow
and fell into thought. Amen.

The poem continues in much the same way, ending with the speech of the flower, who is presumably the transformed hero Tiul'panov.

At the other end of the scale from dramatic poems like "Tiul'panov," which seem to cover masses of verbal material with few selectional restraints, are poems with very strong formal patterns. Usually, the pattern involves extended word play. An example is the poem "Zvonit' -- letet'" from the spring of 1930:

1.

Вот и дом полетел.
Вот и собака полетела.
Вот и сон полетел.
Вот и мать полетела.
Вот и сад полетел.
Конь полетел.
Баня полетела.
Шар полетел.
Вот и камень полететь.
Вот и пень полететь.
Вот и миг полететь.
Вот и круг полететь.
Дом летит.
Мать летит.
Сад летит.
Часы летать.
Рука летать.
Орлы летать.
Копье летать.

И конь летать.
И дом летать.
И точка летать.
Лоб летит.
Грудь летит.
Живот летит.
Ой держите - ухо летит!
Ой глядите - нос летит!
Ой монахи, рот летит!

2.

Дом звенит.
Вода звенит.
Камень около звенит.
Книга около звенит.
Мать и сын и сад звенит.
А звенит.
Б звенит.
ТО летит и ТО звенит.
Лоб звенит и летит
Грудь звенит и летит.
Эй монахи, рот звенит!
Эй монахи, лоб летит!
Что лететь, но не звонить?
Звон летает и звенеть.
ТАМ летает и звонит.
Эй монахи! мы летать!
Эй монахи! мы лететь!
Мы лететь и ТАМ летать.
Эй монахи! мы звонить!
Мы звонить и ТАМ звенеть.

See the house took flight.
See the dog took flight.
See the dream took flight.
See the mother took flight.
See the garden took flight.
The steed took flight.
The bath took flight.
The globe took flight.
See the stone to take flight.
See the foam to take flight.
See the moment to take flight.
See the circle to take flight.
The house flies.
The mother flies.
The garden flies.
The clock to fly.
The hand to fly.
The eagles to fly.

The spear to fly.
And the stead to fly.
And the house to fly.
And the point to fly.
Forehead flies.
Chest flies.
Stomach flies.
Oh hold me -- the ear is flying!
Oh look -- the nose is flying!
Oh monks, the mouth is flying!

2.

The house chimes.
The water chimes.
The stone around chimes.
The book around chimes.
Mother and son and garden chimes.
A chimes.
B chimes.
THAT flies and THAT chimes.
Forehead chimes and flies.
Chest chimes and flies.
Hey, monks, the mouth is chiming!
Hey, monks, the forehead is flying!
What to fly but not to ring?
Sound is flying and to chime.
THERE is flying and ringing.
Hey monks! We to be flying!
We to fly and there to be flying.
Hey monks! We to ring!
We to ring and THERE to chime.

The most apt approach to poems like "Zvonit' -- letet'" was suggested by Kharms himself in a notebook entry of 1931 entitled "Sila, zalozhennaia v slovakh" (The Power Inherent in Words).[2] The entry speaks of the power of words as an intellectually unfathomable quality whose weakest manifestation is poetic meter. In the last few lines, Kharms refers to verse as the product of what he terms a "word machine" (*slovesnaia mashina*). He distinguishes four classes of word machines -- verse, songs, prayers, and incantations -- and wrote extensively in the first three, if not the fourth. Kharms doesn't define his machine any further, but apparently it has something to do with the presense of an insistent, incantatory formal pattern which shapes the words that fall into it. In

"Zvonit' -- letet'" quoted above, the pattern involves the pairing of nominative case nouns with different forms of the same two verbs. The result, while obviously nonsensical, seems to hint at the presence of an elusive philosophical truth, and indeed the poem is subtitled "tret'ia tsisfinitnaia logika" (third cisfinitic logic).

The word machine that is distinguishable in "Zvonit' -- letet'" is a fairly simple one. A more complex example is at work in a poem of 1930 called "Vecherniania pesnia k imenem moim sushchestvuiushchei" (Evening song to the one who exists by my name). The poem, which is one of Kharms's loveliest, is both a song and a prayer. It is dedicated to his first wife, and its subject -- fragmented, of course, but clearly evident -- is a woman whose image reflects the deepest sources of life. The formal patterns recur at irregular intervals, creating a difficult and interesting rhythm. Most striking is the emblematic opening line, composed of words that are generated from one another by phonetic and morphemic ties: the suggestion is of a genealogy that goes far back into time. Another prominent pattern is the placement of usually unstressed possessive adjectives in highly stressed positions at the end of the lines. The model here is religious, and in keeping with the incantatory tone of the poem. The vocabulary of "vecherniaia pesnia" is limited -- a far cry from the vocabulary of poems like "Tiul'panov." There are words that connote religious concepts or universals; there are parts of the body and the similes associated with them; and finally there are repeating syllables of *zaum'*, which suggest something ancient and primitive entirely consonant with the spirit of the poem:

Дочь дочери дочерей дочери Пе
дото яблоко тобой откусив тю
соблазняя Адама горы дото тобою любимая дочь дочерей Пе.
Мать мира и мир и дитя мира су
открой духа зерна глаз
открой берегов не обернутися головой тю
открой лиственнице со престолов упадших тень

открой Ангелами поющих птиц
открой воздыхания в воздухе рассеянных ветров
низзовущих тебя призывающих тебя
любящих тябя
и в жизни желтые находящих тю.

Баня лицов твоих
баня лицов твоих
дото памяти открыв окно огляни расположенное поодаль
сосчитай двигающееся и неспокойное
и отложи на пальцах *a* неподвижные те
те неподвижные дото от движения жизнь приняв
к движению рвутся и все же в покое спут
или быстрые говорят: от движения жизнь
но в покое смерть.

Начало и Власть поместятся в плече твоем
Начало и Власть поместятся на лбу твоем
Начало и Власть поместятся в ступне твоей
но не взять тебе в руку огонь и стрелу
но не взять тебе в руку огонь и стрелу
дото лестница головы твоей
дочь дочери дочерей дочери Пе.

О фы лилия глаз моих
фе чернильница щек моих
трр ухо волос моих
радости перо отражения свет вещей моих
ключ праха и гордости текущей лонь
молчанию прибежим люди страны моей
дото миг число высота и движения конь.

Об вольности воспоем сестра
Об вольности воспоем сестра
дочь дочери дочерей дочери Пе
именинница имени своего
ветер ног своих и пчела груди своей
сила рук своих и дыхание мое
неудобозримая глубина души моей
свет поющий в городе моем
ночи радость и лес кладбища времен тихостоящих
храбростью в мир пришедшая и жизни свидетельница
приснись мне.

Daughter of the daughter of the daughters of the daughter of Pe
doto apple with thee having bitten tiu
seducing Adam hills doto with thee my beloved daughter of the daughters of Pe.
Mother of earth and peace and child of earth su
open of the spirit of grain of eyes
open of the shores do not turn thy head tiu

open to the larch from the thrones of fallen shadow
open to the angels of singing birds
open of the breath in the air of scattered winds
calling thee below summoning thee
loving thee
and in life yellow of finding tiu.

The bath of thy faces
the bath of thy faces
doto of memory opened the window look the placed in the distance
count the moving and the disquiet
set aside on the fingers *a* immobile those
those immobile doto from movement of life taken
rushing to movement and still in quiet sloop
or swift ones speak: from movement life
but in quiet death.

The Source and the Power will abide in thy shoulder
the Source and the Power will abide on thy brow
the Source and the Power will abide on thy heel
but thou shalt not take in hand the fire and arrow
but thou shalt not take in hand the fire and arrow
doto ladder of thy head
daughter of the daughter of the daughters of the daughter of Pe.

Oh fy the lily of my eyes
fe the inkwell of my cheeks
trr the ear of my hair
the pen of joy reflections light of my objects
the source of ashes and pride of flowing
let us run to silence people of my country
doto the moment the number height and steed of movement.

Of freedom let us sing sister
of freedom let us sing sister
daughter of the daughter of the daughters of the daughter of Pe
bearer of thy own name
the wind of thy feet and the bee of thy breast
the power of thy hands and my breathing
inillucidible depth of my soul
brightness singing in my city
night's joy and forest of the cemetery of softstanding times
by courage coming onto earth and witness of life
be in my dream.

The theoretical source for Kharms's poetry can be found in the Oberiu manifesto, and, to a greater extent, in a series

of articles written during the same period: "Sablia" (Saber, 1929),[3] "Predmety i figury, otkrytye Daniilom Ivanovichem Kharmsom" (Objects and figures, discovered by Daniil Ivanovich Kharms, 1927),[4] "Odinnadtsat' utverzhdenii Daniila Ivanovicha Kharmsa" (Eleven propositions of Daniil Ivanovich Kharms, 1930). The articles, which vary between the philosophical and the metaphoric, invariably return to the same points: the denial of ordinary logic and the insistence on the independent existence of objects and words. For Kharms of this period, words have a reality of their own; they combine according to their own rules. "The independent word," Kharms writes in "Sablia," "is no longer bound to the laws of logical series, and jumps in place where it pleases, as we do . . . Nouns give birth to verbs and give verbs free choice . . . New qualities arise, and following them, free adjectives." In "Predmety i figury," the argument is stated somewhat differently. In this article, Kharms assumes a world of objects, connected to the human world by means of their "working meanings." If the "working meanings" are severed, the words or objects retain an existential meaning of their own. A series of words, Kharms concludes, which have only existential meanings, appears as nonsense "from the human point of view" (*chelovecheski BESSMYSLENNYI*).

In poetry composed of such seeming nonsense, formal elements play a particularly important role. "The boundaries of /alogical/ speech shine a bit more brightly, so that we can find the beginning and the end, or else we would lose ourselves completely," Kharms writes in "Sablia." These boundaries fly like breezes through the hollow pipe of the line. The pipe begins to sound and we hear rhyme." Kharms's metaphor is a good explanation for what he was aiming at in some of his most difficult verses, where, as we have seen, rhyme and meter are heavily stressed.

Alogical language in Kharms's poetry is not only a matter of the description of logically impossible events or

the creation, as in surrealist poetry, of semantically surprising combinations. Words that exist independently from the "laws of logical series" are words that are put together in violation of syntactic rules. Grammatical violations of all sorts are a prominent feature of Kharms's early works. Though they gradually disappear -- by the late thirties grammatical irregularities are very rare -- they are a fundamental part of Kharms's poetic theory and deserve a further look.

Grammatical irregularities in Kharms's early work are notably wide-ranging. Direct objects and other complements may be missing:

Дети слушали обедню
Надевая на плечо

The children heard mass
Putting on their shoulders

word order is whimsically inverted:

Кто твари мудрости заря?
Букварь.

Who is wisdom's creature's dawn?
The alphabet book.

and the syntax sometimes changes in midstream:

Вырастала палеандра
и влетая на вагоны
перемыла не того
что налима с перепугу
оградил семью волнами

Paleandra grew
and alighting on the cars
washed the wrong one
who in fright guarded the burbot
with seven waves.

The feeling of syntactic confusion is underscored by the absence of punctuation and hence of intonational cues. The result is language that is swiftly moving and at the same time somewhat disjoint.

On a slightly different level come the numerous vio-

lations of case and voice, and the irregular use of prepositional and other complements. Often the novelty results from the merging of two slightly different constructions. Thus, "vspomnim ptichke o nedavnem" (remember the bird about what just happened) is a mixture of *vspomnit'* + accusative (remember) and *napomnit'* + dative (remind). *Rot razvei* (unfurl your mouth) is the familiar *rot razin'* (open your mouth wide) with the verb replaced by a phonetically similar one. Here and elswhere, the grammatical irregularity of the resulting phrase is an important factor. In *rukhnul ob pol potolok* (the ceiling crashed around the floor) the change in the preposition makes the event a good deal odder than it would have been had the grammar stayed intact.

Despite the statements in the Oberiu manifesto, Kharms's experiments extend beyond the "independent" combinations of concrete words. The early poetry includes numerous examples of neologisms, some based on Russian roots and some which have no visible antecedents. Here, of course, Kharms was following Khlebnikov's lead. Kharms's coinages frequently occur in chains (the word machine in morphophonemic gear). As Meilakh and Erl' have noted, Kharms's neologisms often come in patterns in which consonants are held constant while the vowels change:[5]

Мы уходим, мы ухидим,
Мы ухудим, мы ухедим
Мы ухыдим, мы ухадим

We ukhodim (are leaving), we ukhidim,
We ukhudim, we ukhedim
We ukhydim, we ukhadim

There are also numerous examples that go the other way. In the chain below, as in the one just quoted, one of the series is an existing word:

Это лынь
Это млынь
Это клынь
Это полынь

This is lyn'
This is mlyn'
This is klyn'
This is polyn' (wormwood)

Though Kharms was not aiming at anything approaching a trans-sense language, neologisms do play an important role in his poetry. They frequently occur as the final word in a line, where they carry both rhyme and metrical stress. At least one poem is based primarily on word coinages. This is "Mama niama amania" of 1928, a successful bit of nonsense reminiscent of Carroll's "Jabberwocky." For most of its length, the poem is an amalgam of nonsense roots and real words in a grammatically correct frame. Some of its flavor comes through in the first six lines:

Гахи глели на меня
сынды плавали во мне
где ты мама, мама Няма
мама дома мамамед!
Во болото во овраг
во летает тетервак

Gakhs glelled at me
Synds swam in me
Where are you mama, mama Niama
mama's home mamameater
Into the swamp into the ravine
flies a tetervak

Poems like these, with their grammatical distortions and fragmented plots, are to some extent nonsense, or, as Kharms would put it, nonsense "from a human point of view." But the poet's function is not to make obvious sense. "Poems aren't pies; we aren't herring," read one of the signs at the Oberiu readings. In a poem of the same period, Kharms draws on a notion he shared with Vvedenskii in defining their poetic role as "catching shadows in our foolscaps" (kolpakami lovim ten')[6]. But perhaps the best notion of what he was about comes in a short metapoetic interchange from the dramatic poem "Mest'" (Revenge, 1930). In one part of the poem, the hero, who is none other than Faust, is in conversation with a chorus of

writers. The subject of the conversation is the writers' verse, which Faust admires. The poems are presumably a lot like Kharms's, since the writers themselves dismiss them as "meaningless piles of words." But Faust persists: "v nikh . . . smyslov brodiat sonnye stada" (sleepy herds of meaning wander in them). To prove his point he recites a Kharms-like verse in which, he says, "meanings move like fire," and concludes his argument with a second verse, still more obscure, which gets the highest accolade of all, "the steed of meanings" (smyslov kon'). Meaning in this sense is something that is beyond rationality:hence the foolscap. It is a hint that arises from an irregular conjunction of "independent" words and flashes quickly past.

The discussion on language and form above has led us to a point where it seems hardly possible to talk about theme. Yet, the early poems, for all their distortions, do have subjects, and there are several thematic groupings that are worthy of further note.

For those who know Kharms's prose, it is surprising to see how many of the early poems are set in nature. The presence of a richly animated natural kingdom is something that Kharms of this period shares with Vvedenskii and Zabolotskii and, of course, with Khlebnikov. "Utro: probuzhdenie elementov" (Morning: the awakening of the elements, 1931) is a lyric poem that is reminiscent of many of Vvedenskii's panoramas of the forest. Other poems with a natural setting, like the "Khniu" series of 1931, seem influenced by Khlebnikov's primitivism. The forest of the "Khniu" poems is populated by real animals, animals from folklore, and mythic creatures that originate with Kharms. The Khniu of the title is the spirit of a drowned girl. Two of the poems that bear her name are complicated by passages of overt philosophical reflection: Kharms at this point is close to Vvedenskii as well as to Khlebnikov. But Kharms's imagination is really

an urban one. The forest belongs only to this brief period of his work, and he does not go back to it.

Another large group of narrative and dramatic poems has to do with breaking through some barrier into another world, although, in keeping with the Oberiu predilection for the concrete, the barriers always involve some tangible part of the everyday world. In "Lapa" (The Paw, 1930), the main character reaches eternity by climbing onto a roof and stretching his hand up to the sky. The change in his state is signified by the switch from prose to nonsense verse and *zaum'*:

Земляк: Мне рукой не достать до неба.

Власть: Ты встань на крышу.

/Земляк встает на крышу/

Власть: Ну как?

Земляк: Авла диндури пре пре кру кру.

/Статуя на крыше хватает земляка и делает его легким/

Земляк: Я ле!
Птицы не больше перочинных ножиков.
Ле!
Откройте озеро, чтобы вода стала ле!
Откройте гору, чтобы из нее вышли пары.
Остановите часы, потому что время ушло в землю!
Смотрите какой я ле!

Countryman: I can't reach heaven with my hand.

Power: Get on the roof.

(The countryman gets on the roof)

Power: Well?

Countryman: Avla dinduri pre pre kru kru.

(A statue on the roof seizes the countryman and makes him light)

Countryman: I'm le!

Birds are no greater than penknives.
Le!
Open the lake, so that the water shall be le!
Open the hill, so that the steam escapes from it.
Stop the clock for time has soaked into the earth!
Look at how le I am!

The representations of eternity in "Lapa" range from Amenhotep's grave to a chicken coop, with an equally variegated population. Other poems either stop at the borderline or, like "Padenie vod" (The Falling of the Waters, 1930), present a picture which is less fathomable and therefore less comic. But even the blithe absurdity of "Lapa" does not negate the seriousness of Kharms's intent.

The desire to penetrate a far-off reality was part of Kharms from very early on. He even had a symbol for it, a window through which he could watch a "distant star." The symbol was a monogram formed out of the letter "E," the initial of his first wife, Esther Rusakova.[7] Several poems, among them "Lapa" and the "Vecherniaia pesnia" quoted earlier, are marked with that monogram, and others, like "Okno" (The Window, 1930), use the window as the symbol of a spiritual breakthrough. The interest in mystical topics was not confined to poems in which it is clearly the predominant theme. Kharms toyed with mystic literature, including the Kaballah, and many of the poems appear with astrological signs indicating their time of composition.

On another level entirely are a group of works that are mock-philosophical in content. Like many creators of alogical worlds, Kharms was fascinated by logical order. Around 1930-1932, he wrote a series of mathematical philosophical treatises, "Cisfinitum" (title in Latin), "Nul' i Noĭ'" (Nul and Nil), "O kruge" (On the circle), which are alogical manipulations of the ordered tools of mathematical reasoning. The poems that take up this time are among Kharms's most succesful. Many of them manipulate abstract concepts in a revolving pattern that produces a sense of verbal and philosophical

delirium. The result, while humorous, does not exclude the possibility of a serious interpretation. Below is the "Tret'ia tsisfinitnaia logika beskonechnogo nebytiia" (Third cisfinitic logic of endless nonexistence, 1930):

> Вот и Вут час.
> Вот час всегда только был, а теперь только полчаса.
> Нет полчаса всегда только было, а теперь только четверть часа.
> Нет четверть часа всегда только было, а теперь только восьмушка часа.
> Нет все части часа всегда только были, а теперь их нет.
> Вот час.
> Вут час.
> Вот час всегда только был.
> Вут час всегда теперь быть.
> Вот и Вут час.
>
> Here and Ere hour.
> Here hour always just was and now only halfhour.
> No halfhour always just was and now only a quarter of an hour.
> No quarter of an hour always just was and now only an eighth of an hour.
> No all hour parts always just were and now no longer.
> Here hour.
> Ere hour.
> Here hour always just was.
> Ere hour always now be.
> Here and Ere hour.

The same clash of logical expression and alogical content occurs in poems that are not so abstract. In "Dal'neishee tolshche predydushchego" below, statements of comparison are applied to concepts that are not really comparable. As with "Tret'ia tsisfinitnaia logika," the result is humorous, but there is also the impression, missing in the poems that are more complex, of having entered a world of different dimensions:

> Дальнейшее толще предыдущего.
> Сом керосинки толще.
> Толще лука морской винт.
> Книга толще тетради,
> а тетради толще одной тетради.
> Это стол, он толще книги.

Это свод, он толще пола.
Этот стол толще предыдущего,
а предыдущий выше лука.
Лук же меньше гребенки.
Так же, как шляпа меньше кровати,
в которой поместится ящик с книгами.
Но ящик глубже шляпы.
Шляпа мягче,
нежели морской винт.
Но пчела острее шара.
Одинаково красиво
то, что растет по эту
и по ту сторону забора.
Все же книга гибче супа,
ухо гибче книги.
Суп жиже и жирнее, чем лучинка,
и тяжелее, чем ключ.[8]

The forthcoming is thicker than the preceding.
The catfish than an oil-lamp is thicker.
A ship's propeller is thicker than an onion.
A book is thicker than a notebook
and notebooks are thicker than a single notebook.
This is a table, it's thicker than a book.
This is the firmament, it's thicker than the floor.
This table is thicker than the preceding
and the preceding is higher than a bow.
A bow is smaller than a comb.
In the same way as a hat is smaller than a bed
in which one can place a trunk with books.
But a trunk is deeper than a hat.
A hat is softer
than a ship's propeller.
But a bee is sharper than a globe.
Equally lovely
is that which grows on this
and on the other side of the fence.
Still a book is more supple than soup,
an ear is more supple than a book.
Soup is thinner and fatter than a splinter
and heavier than a key.

A final category, as much formal as thematic, is made up of nonsense songs with no pretence at counterlogical truths. Their structure and tone are simple. An example of an early one is "Chelovek ustroen iz trekh chastei" (A person has three parts, 1930):

Человек устроен из трех частей,
из трех частей,

из трех частей,
хэу ля ля
дрюм дрюм ту ту,
из трех частей человек.

Борода и глаза и пятнадцать рук,
и пятнадцать рук,
и пятнадцать рук,
хеу ля ля
дрюм дрюм ту ту,
пятнадцать рук и ребро.

А впрочем не рук пятнадцать штук,
пятнадцать штук,
пятнадцать штук,
хеу ля ля
дрюм дрюм ту ту,
пятнадцать штук, да не рук.

A man is made from three parts,
from three parts,
from three parts,
heu-lia-lia
drium-drium-tu-tu,
three parts to a man.

The beard and the eyes and fifteen hands,
and fifteen hands,
and fifteen hands,
heu-lia-lia
drium-drium-tu-tu,
fifteen hands and the ribs.

But in fact they are not hands, those fifteen bits,
those fifteen bits,
those fifteen bits,
heu-lia-lia
drium-drium-tu-tu
fifteen bits but not hands.

The bright tone, the repetitions, the presence of clear and simple phrases bring this very close to children's verse. Even the fact that the sentences, put together, do not quite make sense is not out of place in children's poetry. These qualities are shared not only by Kharms's songs, but by the humorous verse which he continued writing until his death.

It is interesting, in conclusion, to look at an example

of a song from a much later date. "Kak strashno taiut nashi sily" (It's frightening how our strength ebbs, 1938) retains the simplicity of expression and structure based on repetitions. But the blithe air of nonsense is gone, and in its place is something almost inappropriately serious:

Как страшно тают наши силы,
как страшно тают наши силы,
но Боже слышит наши просьбы,
но Боже слышит наши просьбы,
и вдруг нисходит Боже,
и вдруг нисходит Боже к нам.

Как страшно тают наши силы,
как страшно!
Как страшно!
Как страшно тают наши силы,
но Боже слышит наши просьбы,
но Боже слышит наши просьбы,
и вдруг нисходит Боже,
и вдруг нисходит Боже к нам.[9]

It's frightening how our strength ebbs,
it's frightening how our strength ebbs,
but God hears our prayers,
but God hears our prayers
and suddenly descends,
and suddenly descends to us.

It's frightening how our strength ebbs,
it's frightening!
It's frightening!
It's frightening how our strength ebbs,
but God hears our prayers,
but God hears our prayers,
and suddenly descends,
and suddenly descends to us.

In "Kak strashno taiut nashi sily" one can feel some of the inertia of the "word machine," for a prayer is a highly emotional form of speech with its roots outside of rationality and logic. But the linguistic exuberance is subdued, and the subject and tone of the poem is fundamentally different from the works with which this chapter began. The next chapter takes up the study of Kharms's mature work, starting with the development of a similar direction in his prose.

Chapter IV
THE ORDINARY AND THE GROTESQUE

Kharms's later work is of a different order entirely. The language is laconic and precise; the plots, if odd, are clear and retrievable; nothing is superfluous. The irrational element is strong, but the background world is realistic. All the details of daily life are present here, though they are never left untouched: either they are distorted into the grotesque, or, more delicately, arranged into a pattern suggestive of some odd philosophical truth. But the focus is clearly on Kharms's own surroundings, the Leningrad of 1930-1941.

I

The new focus on the author's surroundings carries with it an extraodinarily strong impression of his presense. The gentler and less grotesque the story, the more it approaches the illusion of autobiography. The illusion, or connection, is strongest in works with a first person narrator, who in certain cases is very much like Kharms. This is not, of course, to be taken too literally. If the narrator of *Starukha* or "Ia idu po Liteinomu" (I'm walking along Liteinyi) is a close second for the author, the first person narrator of most of Kharms's fiction has nothing to do with him at all.Still,the the impression that it is the author himself persists even in some of Kharms's most grotesque works, so that, as Aleksandrov and Meilakh note, it sometimes seems as though the unpardonable behavior originates not with a character, but with Kharms.[1]

Kharms's writing about himself and his imaginative work are in fact extremely close; one category merges gradually into the other, and they are completely different only at their extremes. The personal writings often serve as sources for the stories, and there are recurring places and events

which fix the stories, however implausible they may be, in Kharms's Leningrad. Except for the theme of hunger, which is never as intense in his fiction, all of the constant themes of his personal writings -- insomnia, desire to write, difficulty in writing -- appear reworked in the stories. More curious is the movement in the other direction, from imaginative work to autobiography. Something of this can be seen in Kharms's persistent recording of the dates and even times of the completion of the poem or story: the desire to capture the moment at which life touches the work.

What may be called Kharms's personal writings are works which have their starting point in the author's experience, and which are removed from it just far enough for the author to impose a form on them and contemplate them from without. For another writer, this category would not make sense, but for Kharms, whose initial idea of real had little to do with reality, this immersion in a personal world marks a significant change.

In the category of personal writings belong diary entries, writer's notes, and letters.Certainly many poems may be considered here also. An example from 1937 shows how far Kharms has moved from the abstract aesthetic of Oberiu:

Погибли мы в житейском поле
Нет никакой надежды боле.
О счастьи кончилась мечта
Осталась только нищета.[2]

We've perished on the field of life
All hope is gone.
The dream of happiness has ended
Only poverty is left.

It is not the classical form that is important, since Kharms wrote his "exercises in the old style" from early on. The novelty, for a poet with roots in futurism, lies in the concept of a poem as a way of contemplating life. By 1936 or 1937, almost all the poems that Kharms wrote were in this mode.

The prose writings that belong in this category are not so obviously contemplative. They comprise an observation of events of the day, of the author's own movements in a somewhat simplified world where everything noted has a peculiar sharp clarity. This part of Kharms's art also has some basis in the real world, for his surroundings, at this point, were indeed simplified. He was no longer working, his literary circle had split up, and he was often hungry. An early example is an entry called "Utro" (Morning), written in 1931; the conclusion is cited below:

> Volodya called. Tatiana Aleksandrovna said about me that she could not understand what part of me was from God and what part from a fool.
>
> I put on my boots. The sole on the right boot is coming off.
>
> Today is Sunday.
>
> Sunday
> 25 October 1931.[3]

The lightness and spontaneity of this tiny piece may mask how carefully the details have been chosen. The mixture of sacred and foolish that is in Kharms is in his surroundings too: it is Sunday, but the sole of his boot is coming off. The concrete part of it (the boots -- *sapogi* in Russian -- a very heavy word) contrasts with the ethereal topic of the conversation. Other things are conveyed also: a sense of community (there are other people around who share the author's sense of values), his poverty, and finally his belief that the events recorded here, and their concurrence, are important.

A more extended example is the entry in the Blue Notebook (1937) which begins, "Vpisyvaiu siuda sobytiia segonniashnego dnia, ibo oni porazitel'ny" (I am writing down the events of the day because they are astonishing). Here again, life is seen as a source of minor events, which, if looked at in the proper way, are no less striking than those of the imagination:

> I am writing down the events of the day, because they are astonishing. Actually, there is one event that is particularly astonishing. I'll underline it.
>
> 1. Yesterday we had nothing to eat. 2. This morning I took 10 rubles out of the bank, leaving 5 in order to keep the account open. 3. I went to Zhitkov and borrowed 60 rubles from him. 4. I went home, buying food on the way. 5. It was a beautiful spring day. 6. Marina and I went to the Buddhist pagoda, having taken a bag with sandwiches and a bottle of red wine mixed with water. 7. On the way back we stopped in the antique store and *saw a Shidmeyer double harmonium, a copy of the Philarmonic's. Except it cost 900 rubles. Only! Except a half hour ago someone bought it!* 8. Went to Zhitkov's. 9.Zhitkov and I found out who bought it and went to see them: Pesochnaia Street 31, apt. 46. Levinskii. 10. We couldn't buy it back. 11. We spent the evening at Zhitkov's.[4]

As in "Utro," we are given a feeling for the spiritual atmosphere in which Kharms lived: the author is clearly delighted by the crazy disconnection between his poverty and his whims. What brings this piece close to much of Kharms's fiction is its style. The numbering of each statement places the most ordinary of details in the foreground; their arrangement into a list implies that the order of their progression is important. The possibility of some hidden meaning -- what did Kharms see in all this? -- is a tease that carries the reader back to search for the key. It is unimportant whether he finds one or not: what matters is the feeling that it may be there.

This concentrated observation of the surrounding world is carried over to those works which are on the borderline between personal writings and fiction. Note this passage from "Ia idu po Liteinomu" (1931):

> I put out the lamp and lay down.
> No, I should lie on my left side.
> I lay on my left side and started to fall asleep.
> I look into the window and see the janitor sweeping the street.
> I am standing next to the janitor and telling him that before you write something, you have to know the words that must be written.
> A flea is hopping along my leg.
> I am lying face down on the pillow with my eyes

shut, trying to fall asleep. But I hear the flea hopping and follow its progress. If I move, sleep will desert me.

But now I have to raise my hand and touch a finger to my forehead. I raise my hand and touch my forehead with a finger. And sleep deserts me.

I feel like turning on my right side, but I have to stay on my left.

Now the flea is hopping along my spine. Now it's going to bite.

I say "Oh, oh."

With closed eyes I see the flea hopping along the sheet, tucking itself into a fold and sitting there peacefully like a dog.[5]

Trivial movements are magnified into events of great importance, just as, in the last sentence, a simile magnifies a flea into a dog.

In the three prose selections just quoted, the narrator's objective tone gives him the air of a detached observer. So long as the events observed are themselves emotionally neutral, there is no clash between tone and content. But in other cases, the detachment is applied to events that are emotionally charged, and the narrator's restraint is odd and frightening:

Так начинается голод:
С утра просыпаешься бодрым,
Потом начинается слабость,
Потом начинается скука;
Потом наступает потеря
Быстрого разума силы, -
Потом наступает спокойствие, -
А потом начинается ужас.[6]

This is how hunger begins:
In the morning you wake up buoyant
Then weakness begins
And then boredom
Then the loss
Of the power of swift reason
Then quiet sets in
And then horror.

Though Kharms's personal world is certainly transformed by his artistic vision, it stands apart from his fiction in several ways. First is the immediacy of the emotion: the

narrator of these works is someone who delights and suffers and understands. Kharms's fiction is by contrast dehumanized; the heroes are mechanized and the narrator is limited and at times perverse. The world of Kharms's personal works is an ordinary one, illuminated from time to time by a desire for faith or the flash of a grotesque imagination. In Kharms's fiction, the grotesque takes leave of the narrator's thoughts and becomes reality itself.

II

The gentlest of Kharms's happenings and short stories rely on a device which we have already observed: the elevation of the insignificant or irrelevant to a position of importance. An obvious example is the following three-liner, where the event is curious simply because it is singled out:

> An old man scratched himself with both hands. Where it was impossible to reach with both hands, he scratched with only one, but particularly quickly. At the same time, he quickly blinked his eyes.[7]

If we take a closer look at this tiny piece, we can see that behind its innocent facade lurks a world which is at the borderline of the grotesque. Banal details are so emphasized that it is bizarre. The old man's scratching (at two speeds) is meaningless and mechanical, and the last sentence gives the idea that eye blinking is a satisfactory compensation for a one-handed scratch. Clearly this is not an ordinary old man, but one of Kharms's marionettes.

Even in stories that are more blatantly grotesque, perverse or fantastic elements are carefully placed in a recognizable frame. The background of these stories is the same minutely observed Leningrad that appears in Kharms's personal writings. When the grotesque occurs, it is far more often as an exaggeration or extension of the ordinary than as an invasion of it by the hitherto unknown. Typical is the con-

clusion to the story "Chto teper' prodaetsia v magazinakh" (What they sell in the stores nowadays), where a character is hit over the head with a cucumber and dies. In other stories, the events, if taken singly, are no more than odd: what makes them grotesque is their constant repetition in a single tiny piece. But the most crucial element in this balance between grotesque and ordinary is the narrator, whose cheerful acceptance of anything that happens makes the grotesque completely banal. Observe his function in Kharms's well-known story about old women falling out of windows:

> An old woman, from an excess of curiosity, tumbled out of the window, fell, and broke into pieces.
>
> A second old woman stuck her head out of the window and began staring at the broken one, but from an excess of curiosity she also tumbled out, fell, and broke into pieces.
>
> Then a third old woman tumbled out of the window, then a fourth one and then a fifth.
>
> When it came to the sixth one I got bored looking at them and set off for the Maltsevskii Market where, I heard, a blind man had been given a knitted shawl.[8]

The narrator's final comment sums up the contrast inherent in the piece by rendering the event boringly familiar.

The death of the old ladies in this very short story points to another element of Kharms's grotesque: the often bloodless nature of his characters. By using the verb "razbit'sia", shatter, to describe the ladies' fall, he turns them into so many pieces of glass. This tendency to make humans inanimate appears throughout his prose. In "Kassirsha" (Cashier), the main character dies suddenly a little while after her installation as a cashier in a food store. The police come to get the body, but they depart with a live cashier instead of a dead one. The problem of who is going to man the register is solved by propping up the dead cashier in her old place, with a cigarette in her mouth to promote verisimilitude. The dead heroine occupies the same function in the story as the live one. Perhaps the extreme of dehuman-

ization occurs in two stories which we will discuss further on, in which the main character is gradually and painlessly disembodied.

If Kharms's characters lack some of the essential traits of live beings, then other features of his prose serve to anchor them in the real world. Chief among these is his mimicry of a formal social distance between author and character, character and reader. Most of Kharms's characters, even those whose appearance is limited to a single phrase, are known by last name alone, name and patronymic, or, even more distantly, by professional title. The use of formal or even official forms of address make the characters deceptively substantial, a perception that combines strangely with their bizarre or violent lives and instant deaths.

The presence in Kharms of two worlds, one which is recognizable and one which is not, draws these tiny stories into the domain of the fantastic. Both Rabkin and Todorov, in their well-known studies, define the fantastic as a constant disturbance to the reader's understanding of what is happening.[9] For Todorov, a work is fantastic when the reader is never sure whether to interpret the extraodinary events in it as natural or supernatural. Rabkin's views are more easily applied to modernist works, and thus to Kharms. He begins with the acknowledgment that any work of fiction carries with it the underlying rules for its peculiar concept of "real," defining as fantastic a work which proceeds to reverse its own rules as it goes along. Both Rabkin and Todorov separate fantastic works from those in which extraodinary occurences fall into place at the end, as well as from the fairy tale world in which events that are impossible by readers' standards astonish nobody.

Kharms's work, as might be expected, falls into the crack between genres as a merger of fairy tale and fantastic. There is certainly no sense of astonishment on the part of the characters, for chaos and irrationality are the "ground rules" of

their world. But the events remain unexpected and provocative to us because the surroundings are so trivially accurate. In his study, Rabkin uses the term "grapholect" to indicate a style which carries with it a certain notion of reality. Here, presumably, belong the marks of Kharms's ordinary world, in particular the dull reportage. The progression from ordinary to impossible can be seen on a stylistic level in almost any sentence. "An old woman, from an excess of curiosity, tumbled out of a window, fell, and broke into pieces." The sentence opens normally, gets progressively less likely, and ends up semantically impossible. The result is an irrational world that is very familiar to us: the source of Kharms's comedy and the reason the stories are disturbing at the same time that they are funny.

Another arena for the transformation of ordinary to grotesque is a stylistic one: a manipulation of the reader's expectations in regard to content, tone and form. It is this aspect of Kharms's work that Shklovskii no doubt had in mind when he wrote, "His words are put together like everybody else's, but through them we can see that this is a torn net, passing through empty water. Empty and impure."[10] One of Kharms's favorite devices is to promise information and then withhold it. A concise example is the "happening" called "Vstrecha" (A meeting):

> One day a man set off for work, but on the way he met a second man who had bought a loaf of Polish bread and was now headed back to his own place.
> That's about it.[11]

Even when information is in fact imparted, it may be vastly different from what is expected. This is certainly the case with Kharms's well-known "Anecdotes about Pushkin." The content of the anecdotes is trivial or absurd, but the tone, true to the title, is one of admiration for a great man.

Kharms's stylistic play may take the form of genre parody, as in the piece appropriately called "Basnia" (Fable).

The fable is about "a certain short man" who declares that he is "ready for anything" if only he can become just a little bit taller. No sooner does he say these words than an evil fairy appears to take his order. Unfortunately, the short man is too frightened to speak, and the disgusted fairy disappears, leaving the hero no recourse but to bite off all his nails, "first on his fingers and then on his toes." The inconclusive fable ends with an inconclusive moral: "Reader, think hard about this fable and you will feel pretty strange."[12]

In the fable, the discomfiture of the reader results at least in part from the contrast between the strong beginning and the weak end. In other stories, the ending is missing completely. Kharms's narrator, pretending an inability to extricate himself, simply gives up: "No, here we have hit a blind alley. And we don't know what to say ourselves. Good-bye."[13]

The extreme of stylistic play occurs when Kharms is undercutting not only a particular genre but the very idea of telling a story at all. An obvious example is his "Simfoniia No. 2" (Symphony No. 2) which purports to tell a story about a certain Anton Mikhailovich. The story, which consists of a series of outrageously inconsequential events, is suddenly dropped in favor of a story about a second character. This account begins as a biography with names and dates all in place but then falters. The third story has no content at all, but concerns the narrator's problems with telling it; the fourth story is a description of the narrator himself. The most remarkable part, however, is the end: the narrator sets out to tell a final story, which turns out, despite the extraodinary nature of the event, to be only a sentence long. He therefore provides a second sentence of explanation, but it is an anti-explanation, a repetition of the first. Then the symphony, instead of dying out, is abruptly cut off: "That's all."[14]

A variant of the story which gets fouled up in the

telling is the story which gradually renders itself untellable. An early example is "O iavleniiakh i sushchestvovaniiakh No.2" (On phenomena and existences No.2).[15] The story begins in an ordinary fashion with a description of a man and a bottle of vodka; we are given the man's full name and even told the reason for his interest in this particular bottle of vodka. By the third paragraph, however, Kharms has begun to play tricks: behind his Nikolai Ivanovich, he proposes a complete and utter void. The narrator informs us of this diffidently, in the same tone he used to describe the vodka. As the story progresses, the void grows to envelop not only Nikolai Ivanovich's surroundings, but Nikolai Ivanovich himself. At this point the story comes to an end. The narrator, stuck in his philosophical cul de sac, is obliged to bow out. But the possibility of a story which gradually negates the existence of its subject and consequently stops evidently intrigued Kharms. It appears again, much condensed, in the "Ryzhii chelovek" (Red-haired man) of 1939:

> Once there was a red-haired man who had no eyes or ears. He didn't have any hair either, so he was called red-haired only in a manner of speaking.
>
> He wasn't able to talk because he didn't have a mouth. He didn't have a stomach and he didn't have a back and he didn't have a spine and he didn't have any other insides. He didn't have anything! So it's hard to understand whom we are talking about.
>
> So we'd better not talk about him any more.[16]

Like Nikolai Ivanovich, the red-haired man dissolves without protest into a state of nonbeing, carrying the story with him.

III

The most disturbing of Kharms's stories are those which deal with violence. It is in these stories that the generalization about the bloodless nature of Kharms's pseudo-people fails to hold: the violent stories are distinguished by the

presence of pain. An example is the following fight between two comrades (note the official manner of address, which combines the violent events in a peculiar, probably satiric way).

> Comrade Koshkin waved his hands insultingly and revoltingly turned out his legs.
> Comrade Mashkin frowned.
> Comrade Koshkin moved his belly and stomped with his right foot.
> Comrade Mashkin shrieked and threw himself on Comrade Koshkin.
> Comrade Koshkin tried to run away, but he stumbled and was overtaken by Comrade Mashkin.
> Comrade Mashkin put a fist into the head of Comrade Koshkin.
> Comrade Koshkin shrieked and fell down on all fours.
> Comrade Mashkin kicked Comrade Koshkin under the belly with his foot, and once again put a fist into the back of his neck.
> Comrade Koshkin collapsed on the floor and died.
> Mashkin killed Koshkin.[17]

Violence is a constant in Kharms's world. It may simply involve people letting out their violent instincts, as in "Sud lincha" (A lynching) or it may be provoked by absurdly insignificant acts like hiccuping in "Pakin i Rakukin" (Pakin and Rakukin). There is a discernible class structure to these stories. When muzhiks kill each other, it is out of an excess of animal energy; when intellectuals kill each other it starts with a silly argument over words. Muzhiks may threaten the weak and self-deceiving intellectual ("Opticheskii obman" /Optical illusion/), but not the other way around; bourgeois and intellectuals divide into the strong and the weak, and prey on each other. Everybody is repulsive.

The violent stories fall roughly into two categories, those in which violent behavior takes place among equals, like the battle between Comrades Mashkin and Koshkin, and those which involve victims and predator. The stories of victim and predator are psychological in an extremely narrow sense. They involve a single psychological reality, fear, which is sometimes, but not invariably, matched by hatred on

the other side. An example is "Grigir'ev i Semenov" (Grigor'-ev and Semenov):

Grigor'ev (hits Semenov in the face): Well, winter has started. Time to make a fire in the stove. What do you think?

Semenov: I think -- if we are to think seriously about your remark -- that perhaps we really ought to make a fire in the stove.

Grigor'ev (hits Semenov in the face): And what do you think? Is the winter this year going to be cold or mild?

Semenov: Perhaps, considering that the summer was rainy, the winter will be cold. If the summer is wet, the winter is always cold.

Grigor'ev (hits Semenov in the face): I never feel cold.

Semenov: That is absolutely correct, what you just said. You are never cold. You have that kind of constitution.

Grigor'ev (hits Semenov in the face): I'm never cold.

Semenov: Ouch!

Grogor'ev (hits Semenov in the face): What do you mean, ouch?

Semenov (holds his cheek): Ouch! My face hurts.

Grigor'ev: Why does it hurt? (With those words, hits Semenov in the face.)

Semenov (falling on a chair): Ouch! I really couldn't say.

Grigor'ev (kicking Semenov in the face): Nothing hurts me.

Semenov: I'll teach you, son of a bitch, not to pick fights. (Tries to get up.)

Grigor'ev (hitting Semenov in the face): Look, we've got a teacher here!

Semenov (falls on his back): You dirty bastard!

Grigor'ev: Now, now, chose your words more carefully.

Semenov (trying to rise): I've put up with a lot, but this is too much. Obviously, one can't get along with you peacefully. It's your own fault.

Grigor'ev (kicks Semenov in the face): Just go on talking and talking. We will listen.

Semenov (falls on his back): Ouch![18]

Violence, or the desire to observe violence, is almost never adequately motivated. It is provoked by annoyance or, more commonly, by boredom. Thus, in "Kassirsha," the crowd that has gathered to enjoy the morbid proceedings in the food store disperses in order to watch an old lady fall out of a window; in the story about old ladies falling out of windows, the narrator gives up after the spectacle becomes dull and he gets wind of a more exciting happening somewhere else. The feeling that nothing significant is at stake comes not only from the frequency of such occurences, but, as noted by the Yugoslavian scholar A. Flaker, stems from the fact that no moral or ethical questions are raised.[20] Kharms's characters are rigorously amoral, or even anti-moral; the possibility of ethical constraints simply doesn't occur to them. The most extreme example of this is certainly the story 'Reabilitatsiia," which concerns a character's attempt to justify himself for having committed a series of murders. His confessions grow steadily more outrageous, but his self-satisfied, faintly apologetic air remains level throughout. The entire story works off the contrast between the reader's internalized values regarding the sacredness of human life, and the character's blissful indifference towards them:

> I don't want to boast. But when Volodya hit me in the ear and spat in my eyes, I let him have it in a way he will never forget. It was only later that I beat him with the little gas stove; I beat him with the flatiron that evening. So he did not die right away. And where is there any proof that I cut off his leg during the day? He was still alive then. And I beat Andriusha to death only because I was carried away by my momentum. I am not at all responsible for that. Why did Andriusha and Liza Antonovna come around? What business did they have coming

> in that door? . . . I've been accused of being bloodthirsty. It's been said I drank the blood. That is a lie. I only lapped up the puddles and the spots. It's natural to want to wipe out the traces of even the most innocent transgression. And I did not rape Liza Antonovna. First of all, she was not a virgin any more. Secondly,I was dealing with a corpse. So there was no occasion for a complaint. So what if she was about to have a baby? I took the child out of her. And if it never became an inhabitant of this world, that's not my fault. I did not tear off its head. It's the fault of that thin neck. It was simply unfit for life. It's true I smashed the dog against the floor. But it's simply cynical to accuse me of murdering a dog, when right alongside it, three human lives had been lost. I'm not counting the baby. . . Let us say, and I might even agree, that there was a certain amount of cruelty on my part. But to try me because I defecated on those victims is, if you pardon me, absurd. Defecating is a natural human need. So how can it be indecent? I do understand certain fears my defense attorney has, but I believe I shall be completely vindicated.[21]

The gap between the reader's ethics and the moral indifference or perversity of the characters is particularly noticeable in stories which have a narrator. Traditionally, the narrator's role involves an element of interpretation; his place is between the story and the reader. Kharms's narrator clearly relishes his traditional role. The problem, of course, is that his conclusion is invariably off the point:

> Once Orlov ate too many ground peas and died. Krylov found out about it and died too. Spiridonov up and died all by himself. Spiridonov's wife fell off the cupboard and also died. Spiridonov's children drowned in the pond. Grandma Spiridonov took to drink and hit the road. Mikhailov stopped combing his hair and caught a skin disease. Kruglov drew a picture of a lady with a whip in her hand and lost his mind. Perekhrestov was sent four hundred rubles by telegram and put on such airs that they fired him at the office.
>
> Good people, but they don't know how to take themselves in hand.[22]

Despite his position as commentator, the narrator is as limited as his characters; he approves everything. Kharms's narrator in these instances had predecessors in Gogol, and, even more so, in Kozma Prutkov. But where Kozma Prutkov's aphorisms can be defined as absurdly banal responses to an

ordinary world, Kharms's are absurdly banal responses to a perverse one.

IV

Perhaps the most important question raised by these stories is whether there is any order to the world they represent or any meaning behind it. At first glance, the answer would seem to be negative. The characters' acts have little to do with their crazy destinies, subject as they are to cancellation at any minute. The denial of cause and effect is obvious even in the syntax. Events are strung together without causatives; "and-and-and" rather than "therefore" or "because". Even when "therefores" exist, the connection, in ordinary terms, is illogical. Kharms's stories begin abruptly, without introduction, and run on without pause until their appointed or arbitrary ends. Except for the narrator's woefully inadequate conclusions, they stand without explanation.

But Kharms, as Aleksandrov and Meilakh note, is indisputably a writer with philosophical tendencies;[23] he is continually playing with the possibility of meaning or the lack of it. Events which at first seem arbitrary may be associated by some elusive meaning; events which ought to be meaningful appear as arbitrary and absurd.

In order to appreciate the puzzle, it is necessary to look more closely at the environment in which it is played out. Two sources for these stories are important here: on the one hand, fairy tales, and on the other, parables or forms of philosophical discourse. As in fairy tales, characters have no inner lives and are essentially replaceable; the act or function is more important than the character who fulfills it. Characters in fairy tales are known by external marks of rank or relationship (princess, daughter, sorcerer), and the same types appear in story after story. Though Kharms's cast is

eccentric, his characters are also defined by external marks and they also recur, in the same or similar situations. Like fairy tales, these stories involve a series of concrete events, arranged in repetitive patterns; there is little time for commentary or description.

The closeness of these works to fairy tales is not a matter of chance: Kharms was interested in fairy tales and was acquainted with their first great explicator, Vladimir Propp. It goes without saying that he was not reiterating them: the marks of the genre which are present must be considered together with those that are dropped or changed. Earlier in the chapter, we looked at "Basnia," a mock fable with a self-deprecating end. Kharms's use of fairy tale elements can be more subtle than that simple parody. A more complex example is "Stoliar Kushakov":

> Once upon a time there lived a carpenter. His name was Kushakov. Once he walked out of his house and went to a store to buy carpenter's glue.
>
> There was a thaw, and the street was very slippery. The carpenter took a few steps, slipped, fell, and broke his forehead. "Ugh," said the carpenter, got up, went to the drugstore, bought a bandage, and fixed up his forehead.
>
> But when he walked out onto the street and took a few steps, he slipped again, fell, and broke his nose.
>
> "Phoo!" said the carpenter, went into the drugstore, bought a bandage, and pasted his nose together with the bandage.
>
> Then he walked out again onto the street; again he slipped;he fell and broke his cheek.
>
> Again he had to go in the drugstore and fix up his cheek with a bandage.
>
> "You know," the druggist said to the carpenter, "you fall so often and hurt yourself, I advise you to buy several bandages."
>
> "No," said the carpenter, "I'm not going to fall any more." But when he walked out onto the street, he slipped again, fell, and broke his chin.
>
> "Lousy ice!" the carpenter shouted and again ran into the drugstore.
>
> "You see," said the druggist, "You fell down again."
>
> "No," shouted the carpenter. "I don't want even to hear about it. Give me a bandage, quick."
>
> The druggist gave him a bandage. The carpenter band-

aged up his chin and ran home.
At home they didn't recognize him and didn't let him into his apartment.
"I am the carpenter Kushakov." the carpenter shouted.
"You don't say!" the people in the apartment answered, and bolted the door and put on the chain.
The carpenter Kushakov stood for a moment on the stairs, spat, and went out to the street.[24]

The opening of "Stoliar Kushakov" is canonic, as is the set of repetitions that follows. But instead of engaging in tests of skill, the poor carpenter is falling flat on his face, and the figure who appears with advice -- the pharmacist who suggests that he quit trying to fight it -- is ignored. At the end, in place of the expected return home, recognition (and wedding), the hero is not recognized by his neighbors and is turned out of the communal apartment. Propp -- and later Rabkin, in his book on the fantastic -- note that the world of the fairy tale is above all an orderly one. This order is both structural and intrinsic: there is causality in a fairy tale, and a system of values with punishments and rewards. In Kharms, there is no intrinsic order at all. His world is repetitive, but the repetition is destructive; it leads to nothing.

The connection between Kharms's stories and fairy tales takes place on another level as well. Among Kharms's papers is the transcript of a conversation between Lipavskii and Propp, which took place in his room. To Lipavskii's question, "What is the key to the fairy tale," Propp, in Kharms's transcription, answered in the following way:

> Let me put it briefly. Everything that plays itself out in a fairy tale, plays itself out in the soul; and these are not visions but real adventures. There is no philosophizing or circumlocution in a fairy tale; everything is precise and concrete. And its hero is the soul . . . For the soul to reach its goal, it must pass through misfortunes, solve precisely set up tasks, get a horse or a bird, struggle with a dragon, attain a goldenhaired princess, etc. Only then does it find what it needs.[25]

If not all of Kharms's heroes can be seen as souls, there

is no doubt that some of them can be.The idea of a spiritual search was a serious one for him, and shows up occasionally even in these stories. Several of them are about spiritual searches, though these may be foolish, as in "Sunduk" (Trunk), or "Makarov i Petersen" (Makarov and Petersen). Here too belong the stories in which the sacred suddenly intrudes into the everyday: "O tom, kak menia posetili vestniki" (About how I was visited by messengers), "Ia idu po Liteinomu," many poems, and the novella *Starukha*.But in most of Kharms's stories, the characters are not so much souls looking for something as much as they are souls at the mercy of hostile forces in an absurd and meaningless world. Nowhere is this more true than in the stories which present one character trapped helplessly by another's arbitrary exercise of power. There are a whole series of these stories: "Pakin i Rakukin," "Vsestoronnee issledovanie" (A detailed examination), "Fedia Davidovich," "Okhota" (Hunt). They are far more personal and more frightening than any of Kharms's other works. There is really no humor in them at all, but only a sort of hysterical desperation. Only one of these stories provides a motivation for what happens, and even in this instance it occurs at the end, so that for the duration of the story the action is unexplained. The victim does not question what is happening; he either does not protest at all or does so weakly. An early example (1930) is "Kalindov":

> Kalindov stood on tiptoe and stared me in the face. This was unpleasant for me. I turned my head, but Kalindov circled around me and once again stared me in the face. I tried to hide from Kalindov behind a newcpaper. But Kalindov outsmarted me, he set fire to the newspaper and when it burst into flame I dropped it on the floor, and Kalindov once again stared me in the face. Retreating slowly, I moved behind the cupboard, and there, for a few moments I rested from Kalindov's insolent looks. But my rest was brief. Kalindov, on all fours, crawled toward the cupboard and stared at me from below. My patiene came to an end, I squinted and hit Kalindov in the face with a shoe.
>
> When I opened my eyes, Kalindov was standing in

> front of me with his bloody mug and cut up mouth and as before stared me in the face.[26]

In "Kalindov," evil is unconquerable; the hero is simply under someone else's power, and there is nothing he can do to fight it. The ordinariness of the environment continues into later stories, where the strain between ordinary surroundings and extraodinary abuses becomes at least for the reader, particularly intense. Perhaps the most extreme and pessimistic of these stories is "Fedia Davidovich" (1939):

> Fedia slowly sneaked up to the butter dish and finally seizing a moment when his wife was bending over to cut her toenails, he quickly, in one movement, slipped all the butter out of the butter dish with his finger and put it into his mouth. As he was closing the butter dish, Fedia inadvertently made a noise with the lid. His wife immediately drew herself up, and seeing the empty butter dish, pointed to it with the scissors and said severely: "There is no butter in the butter dish. Where is it?"
>
> Fedia looked surprised and, stretching his neck, looked into the butter dish.
>
> "The butter is inside your mouth," said his wife, pointing her scissors at Fedia.
>
> Fedia shook his head to say no.
>
> "Aha," said his wife, "you are silent and shaking your head, because your mouth is packed full of butter."
>
> Fedia bulged his eyes and waved his arms at his wife, as though to say, "What are you saying? Not at all." But his wife said, "You are lying. Open your mouth."
>
> "Um, um, um," said Fedia.
>
> "Open your mouth," his wife repeated.
>
> Fedia spread his fingers wide and mumbled something, as though to say, "Oh, my, yes, I forgot, I'll be right back," and got up to leave the room.
>
> "Stop!" his wife shouted.
>
> But Fedia speeded up and disappeared out the door. His wife rushed after him, but she stopped at the door because she was naked, and in that state she could not go out into the hall where other occupants of the apartment walked around.
>
> "He's gone," said his wife, sitting down on the couch. "Hell!"
>
> Fedia went along the hall as far as a door on which hung a sign that said, "Entrance Strictly Forbidden," opened the door, and went into the room.
>
> The room he entered was narrow and long, with the

> window covered by newspaper. At the right, against a wall, stood a dirty broken couch, and near the window was a table made from a board, one end of which was placed on the night table and the other on the back of a chair. On the wall at the left hung a double shelf on which was an indefinite something.
>
> There was nothing else in the room, unless one counts a man lying on the couch, with a pale green face, dressed in a long ragged brown coat and black nankeen trousers, out of which stuck clean washed feet. This man was not sleeping, and he stared intently at the man who entered.
>
> Fedia bowed, scraped his feet, and taking the butter out of his mouth, showed it to the man who was lying down.
>
> "One ruble fifty," the man said without changing his position.
>
> "Too little," said Fedia.
>
> "Enough," said the man.
>
> "Well, all right," said Fedia, and slipping the butter from his finger, put it on the shelf.
>
> "Come to get the money tomorrow morning," the man said.
>
> "What!" shouted Fedia. "I need it now. Only one ruble fifty!"
>
> "Get out," the man said sharply, and Fedia ran out of the room on tiptoe, closing the door behind him carefully.[27]

In "Fedia Davidovich," trivialities (the butter, a neighbor in a communal apartment) become invested with extraodinary, unpleasant power. The power is undefined ("every horror," said Lipavskii in that same conversation, "is the horror of the undefined") -- yet it is the accepted, underlying order of these stories. In the subservience of Fedia to the neighbor there is also something archetypal: note the description of the neighbor's room, the fact that he has no name. As in fairy tales (which are also at times grotesque), concrete actions have their roots in the eternal.

The world view that emerges from stories like this is discomfiting. The world is ordinary and it is frightening; the individual is powerless. Trials and ordeals are constant, but they lead nowhere. Even good change is arbitrary and meaningless. In "Istoriia" (A story), the hero becomes blinded by a

speck of dust and is reduced to scrounging for food in garbage pails until a second speck of dust reverses the process and he becomes a great man. The only relief lies in the tentative connections between this world and the next, sketched in in a very few of these stories. Perhaps the most surprising of these is "Pakin i Rakukin," a story of predator and victim which continues after the victim's death:

> Some fourteen minutes later a tiny soul emerged from Rakukin's body and maliciously looked at the spot where Pakin had just been sitting. But at this point from behind the cupboard came the tall figure of the Angel of Death and, takin Rakukin's soul by the hand, led it somewhere, right through the house and wall. Rakukin's soul ran after the Angel of Death, every minute looking back malociously. But the Angel of Death increased his pace and Rakukin's soul, skipping and stumbling, disappeared around the corner.[28]

Rakukin's soul retains certain ties with its former world (it looks back resentfully; it stumbles, unaccustomed to its new state) but the story ends on a note of relief; the new world is different from the old.

A second source for these stories can be described as forms of philosophical discourse: dialogues, parables, and aphorisms. An example which incorporates the first two is "Vlast'" (Power, 1940) (I am quoting only the beginning):

> Thaol said: "We sin and we do good blindly. An attorney was riding a bicycle when suddenly, having reached the Kazan' Cathedral, he disappeared. Did he know what he was destined to do -- good or evil? Or another instance: an actor bought himself a fur coat and seemed to do good to the old woman who, in need, had sold the coat, but to another old woman, specifically his mother, who lived with the actor and usually slept in the foyer where he hung his new coat, he apparently did evil, for the new coat smelled so unbearably of formaldehyde and naphthalene that the old woman, the actor's mother, couldn't wake up one morning and died. Or another one: somehow a certain graphologist got loaded on vodka and did something so incredible that here, if you please, even Colonel Dibich himself couldn't figure it out: what was good and what was bad."[29]

"Vlast'" retains the basic elements of the genre. Like the philosophical dialogue, it is a search for truth between two speakers, master and pupil; the discourse is conducted through parables. But Kharms's parables are somehow unclean. For one thing, they are too familiar. Lacking, on the one hand, the poetic remoteness of Biblical parables, and on the other, the exoticness of Zen tales, they come across as parodic. All parables are to a certain extent enigmas which the reader must solve in his search for truth. But in Kharms's parables, the reader cannot dispel the suspicion that in place of what ought to be a retrievable system of belief there is vacuum. The parables may be tricks; truth may be somewhere else, or nonexistent.

"Ryzhii chelovek," which we looked at earlier, presents a similar situation. Like the parables in "Vlast'," "Ryzhii chelovek" is a negation of another system: in the Blue Notebook it is accompanied by a notation "against Kant." But the author refuses to set up anything in its place: "Perhaps we shouldn't talk about him any more." At the end of "Vlast'," the rejection is even more intense. The pupil, whose comments have previously been limited to nonsensical monosyllables, suddenly tells his master to "get lost," and the master "disintegrates."

Kharms's use of these forms of philosophical discourse is almost always parodic. Because of their concreteness, they are easily subverted by the addition of slightly inappropriate details and the resulting "philosophies" are either comically trivial or nonexistent. But into this complex of negated and parodied meanings flash occasional glimpses of an unexpected underlying order. Opposed to Kharms's world of arbitrary and disconnected acts is a world in which everything is ultimately connected. The connections are odd and alogical, but the result is a unified world which somehow, alogically, makes sense. The germ of this order can be seen in his "Piat' neokonchennykh povestvovanii" (Five unfinished narratives):

Dear Iakov Semenovich,

1. A certain man took a running start and knocked his head against a smithy with such force, that the blacksmith put aside the sledgehammer he was holding, took off his leather apron and went out into the street to see what had happened. 2. At this point the blacksmith saw the man sitting on the ground. The man was sitting on the ground and holding his head. 3. "What happened?" asked the blacksmith. "Ow!" said the man. 4. The blacksmith moved closer to him. 5. We will cut off this narrative about the blacksmith and the unknown man and begin a new one about four harem friends. 6. Once upon a time there were four harem lovers. They believed that it was nice to have eight women at a time. Evenings they would get together and discuss harem life. They drank wine; they got drunk; they fell under the table; they vomited. It was revolting to look at them. They bit one another on the leg. They called one another bad names. They crawled upon their bellies. 7. We shall cut off the story about them and start a new one about beer. 8. Once there was a barrel of beer, and next to it sat a philosopher, and reasoned: "This barrel is full of beer; beer ferments and grows strong. And my mind wanders, fermenting along the starry heights and my spirit grows strong. Beer is a drink, flowing in space, and I am a drink flowing in time. 9. When beer is confined in a barrel, it has nowhere to flow. If time comes to an end, I will stop. 10. But time will not come to an end, and my flowing is ineluctable. 11. No, it would be better to let the beer flow freely, for it is against the laws of nature for it to stay still." And with these words the philosopher opened the tap of the barrel, and the beer poured onto the floor. 12. We have talked enough about beer, now we will talk about a drum. 13. A philosopher beat on a drum and shouted "I am producing a philosophical noise! This noise is no good to anyone; in fact it even bothers everyone. But if it bothers everyone, then, obviously, it's not of this world. And if it's not of this world, it must be of the other world. And if it is of the other world, then I will continue producing it." 14. The philosopher made noise for a long time. But we will leave this noisy story and move to the following quiet story about trees. 15. A philosopher was strolling under the trees and not saying anything, because inspiration had left him.

March 27, 1937.[30]

By numbering these segments consecutively, Kharms makes the reader contemplate them as a single unit. The missing end of each story becomes in essence the beginning of the next,

and the final sentence must be taken as the ending to them all. Thus, these five blocks of narrative which logically have nothing to do with each other seem to be connected, and the final sentence, with its hint of a meaning irretrievable by logic, seems to sum them up.

In the five narratives, the sense of unexpected connections operates slightly below the surface. It is present on the same level in the personal writings we looked at in the beginning of the chapter; we shall meet it again in *Starukha*. In the group of stories we are considering here, there is at least one in which the connections are explicit. "Sviaz'" (The connection, 1937) is a chain of eccentric acts performed over many years by characters who are unknown to one another. Finally, they find themselves riding in the same streetcar. Kharms concludes:"They ride along and don't know what connection there is between them, and they won't know till the day they die."[31] The order, if it exists at all, glimmers playfully beyond the reach of human reason.

Chapter V
THE ORDINARY, THE SACRED, AND THE GROTESQUE

Starukha, written over May and June of 1939, is one of Kharms's last works. In form it is close to traditional short story, and Vvedenskii, who saw it as an abandonment of experimentalism, disliked it. But *Starukha* is far more a culmination than an abandonment. It is here that the separate elements of Kharms's prose pieces and poems achieve a delicate balance: not only the ordinary with the grotesque, but the ordinary and the grotesque with the sacred. *Starukha* is about the main character's spiritual search, and ends with a very minor miracle. Characteristically for Kharms, the search is a modest one, masked in an incongruous perverse humor; it must be extrapolated from understatements and comments that appear to be offhand. The story is so structured that the last line, with its revelation of a gentle and traditional faith, comes as a surprise. It is only when we look back at the story that the motivation for it seems obvious and its culmination inevitable.

The line of development that leads to *Starukha* involves two ideas: a belief in God closely integrated with the details of everyday life and the expectation of a miracle. Both of these ideas can be found in Kharms's work dating from the early thirties. They are also present in the philosophical writings of Ia. S. Druskin, a close friend of Kharms and, like him, a member of Lipavskii's circle. Druskin's philosophy -- in particular, the idea that through prayer one can glimpse the transcendant state that lies just beyond the surface of ordinary life -- seems especially relevant to *Starukha*.[1]

In his own life, Kharms seemed to delight in the possibility of a miracle arising suddenly in the most commonplace setting. This thought, which recurs in his poetry and letters, can be seen most vividly in an unfinished story of 1939. At the opening of the piece, the narrator is longing for a

miracle: "I am walking along Liteinyi past the book shops. Yesterday I asked for a miracle. Yes, if only there could be a miracle right now."[2] The desire appears in the middle of an ordinary day, and the conversational, even offhand language suggests that the thought is a familiar one. Typically, it gives way to more pressing needs: "I asked God for a miracle, so I would know what I should write. But then I felt like smoking."[3] The association of the spiritual and the everyday can be seen in a poem of the same year:

Господи, среди бела дня
Накатила на меня лень.
Разреши мне лечь и заснуть, Господи,
И пока я сплю, накачай меня, Господи,
Силою Твоей.
Многое знать хочу,
но не книги и не люди скажут мне это.
Только Ты просвети меня, Господи,
путем стихов моих.
Разбуди меня, сильного к битве со смыслами,
быстрого к управлению слов
и прилежного к восхвалению имени Бога во веки веков

28 марта 1931 года в 7 часов вечера[4]

Lord, in the light of day
Weakness has come over me.
Permit me to lie down and fall asleep, Lord
And while I am sleeping, Lord, fill me
with Your strength.
There is much I would know
But neither books nor people will tell me this
Only You can enlighten me Lord
through my verse.
Awaken me strong for the battle with meanings
Quick in directing words
And constant in praise of the name of God unto ages of ages

28 March 1931 at 7 in the evening

Note how little this prayer for enlightment strays from the detail of the poet's real life: he is a writer, it is the middle of the day, he is tired. In *Starukha*, the spiritual theme is similarly integrated with the everyday. There is, however, an important difference. In *Starukha*, the spiritual

is associated with the comic grotesque as well. For Kharms, there seems to be no contradiction: the spiritual is intertwined with its seeming opposite and even proceeds through it.

I

Kharms's novella opens with an old woman standing in a courtyard and holding a wall clock without any hands on it. The narrator asks her for the time, and, despite the seeming contradiction, she glances at the clock face and gives him a very matter-of-fact reply. She clearly wants to speak to him -- she calls after him as he walks off -- but he doesn't pay attention and in fact forgets all about her. He goes home and tries to write a story. Its subject is, in a typically Kharmsian way, obliquely relevant: "a miracle worker who lives in our time and doesn't work any miracles."[5] But here the narrator is stricken by a bad case of writer's cramp: he spends most of his time staring out the window and never gets beyond the first sentence ("The miracle worker was tall.").

At this point, most unexpectedly, the old woman makes her appearance in his room. At their first meeting, she was not yet distinguishable from Kharms's other eccentrics: her ability to tell time from a clock that had no hands was mentioned as an oddity and passed over. Now her appearance seems to have a purpose:

> Somebody knocks on the door.
>
> "Who's there?"
>
> No answer. I open the door and see before me the old woman who stood in the yard this morning with her clock. I am very surprised and can't think of anything to say.
>
> "Here I am," says the old woman and enters my room.
>
> I stand at the door and don't know what to do: chase her out, or on the contrary, invite her to sit down. In the meantime the old woman walks over to the window and sits in my armchair.

> "Shut the door and lock it," she says to me.
>
> I shut and lock the door.
>
> "Down on your knees," says the old woman.
>
> I get on my knees.
>
> At this point I begin to realize the absurdity of my position. What am I doing on my knees in front of some oldwoman. And what is she doing in my room sitting in my favorite chair. Why haven't I chased her out?
>
> "Look here," I say, "what right do you have to march into my room and order me around? I haven't the slightest desire to be on my knees."
>
> "And you needn't," says the old woman, "now you have to lie on your stomach face down on the floor."
>
> I obeyed the order immediately . . .

If we look beyond the narrator's light irony -- his misunderstanding and Kharms's comic mask -- much in the sequence becomes clear. The old woman's attitude toward the narrator is that of a master toward a novice. She comes to him as if it is preordained ("Here I am.") and has him prostrate himself before her. He feels ridiculous, but is powerless to disobey her. When he does, he loses track of time -- a significant event in a story which makes constant references to passing minutes.

When the narrator comes to, it is some indeterminate time at night. The old woman is still in his armchair, and a closer look discloses that she is dead. Her role as master was intriguing but brief; once dead, she is simply grotesque:

> The old woman sits like a sack in my chair. Teeth hang out of her mouth. She looks like a dead horse.
>
> "A revolting picture," I say. I don't want to cover her with a newspaper because you never know what can go on under a newspaper.

Characteristically for Kharms, the narrator's reaction is the most deflating of all possible responses. But in its way it is also an appropriate one, for the old woman is not a spiritual abstraction, but a problem he will have to deal with in concrete terms.

The narrator becomes annoyed at the turn events have taken, and kicks the old woman in the face. Now things become more serious: the mark is visible and it will seem as if he killed her. His ties to the old woman are now complicated by guilt -- an important point which we will return to later.

The rest of the story can be summarized more quickly. The narrator, who hasn't eaten since the previous day, leaves the apartment to buy some food. In the bakery he is pursued by a nice young lady. In the course of their short conversation, he asks her two important questions: does she believe in God and will she come to his room for a drink (the answer to both is yes). They go to buy vodka, but the narrator suddenly remembers about the dead old woman in his room. Their tryst becomes impossible, and in order to avoid explanation he sneaks off.

Taking his bottle of vodka, the narrator stops by his friend Sakerdon Mikhailovich's. They drink and talk. After some hesitation, the narrator asks Sakerdon Mikhailovich if he believes in God. Sakerdon Mikhailovich hints that he does, but refuses to answer outright. Note that these two questions, coming in quick succession, are not fortuitous; they are obviously connected with something that is on the narrator's mind.

The narrator then returns to his room, intending to confess to the superintendent, but doesn't find him in. He goes back to his apartment, where he runs into another old woman, his neighbor, and his other neighbor the engineer. By this time, the thought of the dead old woman has him scared out of his wits; when he first opens the door to his room he sees -- or thinks he sees -- her crawling toward him on all fours. He masters himself with great effort, stuffs her into a suitcase, and prepares to deposit her in a swamp outside of town.

While waiting for the streetcar, he sees the young woman walking by, but can't catch up with her because the suitcase, with the old woman in it, is too heavy. The narrator reaches the train without major difficulty. Most of his ride, however,

is spent in the toilet -- the result of some raw frankfurters he ate at Sakerdon Mikhailovich's. When he returns to his seat, the suitcase is gone, probably stolen. He panics, but gets off at Lisii Nos, as planned.

At this point, the tone of comic grotesque that has prevailed for much of the story dissolves. The last few paragraphs of the story take place in complete seriousness, and in a natural setting that appears with great rarity in Kharms's work. The narrator leaves the train and goes to the woods behind the station. Making sure that no one will see him, he kneels down to watch a caterpillar, and, quite unexpectedly, prays.

In summary, as in the original, *Starukha* seems to develop out of a series of arbitrary events. But here, arbitrariness is just an illusion. There is a metaphor for this within the story itself. As the narrator and Sakerdon Mikhailovich sit down to drink, they hear a sudden loud crack. To the narrator's complete incomprehension, his friend gets up and starts tearing down the curtains. It is only later that the reason for this becomes clear: they had forgotten to put water in a pot, the enamel had cracked, and the curtains were necessary as a potholder.[6] The incident comes up a second time when the narrator "for some reason" recalls it in the moments after his suitcase has been stolen. The reason behind this is not hard to determine. Once again, events which seem irrational (the story up to this point) are about to make sense by culminating in the narrator's enlightenment.

The world of the story is in fact a highly ordered one, marked by a precise network of interconnections. Almost all the characters who cross the narrator's path are part of a system of interrelationships with the old woman at its center. The existence of this system points to a premise that we have already noted in some of Kharms's prose: that events are not arbitrary, but part of an odd order. The significance of the

internal mirroring in *Starukha* does not end with this understanding The old woman is not merely the center of a web of interrelationships, she is the narrator's means to faith; and every character who is connected with her is also in some way connected with it.

The old woman's reflection is strongest in the "nice young lady" from the bakery. Both enter the narrator's life on the same day; both seek him out and both pursue the relationship despite his initial show of indifference. Their association is underscored by interesting coincidences in language. The narrator's first contact with both women is followed by a similarly worded event: "The spring sun is very pleasant. I go on foot, squinting and smoking my pipe" (the old woman). "The spring sun is shining right in my face. I light my pipe . . . I stand, squinting from the sun, smoking my pipe and thinking about the nice young lady." "I'll buy it, and we can settle accounts later" (rasschitaemsia) says the young woman to the narrator, offering to buy him bread. "Now you and I are going to settle accounts," says the narrator to the old woman in a wholly different tone as he prepares to stuff her into the suitcase. Even Sakerdon Mikhailovich sets them up as a pair: when his proposal that the narrator marry the "lady" in his room meets with an emphatic refusal, he suggests "the one from the bakery" as a substitute.

The old woman and young woman are held in tandem by the plot. On two occasions, the old woman's presence prevents the narrator from meeting with his nice young lady: once, as we have seen, when he can't take her home because of the dead old woman in his room and again when he can't catch up with her because of the dead old woman in his suitcase. Her meddling is not merely annoying; there is a serious reason for it. The old woman provides the narrator first with a glimpse of another order and then with a burden. The young woman provides him with the promise of normal happiness on earth: love, dinner every day, and unquestioned belief in God. While the

old woman does not give him anything he was searching for consciously, the young woman holds out to him everything that the lonely, poverty-stricken, intellectual narrator could possibly want. But to attain happiness with the young woman before coming to terms with the old one would be incomplete, premature, and simplistic. When the burden of the old woman is lifted, the narrator has attained something more valuable. It is significant that the narrative breaks off with his prayer: at that point there is really no need to return to the romance.

The reflection of the old woman appears next in Sakerdon Mikhailovich. In this case the resemblance involves an uncanny coincidence in physical position. Note Kharms's description of the dead old woman, lying on the floor near the narrator's armchair: "Her arms were twisted under her body and couldn't be seen, but from under her rolled-up skirt protruded a pair of bony legs in white, dirty woolen stockings." The same sequence of phrases and many of the same words are used to describe Sakerdon Mikhailovich, sitting on the floor under his window: "Sakerdon Mikhailovich put his hands behind his back (ruki zalozhil za spinu) and they could not be seen. But from under his rolled-up robe protruded his naked, bony legs and a pair of Russian boots with cut-off tops." This is the only instance in the story where the narrative concerns an event that the narrator himself does not see; its inclusion was apparently important enough to warrant the momentary disruption in tone. Moreover, Sakerdon Mikhailovich assumes his position deliberately, and seems to have been sitting that way before the narrator's arrival:"'I didn't tear you away from your work?' I asked. 'Oh, no,' says Sakerdon Mikhailovich. 'I wasn't doing anything, I was just sitting on the floor!'" In taking such care to emphasize their physical resemblance, Kharms seems to imply some spiritual congruence as well. The fact that here, too, the conversation turns to belief in God suggests that Sakerdon Mikhailovich's grotesque pose is that of a meditator.

The old woman's reflection appears for the third time in a more likely mirror: Mar'ia Vasilievna, the narrator's neighbor. This time the resemblance is a matter of a set of false teeth. The old woman's false teeth make two appearances in the course of the narrator's acquaintance with her. On the first occasion, they fly out of her mouth when he kicks her in the face; the second time, they unnerve him by disappearing altogether. Mar'ia Vasilievna is also an old woman, and her false teeth, though not mentioned outright, are certainly the cause of her lisp:

> "Shome old man wash ashking for you."
> "What old man?" I asked.
> "I dunno," answered Mar'ia Vasilievna.
> "When was it?" I asked.
> "I dunno that either," said Mar'ia Vasilievna.
> "Did you speak to him?" I asked her.
> "I shpoke to him," said Mar'ia Vasilievna.
> "Then why don't you know when it was?" I said.
> "About two hourzh ago," said Mar'ia Vasilievna.

Like the old woman, Mar'ia Vasilievna has a peculiar understanding of time: first she says she doesn't know when the "old man" called, then she is able to give him an answer.

The net of resemblances catches even minor characters. While the narrator is waiting at the train station, he sees a man being carried off by the police: "Along the platform two officers are leading someone to the precinct. He is walking with his hands behind his back (zalozhiv ruki za spinu) and his head bent over." The man's curious position shows him to be a momentary third to the old woman and Sakerdon Mikhailovich.[7] A few minutes later, when the suitcase is stolen, the narrator remembers the man and extends the comparison to include himself: "They'll catch me this very day, right here or at the station in the city, like that man who was walking with his head bent over."

II

From the summary of Kharms's story the reader can catch some of the interplay of ordinary and sacred, sacred and grotesque. The spiritual side of *Starukha* is shaped by the association of the sacred with these other elements. To understand it, it is necessary to look more closely at the points at which they come together.

As in many of Kharms's shorter works, the first person narration of *Starukha* creates an illusion of autobiography. The narrator, who is never called by name, is one of Kharms's recreations of himself. He is a writer, he suffers from insomnia; he has barely enough to eat and spends long hours simply sitting in his room and watching. The same voice, and the same reality, occur in many of the poems. Thus, the poet-narrator of "For a long time I looked at the green trees" lives in the same room as the narrator of *Starukha* and shares many of his working habits.[8] The objects that surround the poet -- a pipe, a chair by a window, a watch -- appear again in *Starukha* and seem to be Kharms's own.

Kharms's more clearly autobiographical writings -- diary notations and poems -- often involve a search for something beyond himself, although the spiritual nature of the search is understated. The severe limitations of the narrator's world is an important factor in *Starukha* as well. His isolation and self-absorption can be felt in the slightly repetitive quality of his language -- his thoughts turn continually to the same objects in the same words -- and in his tendency to make everything that happens to him important. It is in part because of this that passing characters attain an unexpected significance, and the web of interconnections comes through so strongly.

The sense of autobiography in *Starukha* is enhanced by its diary-like form. It takes place in slightly over twenty-four hours, with the time continually marked; with one exception

it is limited to things the narrator actually sees or does. The continual notations of time serve a dual function in the story. In addition to establishing the atmosphere of a diary, they point to a crucial difference between the narrator's understanding of time and that of the old woman: his ties to the "earthly, Euclidean world" and her freedom from it.

As in many of Kharms's shorter pieces, fantastic elements are balanced by a strong physical sense of where the story is taking place. Ordinary details of Kharms's city are recorded precisely: thus the entire series of train stops between Leningrad and Lisii Nos. Once again, the observations are not merely exact, but personal. The Buddhist pagoda, which the narrator watches as he rides past it in the train, figures in Kharms's notebooks and letters. Not only do they share the same memory, but they live in the same place: the narrator's walk home takes him up Nevskii Prospect to the corner of Liteinyi, just like Kharms's and both have to climb several flights of stairs.

The feeling that what we are reading is not a created work, but a diary, has several somewhat contradictory effects. In part, it serves to de-emphasize the spiritual side of *Starukha*, turning it into simply another small event in the narrator's personal and not terribly significant world. But if the spiritual is de-emphasized by this, it is also supported and made plausible by it. The conjunction of ordinary and sacred in *Starukha* is a declaration that such things are indeed possible: the realization of Kharms's wish for the sacred to manifest itself in the middle of his own life.

If the familiar outlines of the narrator's ordinary world like *Starukha* to Kharms's more autobiographical writings, then the presence of the grotesque recalls -- though incompletely -- his happenings. The most extreme example of the grotesque occurs after the death of the old woman when the narrator is overcome by visions of what dead people are capable of doing:

> "The dead," my thought explained to me, "are not the people to be relied on. You lay them to rest, but they're all restless. You have to keep your eye on them. Ask any watchman from the morgue. What do you think he's there for? For one thing alone: to keep the dead from crawling away. There are some funny incidents connected with this. One day, while the watchman, following the orders of his superiors, was washing in the bathhouse, a dead person crawled out of the morgue and into the disinfection chamber where he ate a pile of laundry. The disinfectors whipped him hard, but they still had to pay for the spoiled laundry out of their own pockets. And another dead person crawled into a ward of expectant mothers and frightened them so that one of them had a miscarriage, and the dead person threw himself on the fetus and began to chomp on it greedily. And when one brave nurse hit him on the back with a stool, he bit her on the leg and she died of blood poisoning. Yes, the dead are not the people to be relied on. You have to watch out for them.

The excerpt just quoted differs from Kharms's "happenings" in an important respect: what would ordinarily be a discrete story is here embedded into the narrator's thoughts. In *Starukha*, the grotesque does not involve antic external events, but the psychology and desires of the narrator. He is the one who daydreams about giving the children tetanus, and reacts to the old woman first with annoyance and later with disgust. The outside world in *Starukha* is more or less ordinary; the flashes of perversity, and finally, belief, are all within the narrator.

Related to the grotesque is the atmosphere of paranoia that surrounds the narrator, growing stronger as his situation gets more complicated and in part responsible for his breakthrough. The narrator's paranoia is the natural outcome of his chance involvement in a criminal matter. It gets worse after he kicks the old woman in the face and reaches an extreme when the suitcase is stolen. More generally, it can be felt in his hatred and suspicion of the little boys[9] and his hatred and fear of the dead old woman. His inner state is externalized in yet another fleeting double, a stranger who passes his vision three times in the course of the story. This stranger, "the

man walking with his stick and artificial leg," is victimized by the little boys, two workers, and an unknown old woman.[10] He is clearly a symbolic extension of the narrator's own predicament.

An undertone of hatred and paranoia is present in many of Kharms's earlier works, beginning with *Elizaveta Bam*, but the resemblance to *Starukha* is strongest in "Ia podnial pyl'" (I kicked up dust), a short piece written four months earlier, in February 1939:[11]

> I kicked up dust. Children were running after me and tearing their clothing. Old men and women were falling from roofs. I whistled, I rumbled, I chattered my teeth and knocked with an iron stick. Torn children rushed after me; and, falling behind, broke their fragile legs in their terrible haste. Old men and women hopped around me. I was carried forward. Filthy, malnourished children looking like poisonous mushrooms got tangled under my feet. I couldn't run. Every minute I stumbled and once almost fell into the wet gruel of old men and women wallowing on the ground. I jumped, ripped the heads off a few mushrooms and stepped on the belly of a thin old woman who crunched loudly, whimpering "they tortured me." I didn't look and ran farther. Now there was a clean and even pavement underfoot. Occasional streetlights lit my way. I ran to a bathhouse. The welcoming bathhouse light already flickered before me and the comfortable heavy bathhouse steam seeped into my nostrils, ears and mouth. Not undressing, I ran past the entry, then past the showers and tubs, right to the steamshelf. A hot white steam enclosed me. I hear a weak but insistent ring. I seem to be lying down.
>
> . . . And here a powerful rest stopped my heart.
>
> February 1, 1939.

The atmosphere of this fragment is far more horrifying than that of *Starukha*, a nightmare compared to a daydream. But the figures are the same: fragile old people and awful, sickly children. They are pursuing him, but he is inflicting on them terrible and unwarranted pain. In "Ia podnial pyl'," the horror dissolves in a conclusion that involves purification (the bathhouse) and death. The ending of *Starukha* is much brighter, but the impetus for it is also partially in the grotesque. Note that in *Starukha*, the narrator's breakthrough follows the

moment of his most intense paranoia. When the suitcase is stolen, his situation becomes intolerable: he has lost all control over what will happen. It is at this point that he remembers the man being carried off by the police, and sees himself in the same position. The sudden comparison links him not only to the unknown man, but to Sakerdon Mikhailovich and the old woman. A moment later, the comparison is realized: the narrator leaves the station and declares his faith in God.

The narrator's breakthrough is unthinkable without the impetus provided by the sudden intensification of his guilt and paranoia (the fringe existential situation: the breakdown of one's own limits). In this way, the spiritual has its source in the grotesque. But the grotesque, particularly the comic grotesque, interacts with the spiritual in more subtle ways.

Kharms seems to delight in the reconciliation of opposites, the confusion of sacred and profane. The most obvious example of this is the old woman herself, but it appears with equal clarity in the two conversations which follow her death. In the first of these, the conversation between the narrator and the nice young lady, the question of belief in God appears in a most unlikely context:

She: So you go to the bakery yourself?
I: Not only to the bakery, I buy everything myself.
She: And where do you have dinner?
I: Usually I cook my own dinner. And sometimes I eat in a pub.
She: Do you like beer?
I: No, I prefer vodka.
She: I like vodka too.
I: You like vodka? That's great. I'd like to have a drink with you sometime.
She: I'd also like to drink vodka with you.
I: Excuse me, may I ask you a question?
She (blushing hotly): Of course, go ahead.
I: Okay, I'll ask you. Do you believe in God?
She: In God? Yes, of course.
I: And what would you say if we bought some vodka and went over to my place. I live right around here.
She (perkily): Well, all right, I don't mind.

I: Then let's go.

The young woman, having proposed that they drink vodka together, certainly ("blushing hotly") expects a different sort of question. Kharms is playing with the confusion of sacred and profane love. But the appearance of the question of belief in this context has a more serious purpose. For the narrator, this is the most pressing question and also the most private one; it is the question that must be approached gingerly, through innuendo and euphemism.

The same complex of factors -- the narrator's shyness in asking his question and the introduction of the profane as a euphemism -- can be seen in his conversation with Sakerdon Mikhailovich. The narrator broaches the subject almost as soon as he enters, but has evident difficulty doing it. "For some time we are silent. 'I wanted to ask you,' I say at last. 'Do you believe in God?'' Sakerdon Mikhailovich, sharing his reticence, refuses to give him a straight answer.

Their conversation turns from this to an interpretation of belief in God as belief in immortality. The subject -- probably a reference to Dostoevsky[12] -- once again serves to link the sacred with the comic grotesque. After all, the narrator, who is harboring a dead old woman in his room, has a very concrete reason for wanting to know about immortality.

The narrator, like all of Kharms's heroes, does not philosophize about his desires; he is not even aware of them until they appear in front of him in concrete form. His inner struggles are focused on external objects -- an old woman that he wants to get rid of, a young woman that he wants to attain. The comic grotesque serves as a means of concretization and circumlocution.

Perhaps the most extended instance of this circumlocution is the series of events that concludes the story. The prelude to the narrator's breakthrough -- the disappearance of the old woman -- occurs on the train when the narrator is

in the toilet suffering from cramps. The train stops at Lakhta: here, presumably, the first of the two passengers gets off, leaving the second alone with the suitcase. The theft now becomes a possibility and the narrator, sitting in the toilet with no knowledge of what is about to take place, feels a sudden joy, strain, and a sense of expectation. Of course, he interprets his state as resulting from a different set of affairs:

> I wish it would go! I wish it would go! The train goes and I close my eyes with bliss. Oh, these moments can be as sweet as the moment of love. All my nerves are strained but I know that a terrible collapse is to follow.

As the train approaches the next stop, the narrator expects a resumption of his torments. But at this point, we may surmise, the remaining passenger takes off with the suitcase and the narrator, appropriately, feels empty and weak:

> The train stops again. It's Olgino. That means another round of torture. But this time the urge is fruitless. A cold sweat breaks out on my forehead, and a light coolness flutters around my heart. I lift myself up and stand for some time with my head pressed against the wall. The train is moving, and the rocking of the car is very pleasant. I gather all my strength and weave unsteadily out of the toilet.

When he returns to his seat, the two passengers and the suitcase are gone; he is seized by fear.

At this point, the stage is set for his enlightenment; the comic grotesque is dropped. The physical burden of the old woman has been lifted, leaving in its stead a spiritual burden, fear and guilt, that is all the more intense. Leaving the train, the narrator goes to the woods behind the station. His attention is captivated by a catepillar; he gets down on his knees just as he did before the old woman. The words he speaks complete the circle begun by his meeting with her:

> I look around. Nobody can see me. A light shiver runs along my spine.
>
> I bend my head and say softly:

> "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, now, and ever, and unto ages of ages."

This unexpected declaration of faith is Kharms's miracle. It is significant that the formula he chooses associates God and timelessness, God and eternity; it is thus the resolution of the opposition of time and timelessness which began with the old woman and her wall clock. If it comes as something of a surprise in the story, it is not at all surprising in terms of Kharms's work, as can be seen in this short poem of 1937:

> Вот грянул дождь,
> Остановилось время,
> Часы беспомощно стучат.
> Расти трава, тебе не надо время,
> Дух Божий, говори, Тебе не надо слов.[13]
>
> The rain has thundered in.
> Time has stopped.
> The clock beats helplessly.
> Grow, grass, you have no need of time.
> Holy Spirit, speak, you have no need of words.

The spiritual idea behind *Starukha* is a simple and traditional one: acknowledgement of the presence of God. Neither here, nor in any of his other works does Kharms break new ground in Christianity. What is unexpected is the appearance of the spiritual as the other side of everyday existence (the "miracle" that Kharms was waiting for) and its development through the comic grotesque.

Chapter VI
VVEDENSKII: IN THE WORLD'S PAVILION

Vvedenskii, like Kharms, begins with experiments in alogical and fragmented verse. His poetry starts out more radical than Kharms's: a swift stream of words and phrases whose association is all but random. Pieces of narrative and fragments of word play rise to the surface and disappear without a trace. But this extreme style, so seemingly emblematic of Oberiu poetic theory, is in fact short-lived. Around 1929, still within the context of semantic experiment and poetic absurdity, there is a shift toward clarity of thought and construction. Narrative movement becomes important, and with it, the underlying philosophical context.

The works that form the subject of this chapter are narrative poems and unstageable dramatic scenes written in 1929 and 1930. Their locale is a sort of philosophical netherworld, a place for disembodied conversations and strange revelatory journeys. Most of these works are scenarios of what might occur after death; almost always the tone is brightly ironic. They are concerned with the classical questions of God and death, presented directly, with only the barest filtering through human emotions and psychology. The questions are not difficult but the answers are beyond understanding, and it is with this realization that he eventually ends.

I

Despite the move toward internal coherence, the construction and especially the language of these early works remains extremely unconventional. Narrative or dramatic elements are almost always subordinated to the language in which the works are written. Because of odd usages and irregular combinations, the story line of a poem is often difficult to retrieve, in the same way as it is sometimes hard to sort out exactly who it is that is speaking. Vvedenskii's language has

been described as an "experiment in semantic aphasia."[2] Because the deliberate awkwardness is so pronounced, it seems worthwhile to begin by looking at the language more closely.

In the discussion of Kharms's early poetry, we noted his idea of a "word machine" that provides a pattern for the generation of poetic language. Though Vvedenskii did not borrow the name, something similar can be sensed in his verse. Vvedenskii's "word machine" works through an insistent meter and rhyme, which pull together elements that are semantically unrelated.[3] The result is an impression of words chosen spontaneously for purely formal reasons:

дети нюхайте эфир
дети кушайте кефир
пусть летят к вам с потолка
три стакана молока
дует ветер с облаков
а усы у каблуков[4]

Children shiff ether
Children eat kefir
May three glasses of milk
Fly down to you from the ceiling
The wind blows from the clouds
And the moustache is on heels

This is not the automatic writing of the surrealist, but rather a play of material against pattern. At times the pattern distorts the material to the point of ungrammaticalness. In the sequence "v moem tebe / v moei sud'be," the combination of adjective plus pronoun ("my thee") is permitted by analogy to the perfectly ordinary "my fate." A similar mechanism results in the substitution of a semantically unrelated word for the one expected by the context. The pattern here may consist of one phrase only, but it it equally evident:

Маргарита или Лиза
чаю дать вам иль часы.[5]

Margarita or Liza
would you like tea or a clock.

The language that results is completely consonant with Vveden-

skii's theme: the absurdity of the world beyond death and the impossibility of understanding.

The opposition of material to pattern comes up again in the contrast between the intonation of normal speech and the rhythm of verse. Vvedenskii exaggerates this difference by leaving out punctuation, requiring the reader to sort out phrases and pauses. The problem is compounded when, as frequently happens, the verse contains quoted speech. In the first example below, it takes a moment to realize that "skazhet" ("says") in the third line refers to the general; in the second example, quoted speech begins unexpectedly with the word "kobyla" ("mare") . In neither case does the rhythm facilitate an intonational pause:

/1/ выходит рыжий генерал
глядит в очках на потроха
когда я скажет умирал
во мне была одна труха[6]

Enter the redhaired general
Peers through his glasses at the tripe
When I says was dying
There was nothing in me but dust

/2/ махнув хвостом сказал кобыла
андреевна меня любила[7]

With a wave of the tail said mare
Andreevna loved me

The material that falls into the "word machine" is of widely divergent origin: foreignisms, euphemisms, puns, bureaucratic speech, and old-fashioned poetic language. Like the vocabulary, the metrical patterns themselves are unstable and may give way to a line or two of completely jarring prose. The instability of vocabulary and meter is matched by a free-wheeling approach to word combinations. Usage violations are extremely common. In the example below, the verb "nastupit'," ordinarily reserved for natural occurences like night or spring, is stretched to include God:

идите четвертые
в тот кабинет
здесь окончательно
Бог наступил[8]

Go Number Fours
To that office
Here once and for all
God has set in

A similar device is the breakup and recombination of conventional expressions, as in the mixed metaphor "Ia vas liubliu do dna" (I love you to the dregs), a combination of "Ia vas liubliu do bezumiia"(I love you madly), and "Peite do dna" (drink to the dregs). Violations of this sort are an important feature of Vvedenskii's language, and remain characteristic of him long after the more arbitrary products of the word machine have played themselves out.

II

Vvedenskii's early works fall into two structural groups: fantastic journeys and dramatic dialogues. In the first category belong narrative poems like "Znachenie moria" (The Sea's meaning), or "Bol'noi kotoryi stal volnoi" (The sick man who became a wave). In the second belong the disembodied conversations of "Sviatoi i ego podchinennye" (The saint and his subordinates), "Fact, teoriia i Bog" (Fact, theory, and God),or "Konchina moria" (The sea's end). The groups are no more than tendencies, and in some works, like *Krugom vozmozhno Bog* (There May Be God All Over), they are mixed.

The fantastic journeys have their roots in story telling, and much of their charm comes from the association of a childishly rhyming narration with metaphysical themes. An interesting example is "Chelovek veselyi Frants" (Franz the Merryman).[9] Though it is in certain ways atypical of the fantastic journeys, it is worthwhile looking at it in detail before continuing the discussion of the journeys as a group.

"Chelovek veselyi Frants" is the most whimsical and the most optimistic of Vvedenskii's works. It is unusual because the central character is more than a vehicle for questions and perceptions. But beyond this, Franz (the German name gives the piece a slightly foreign flavor) is clearly at home in Vvedenskii's world. He is gentle, pure, and a philosopher. The poem begins this way:

человек веселый Франц
сохранял протуберанц
от начала до конца
не спускался он с крыльца
мерял звезды звал цветы
думал он что я есть ты
вечно время измеряя
вечно песни повторяя
он и умер и погиб
как двустволка и полип

Franz the merryman
preserved the solar prominence
from start to finish
didn't leave the porch
he measured stars, hailed flowers
thought that I is thou
eternally measuring time
eternally repeating songs
he died and perished
like a double-barreled gun like a polyp

The rest of the poem takes place on the dreamlike border between life and death and is an account of Franz's struggle with death. The struggle begins when the hero falls asleep. Even now, he withdraws from worldly things, and the poem evokes his dream landscape:

он пугаясь видел юбку
фантазируя во сне
и садясь в большую шлюпку
плыл к задумчивой сосне
где жуков ходили роты
совершали повороты
показав богам усы
говорили мы часы
боги выли невпопад
и валились в водопад

frightened he saw a skirt
fantasizing in his dreams
and getting into a large boat
sailed to the pensive pine
where battalions of beetles marched
made turns
showing their mustaches to the gods
said we are clocks
gods howled out of turn
and dropped into a waterfall

The objects of Franz's vision -- the clocks and gods, the pine tree and the beetles -- are not in the least arbitrary but mark Vvedenskii's preoccupation with religion, time, and nature. The dream landscape is now given an existence outside of Franz's consciousness in a setting beyond time and space:

где же? где все это было
где вращалась эта местность
солнце скажет: я забыло
опускаясь в неизвестность

Where? Where did all this happen?
Where did this terrain revolve
the sun will say I have forgotten
sinking into the unknown

The explanation is followed by the appearance of a magician, a "psychologist of godliness," who provides Franz with a vision of the moment of creation. It is frightening. Franz wakes up, but his perception has been altered. Now the objects surrounding him are real, but they appear strange and significant:

Франц проснулся сон зловещий
для чего здесь эти вещи?
тут как пальма стал слуга
сзади вечности луга
невысокий как тростник
спит на стуле воротник
керосиновая ветвь
озаряет полумрак
ты кудесник мне ответь
сон ли это? я дурак

Franz awakened oh ominous dream
what are these things doing here

here a servant stood like a palm
behind are meadows of eternity
small as a reed
the collar sleeps on a chair
the kerosene twig
lights the half-darkness
you magician answer me
is this a dream? I am a fool

The magician cannot answer because he belongs completely to the other world:

он сюда придти не может
где реальный мир стоит
он спокойно тени множит
и на небе не блестит

he cannot come here
where the real world stands
tranquilly he multiplies shadows
and doesn't shine in the sky

So Franz returns to his dream vision. It is unimportant now whether the vision is hallucinatory or actual. This time the location is the universe itself, and Franz senses his strength and ability to control:

я поеду по вселенной
на прекрасной этой конке
я земли военнопленный
со звездой устрою гонки

I will ride along the universe
on this wondrous carriage
earth's prisoner of war I
shall make a race with a star

Death appears:

между тем из острой ночи
из пучины злого сна
появляется веночек
и ветвистая коса

at the same time from the sharp night
from the desert of malicious sleep
appears a garland
and a bushy scythe

Franz addresses Death, noting in his unhappiness that it is

the source of these visions more profound than any others:

ты сердитая змея
смерть бездетная моя
здрасте скажет Франц в тоске
в каждом вашем волоске
больше мысли чем в горшке
больше сна чем в порошке

you angry serpent
my own childless death
hello Franz will say in grief
every lock of your hair
has more thought than a pot
more sleep than a powder

He submits to it, but reserves for himself a sort of immortality by creating a grandchild to take his place. Death is charmed by his innocence. Franz is victorious and remains forever in his intermediary, planetary kingdom:

смерть сказала ты цветок
и сбежала на восток
одинок остался Франц
созерцать протуберанц
мерять звезды звать цветы
составляя я и ты
лежа в полной тишине
на небесной высоте

death said you are a blossom
and fled to the east
Franz remained alone
to contemplate the solar prominence
measure stars hail flowers
putting together I and thou
lying in complete quiet
on the heavenly height

This short summary of "Chelovek veselyi Frants" makes clear a number of characteristics common to the fantastic journeys. First of all, they are structurally loose, with the narrative moving constantly forward. The ending may entail a reiteration of the opening lines, but aside from this, there is no looking back. As in all of the works of this period, there is a certain tension operating between chance and premeditation. In some of them (*Krugom vozmozhno Bog*), the inter-

nal coherence is unusually strong, and even chance or humorous items fall into a pre-established pattern; in others, mostly weaker ("Bol'noi kotoryi stal volnoi") there is the impression that chance and the vagaries of rhyme are responsible for a good deal. The difference is to a large extent chronological. In the works of 1929-30, Vvedenskii is moving toward a cohesive system of image-ideas. By *Krugom vozmozhno Bog*, the thematic focus is much sharper, and the exuberant freedom of the earlier works has given way to distinct internal cross-referencing.

Like "Chelovek veselyi Frants," the fantastic journeys involve a vision and an experiencer. The experiencer may be a character, or it may be a more fluid "I-we." The visions themselves are vivid, hallucinatory, and as much active as visual: it is because of this strong participatory quality that they can be called journeys. Frequently they involve huge carnival scenes. In "Znachenie moria," the observers are witness to a feast of geological features and inanimate objects; then they themselves fall to the bottom of the sea, emerge from it and leave. *Krugom vozmozhno Bog* concerns the wanderings of a certain Fomin following his execution.[10] Among other things, he takes part in a wild party and a duel. The vision-journeys may be associated with the power of the creative imagination ("Zerkalo i muzykant") or the altered states of perception due to dying or sickness ("Chelovek veselyi Frants," "Bol'noi kotoryi stal volnoi"). They may be purely mental in origin, as in "Zerkalo i muzykant" (The mirror and the musician):

> Иван Иванович: А ты их посетил?
> Музыкант Прокофьев: А как же? Посещал не раз, положим мысленно...[11]
>
> Ivan Ivanovich: And have you visited them?
> Musician Prokofiev: Of course I've been there more than once.
> Let's say in thought...

but by no means all the time. In *Krugom vozmozhno Bog*, for example, Vvedenskii is describing not only an altered state of perception due to death, but the actual topsy-turvy world of the dead.

The dramatic dialogues are structurally much closer to plays -- to dramatic sketches that are all talk and no action. They are philosophical dialogues, in which the propositions have a strong surrealistic air and develop according to their own logic. They are organized as a series of statements made by various voices. The voices are not necessarily connected to bodies, and the location of the discussion is abstract -- most frequently a "world's pavilion" visited by the confused souls of the newly dead. Before discussing this further, it is worthwhile to look at one of these sketches in greater detail.

"Fact, teoriia i Bog"[12] opens with a speech by "Fact." Solemn in tone and fairly lengthy, it is essentially the recitation of a journey-vision. On that day, Fact reports, he was sucked up by eternity:

> и в этот день меня манил
> магнит малюток и могил
> я утром встал
> я сел на ленту
> цвела листва
> я поклонился монументу
> и тихо вышел за дрова
>
> and on that day I was beckoned
> by the magnet of infants and graves
> in the morning I got up
> sat on a ribbon
> the leaves flowered
> I bowed to the monument
> and quietly went behind wood

There was a dream, a confusion of time and space:

> был сон приятным
> шло число
> я вижу ночь идет обратно
> я вижу люди понесло
> моря монеты и могилу
> мычанье лебедя и силу

the dream was pleasant
the date turned
I see night going backwards
people I see carried away
seas coins and the grave
mooing swan and strength

and the attainment of knowledge:

я вижу все и говорю
и ничего не говорю
я все узнал. Я понимаю
я мысль из тела вынимаю
кладу на стол сию змею
ее ровесницу мою

I see everything and say
and say nothing
I found out everything. I understand
I remove a thought from my body
place this serpent on the table
it, my coeval

The opening speech is followed by a series of shorter interchanges between "question," "theory," and "answer." The subject is the value of religion to the dead, and the tone is light and ironical.

Вопрос: это поле люди
поле боевое
еду на верблюде
еду я и вою
вою боги
о звезде
где убогие?

Ответ: везде

Вопрос: что мы знаем о Боге
дети, люди, друзья?
мы с тобою на небе -
это ты, это я
Бог летит всемогущий
через райские кущи
сквозь пустые вершины
сквозь моря и машины

Теория: я сегодня скончался
ты скончался вчера
кто из нас причащался?

Ответ: три пера

Question: This field people
is a field of battle
I ride on a camel
ride and howl
howl gods
about the star
where are the downtrodden?

Answer: Everywhere

Question: What do we know about God
children, people, friends?
You and I are in the sky
this is you, this is me
Almighty God is flying
through the heavenly thickets
across the empty summits
across seas and cars

Theory: I passed away today
you passed away yesterday
which of us took communion?

Answer: Three feathers

The next entrants into the conversation are a running wolf and his soul. Thus split into two parts, like most of Vvedenskii's dead, they are having an understandable problem with their identity:

Бегущий волк: смешно: о чем тут разговор?
я мимо шел. Я вижу лес
я долго спал. Я вижу двор,
покойник, поле. Я залез
я подошел в тоске, дыша
какая скука - нет меня
под потолком сидит душа
как тетерев себя маня

Душа: иди сюда я
иди ко мне я
тяжело без тебя
как самому без себя
скажи мне я
который час?
скажи мне я
кто из нас?

Running wolf: It's funny: what's there to talk about?
I walked past. I see the forest.
I had a long sleep. I see a barnyard,
A corpse, a field. I crawled in.
I walked up, breathing in despair.
What a bore -- there's no me.
A soul sits beneath the ceiling
Beckoning to itself like a grouse

Soul: Come here, me
Come to me, me.
It's hard without you
Like a self without a my
Tell me, me
What time is it?
Tell me, me
Which one of us is me?

Fact, being factual, is able to enlighten them, at least in regard to their location:

ты сидишь в беседке мира
звездам и планетам брат

You are sitting in the world's pavilion
Brother to planets and stars.

The Russian "besedka" is more suggestive than the English "pavilion" or "gazebo." Its connotation is more specific: a place for conversation in an eighteenth-century garden. Vvedenskii's garden is the universe, and its inhabitants have more on their minds than idle talk. As another pair of speakers -- deceased White Russian officers -- expresses it:

мы есть мы
мы из тьмы
вы есть вы
где же львы?
мы рабы
сидим и плачем
и в гробы
грозою скачем

We are we
We are from the darkness
You are you
Where are the lions?
We are slaves
We sit and weep

And into our graves
Leap like thunder

When the officers have finished, Fact poses a question: what do we know about God and death?

однако ужасен таинственный факт
где это горы и где тот антракт
что знаем мы дети
о Боге и сне

But terrible is the mysterious fact
Where are these hills and that entr'acte
What do we know children
Of God and sleep

The answer is sardonic. Death is universal and religion is useless:

я был там. Я буду.
я тут и я там
малютку и будду
кому-то отдам

I was there. I will be.
I'm here and I'm there
The child and the Buddha
I'll give to someone or other

Fact concludes:

значительней не знал эпохи
конец и смерть родные блохи
осталось что
лежать и зреть
и на себя в кулак смотреть
осталось что
сидеть и гнить
из смерти чудом вырвав нить

I've never known a more significant epoch
The end and death are twin fleas
All that's left
Is to lie and ripen
Staring at yourself through your own fist
All that's left
Is to sit and rot
Miraculously pulling a thread out of death

and invites those present to the single event of the sketch,

an interview with God:

которые мертвые
которые нет
идите четвертые
в тот кабинет
здесь окончательно
Бог наступил
хмуро и тщательно
всех потопил

Бог /подымаясь/: садитесь
вы нынче мои гости

Вопрос: где мы?

Ответ: мы кости?

Dead
And nondead
Go Number Fours
Into that office
Here once and for all
God has set in
Gloomy and carefully
Has drowned everyone

God (standing up):
Take your seats
Today you are my guests

Question: We're where?

Answer: We're bones?

The oddest feature of these sketches is probably the nature of the speakers. Everything has a voice -- abstractions, mythical figures, geological features, people, and animals. The individual may be split into many voices, like the running wolf whose soul speaks out on its own, or Fomin in *Krugom vozmozhno Bog* who winds up in a dialogue with himself. It is interesting to note the continuance of this technique in Vvedenskii's later work. It makes a brief appearance in *Elka u Ivanovykh* (1938), where the corpse of Sonia Ostrova, left alone in the room, has an unexpected discussion with itself:

Голова: Тело ты все слышало?

Тело: Я голова ничего не слышало. У меня ушей нет. Но я все перечувствовало.

Head: Body, did yoy hear everything?
Body: I didn't hear anything. I don't have ears. But I sensed it all.[13]

In *Nekotoroe kolichestvo razgovorov* (1938-39), it is the major structural and thematic device.

At the same time as the individual is split into many voices, there is a loss of individual uniqueness among them. In the beginning of "Fact, teoriia i Bog," there is a clear distinction between the participants in the conversation, but this quickly becomes blurred. Of course, in "Fact, teoriia i Bog," most of the speakers are abstractions. In other sketches where this is not the case there is more of an attempt at characterization. A good example is "Sviatoi i ego podchinennye," where, despite the otherwordly location of the dialogue, the perception of the two speakers is closely tied to what they were:

и кругом в пустой беседке
вдруг заспорили соседки
о еде
о беде
о себе
и лебеде

Первая соседка: ты знаешь Маня
я вся вниманье
когда по крыше скачет вождь,
я думаю что это трус
я думаю что это дождь
я плачу и руками трусь
я думаю что это Русь
я думаю что это ветчина
и посторонняя картошка
и мне тарелка вручена
а в ней пустынная дорожка[14]

And all around in an empty pavilion
Suddenly the neighbors began arguing
About food
About misfortunes
About themselves
About goose-foot

First neighbor: You know, Mania
I'm all ears
When our leader hops around the roof
I think it's a coward
I think it's rain
I weep and rub myself
I think it's Russia
I think it's ham
And an alien potato
And I've been given a plate
With an empty path inside

In *Krugom vozmozhno Bog*, the various characters possess completely distinct personalities and desires. But even when the personalities are distinct, the concerns are identical. Vvedenskii's characters operate in a fascinating but narrowly defined arena, in which the speech and not the speaker is important. Thus the characters may revolve, drop in or drop out, but the discussion continues.

For all these early works, we can distinguish two opposing tendencies, one pushing toward the abstract and the other towards the concrete. The abstract sections -- they are never purely so -- are the bodiless dialogues in the pavillion. But the intrusion of remnants from the real world leads swiftly into absurdity. Included here are black humor sequences like the following love scene from *Krugom vozmozhno Bog* (it must be remembered that Fomin has has his head chopped off):

Софья Михайловна: Я как видите одна,
сижу изящно на столе.
Я вас люблю до дна,
достаньте пистолет.

Фомин: Вы меня одобряете. Это превосходно.
Вот как я счастлив.

Соф. Мих. Сергей, Иван и Владислав и Митя
покрепче меня обнимите.
Мне что-то страшно, я изящна,
но все-таки кругом все мрачно,
целуйте меня в щеки.

Фомин: Нет в туфлю. Нет в туфлю. Большего
не заслуживаю.
Святыня. Богиня. Богиня. Святыня.

Софья Михайловна: Разве я так божественна. Нос у меня курносый, глаза щелки. Дура я, дура.

Фомин: Что вы, любящему человеку, как мне, вы кажетесь лучше, чем на самом деле.

И ваши пышные штанишки
Я принимаю за крыло,
и ваши речи - это книжки
писателя Анатоля Франса.
Я в вас влюблен.

Соф. Мих. Фомин золотой. Лейка моя.[15]

Фомин ее целует и берет. Она ему конечно отдается. Возможно, что зарождается еще один человек.

Sofya Mikhailovna: As you see I am alone
Sitting elegantly on the table
I love you to the dregs
Get out your pistol.

Fomin: You approve of me. That's superb.
How happy I am.

S. M.: Sergei, Ivan, Vladislav, and Mitia
Hold me a little tighter
Somehow I'm frightened, I'm refined
But all around it's gloomy.
Kiss my cheeks.

Fomin: No, your shoe. Your shoe. I don't deserve more. Saint. Goddess. Goddess. Saint.

S. M.: Am I really so holy? I have a snub nose and tiny eyes. I'm a fool, a fool.

Fomin: What do you mean? To a person in love, like myself, you seem better than you really are.

I take your ample panties
For wings
And your words are books
By the author Anatole France
I am in love with you.

S. M.: Sweet Fomin. My little watering can.

Fomin kisses her and takes her. Of course she gives in to

him. Perhaps another human being is being conceived.

What we have been discussing in regard to both the fantastic journeys and the dramatic dialogues can be summarized as follows: no real actions, no real space, no real characters. Distortions of this sort are of course the product of a conscious effort, and to understand them it is helpful to turn to Vvedenskii's own declarations. The first of these is the Oberiu manifesto, which refers to a slightly earlier period. The manifesto, as we have seen, denies the necessity for "realism" and "logic" in art; it seeks purity and concreteness in an escape from emotional encumbrances. For the works of 1929-30, the general text of the manifesto is more relevant than the paragraph devoted to Vvedenskii in particular. Vvedenskii's intention, according to the manifesto, is the breakdown of actions and objects into separate pieces, a statement which can be taken as a metaphorical description of the works we are concerned with here. But the care the manifesto takes in distinguishing between the "appearance of nonsense" and real nonsense, which would be *zaum'*, points to works of an earlier period.

The theoretical commentary of Vvedenskii's Grey Notebook (1932-33) is of greater relevance both to these works and to those that will be taken up in succeeding chapters. In the Grey Notebook, Vvedenskii returns again and again to the absurdity of ordinary notions of time. By giving names to days and months, he writes, we turn quantity into quality and make time into an object -- a fiction which precludes even the most elemental understanding of its nature. Vvedenskii occasionally satirizes this objectivization of time, but most often he avoids it by choosing environments in which it is irrelevant. Another fiction he distinguishes in language is perpetrated by verbs, with their constant reference to tense. If sequential time is absurd, it follows that verbs in their ordinary usage are also absurd. Only in art, where logical

fictions can be ignored, can verbs exist meaningfully. "In my verse," writes Vvedenskii, "those actions which exist are illogical and useless; one could not call them actions." Time, space, and actions are plausible only at the instant of death. This is the single moment that time is perceptible or spatial, and the single act or occurence that has any significance:

> - Самоубийцы и убитые, у вас была такая секунда, а не час? - Да, секунда, ну две, ну три, а не час говорят они. - Но они были плотны и неизменны? Да, да.[16]
>
> Suicides and victims, did you have such a second, though not an hour? Yes, a second, maybe two, maybe three, but not an hour, they say.
> But they were dense and immutable? Yes, yes.

It is no accident that the thematic core of his work is centered here.

III

Death is beyond doubt Vvedenskii's central theme, and this is true not only for these early works, but for all of them. Essentially, it appears in three aspects: as absurdity, as perplexity, and as perception. Death as absurdity results from the persistence of ordinary behavior in the nether world; we have seen this in Fomin's love scene. Death as perplexity is the subject of "Fact, teoriia i Bog." But the most significant aspect of death is death as perception: death as the possibility of enlightenment.

In most of these pieces, the possibility remains unfulfilled or only partially so, and the disappointment is bitter. This aspect of death can be seen in two of Vvedenskii's best works of this period, "Znachenie moria" and its companion piece "Konchina moria."[17] "Znachenie moria" begins with a desire for knowledge that leads to a symbolic rehearsal of death and rebirth:

чтобы было все понятно

надо жить начать обратно
и ходить гулять в леса
обрывая волоса
а когда огонь узнаешь
или в лампе или в печке
то скажи чего зияешь
ты огонь владыка свечки
что ты значишь или нет
где котел где кабинет
вьются демоны как мухи
над кусочком пирога
показали эти духи
руки ноги и рога
звери сочные воюют
лампы корчатся во сне
дети молча в трубку дуют
бабы плачут на сосне
и стоит универсальный
бог на кладбище небес
конь шагает идеальный
наконец приходит лес

To have everything clear
You have to begin living backwards
And go strolling in the forest
Tearing out your hair
And when you recognize the fire
In the lamp or on the hearth
Then say what's the gaping for
You fire sovereign of the candle
What's your meaning and what is not
Where's the cauldron where's the study
Demons whirl like flies
Over a piece of pie
These spirits showed
Arms legs and horns
Succulent beasts howl
Lamps contort in sleep
Children silently blow into their hoses
Females weep on a pine
And there stands the universal
God on the heavens' graveyard
The ideal steed stalks by
And finally comes the forest

There is a great elemental feast, with everything present participating:

здесь всеобщее веселье
это сразу я сказал
то рождение ущелья

или свадьба этих скал

Here's a general gaiety
I said that right away
It's the canyon's birth
Or the wedding of these cliffs

There is a feeling of dislocation and exhiliration:

и взлетали мысли наши
меж растений завитых
наши мысли наши лодки
наши боги наши тетки
наши души наша твердь
наши чашки в чашках смерть

And our thoughts took flight
Amid the curly growth
Our thoughts our boats
Our gods our aunts
Our souls our firmament
Our cups and in the cups -- death

But the poet and his companions are not satisfied; they desire something more meaningful, and so they are thrown to the bottom of the sea:

но сказали мы однако
смысла нет в таком дожде
мы как соли просим знака
знак играет на воде
холмы мудрые бросают
всех пирующих в ручей
в речке рюмки вырастают
в речке родина ночей

However we said
There's no sense in such a rain
We want a sign like salt
The sign plays on the water
Wise hills cast
All the celebrants into a brook
In the brook grow shot glasses
In the brook the homeland of nights

Here they arrive at an initial level of understanding, that the sea, time, and dream (death) are one:

море время сон одно
скажем падая на дно

Sea time dream are one
We will say falling to the bottom

This sense of universality is attained by several of Vvedenskii's seekers. It is connected with the dissolution of individuality after death, and it is one of the reasons for Vvedenskii's equation of objects, thoughts, and beings. But in "Znachenie moria," it is insufficient. After a while, the poet and his companions become dissatisfied, reject the vision and leave the sea:

кто сказал морское дно
и моя нога одно
в общем все тут недовольны
молча вышли из воды

Who said the bottom of the sea
And my leg are one
Well, everyone, dissatisfied
Silently came out of the water

The poet is satisfied with a reunion with the ordinary world:

это ваза это ловко
это свечка это снег
это соль и мышеловка
для веселья и для нег

This is a vase that's well done
This is a candle this is snow
This is salt and a mousetrap
For merriment and langour

He sticks out his tongue at God and is clearly pleased to have gotten back his equilibrium:

здравствуй бог универсальный
я стою немного сальный
волю память и весло
слава небу унесло

Hello universal god
Here I stand a little smutty
Will memory and the oar
Thank heaven have been carried away

The disillusionment in "Konchina moria" is much stronger. Here Vvedenskii plays off on the idea of the similarity

between the world after death and real life. The sea, declares the sea demon in the opening speech, is also ordinary and meaningless; there is no reason to hurry there:

и море ничего не значит
и море тоже круглый нуль
и человек напрасно скачет
в пучину от ножа и пуль
и в море так же ходят рыбки
собаки бегают играют скрипки
и водоросли спят как тетки
и будто блохи скачут лодки
и в море так же мало смысла
оно покорно тем же числам
оно пустынно и темно
быть может море ты окно?
быть может море ты одно?

The sea also means nothing
The sea is also a perfect zero
And man leaps in vain
Into the abyss from knife and bullets
In the sea fish also swim
Dogs run violins play
And seaweed sleeps like aunts
Boats skip like fleas
In the sea there's also little sense
It submits to the same numbers
It is deserted and dark
Perhaps sea you are a window?
Perhaps sea you are alone?

The speakers in "Konchina moria" are suicides who expected revelation after death, and found only a parody of their former world. The most bitterly disappointed is the hunter, who knew nature in all its profundity. In Vvedenskii's terms, he is a figure who exchanges the mute, senseless wisdom of nature for the enticements of knowledge after death, and he loses:

я сам ходил в леса по пояс
я изучал зверей науку
бывало крепкой водкой моясь
испытывал я смерть и скуку
передо мной вращались звери
разнообразные сырые
но я закрыл лесные двери
чтобы найти миры вторые

вот я стою на этих скалах

I myself walked in the forests to my waist
And learned the science of beasts
Sometimes washing with strong vodka
I felt death and torment
Before me beasts revolved
Varied, raw
But I closed the forest doors
To find other worlds
Here I stand now on these cliffs.

For the high official, the disappointment is more ironic:

вот перед вами я
пучина милая моя
я вижу здесь еще людишки
хотят купить на дне домишки
чтоб в этих домиках морских
с русалками обедать

Here I stand before you
My dear abyss
I see here people even now
Want to buy their houses in the deep
So that in these sea houses
They can have supper with mermaids

The piece ends in hopelessness. The suicides gather at a feast and ask the sea to do something for them. But the sea is empty and incapable:

Море:	я не могу
Морской демон:	а что я говорил
Сановник:	я думаю я плачу
Море:	я так же ничего не значу

Sea:	I can't
Sea demon:	What did I tell you
High Official:	I think I'm crying
Sea:	I don't mean anything either

The negation of the vision frequently involves the rejection of God. In fact, the appearance of God in these pieces is almost always associated with a particularly virulent sarcasm. But on close glance, it is not the possibility of God that is the object of Vvedenskii's satire so much as the God of traditional belief. This is certainly the case in

the end of "Fact, teoriia i Bog," where God, somewhere in between a natural force and a committee chairman, only adds to the confusion. In the ending of "Sviatoi i ego podchinennye," the parody is even more obvious. God lives on a hill, and good pilgrims can get there. He gives orders, and his followers, full of idiotic delight, do as told:

Люди: ура, ура
видна гора
мы пришли
это Бог

Бог /громко/: исчезни
Святой /исчезая/:
слава Богу
Бог: исчезните
Все /исчезая/: слава Богу[18]

People: Hurray, hurray
There's the hill
We've arrived
That's God
God /loudly/: Disappear
Saint /disappearing/:
Thank God
God: Disappear
Everyone /disappearing/:
Thank God

It is clear, therefore, that the success of these searches is to a great extent dependent on the seeker -- on whether or not the right questions are asked. Fomin, of *Krugom vozmozhno Bog*, is faced with the same dilemma as the suicides in "Konchina moria": the persistence of earthly patterns in the world after death. But in this case he is able to go beyond them. "I didn't die so that it would all start in again," he says to Venus, rejecting her advances. He comes to the conclusion that man is not the center of the universe. Everything is not created for his benefit. Meaning in nature exists, but it is apart from man and not necessarily comprehensible to him:

Если мы заводим разговоры,
вы дураки должны их понимать.

Господа, господа,
а вот перед вами течет вода,
она рисует сама по себе.[19]

If we start conversations
You fools have to understand them
Gentlemen, gentlemen
Here water is flowing before you
It makes designs on its own.

For Fomin and for Vvedenskii, true understanding is beyond logic. When reading Vvedenskii, one must distinguish between two forms of absurdity: one which is clearly parodic, and the other which reflects mysteries. It is the existence of the second that Fomin comes to accept. When he does so, an odd thing happens: his world, and all the earthly remnants in it, go up in flames. This is the transformation ("prevrashchenie") that Fomin is able to understand and welcome. He is told:

Тема этого событья
Бог посетивший предметы

The theme of this event
Is God visiting objects

and responds: Понятно.

I see.

Then he has a final vision:

Фомин лежащий посинел
и двухоконною рукой
молиться начал. Быть может только Бог.
Легло пространство вдалеке.
Полет орла струился над рекой.
Держал орел икону в кулаке.
На ней был Бог.
Возможно, что земля пуста от сна,
худа, тесна.
Возможно мы виновники, нам страшно.
И ты орел аэроплан
сверкнешь стрелою в океан
или коптящей свечкой
рухнешь в речку.
Горит бессмыслицы звезда
она одна без дна.

Вбегает мертвый господин
и молча удаляет время.

Fomin, lying, turned blue
And with a doublewindowed hand
Began to pray. Only God may be.
Space lay down in the distance.
The eagle's flight streamed above the river.
The eagle held an icon in its fist.
On it was God.
Perhaps the earth is empty from sleep
Thin, cramped.
Perhaps we are the culprits, we are frightened.
And you eagle-airplane
Will glint like an arrow into the ocean
Or like a smoking candle
Will crash into the river.
The star of absurdity glows
It alone is without end.
In runs a dead gentleman
And silently removes time.

His conclusion is that God must exist. But it is a God at home with absurdity, a God in harmony with the "zvezda bessmyslitsy" -- the absurd star which reflects a meaning incomprehensible to man.

Chapter VII
VVEDENSKII: TRAVESTIES AND IMPENETRABLE TRUTHS

Vvedenskii's later works oscillate between two extremes: the rejection of bourgeois patterns and values, and the recognition of a truth which has the appearance of absurdity. His development in this direction was evident in the works of 1929 and 1930, particularly in *Krugom vozmozhno Bog*. But the focus is sharpest in the two late works that form the subject of this chapter, *Nekotoroe kolichestvo razgovorov* (A Certain Quantity of Conversations, 1936-38) and *Elka u Ivanovykh* (Christmas at the Ivanovs', 1938).[1] The two themes are weighted differently in the two works: *Elka* is more parodic, and the conversations, despite their satire, skirt the evocation of a mystery.

The shift to a consideration of two late pieces allows us to see something of Vvedenskii's evolution over ten years. Stylistically, the most striking change is Vvedenskii's tight control over his text. He has become a master of several styles, each used with precision and appropriateness. *Elka* and *Nekotoroe kolichestvo razgovorov* are plays (in terms of structure, *Elka* is by far the more conventional of the two). They are written primarily in prose, with some, for the most part satirical, excursions into verse. Nonsense verse is used rarely and always for a defined end. Extreme attention is paid to the interrelationship of language and subject. In discussing Vvedenskii's early works, we noted a tension between a tendency toward abstraction (a dialogue without personalities and with minimal setting) and concretization (distinct characters, lots of objects, and exuberant images). *Nekotoroe kolichestvo razgovorov* clearly derives from the first of these. It concerns three characters, indistinguishable as three mimes in a theater, who are shown in ten hypothetical situations. *Elka*, on the contrary, is a pure travesty, historically set. The atmosphere is similar to the one Ionesco will use in his early plays -- a scene which pretends to realism though the actual events may be irregular to say the least.

Nekotoroe kolichestvo razgovorov

"A Certain Quantity of Conversations" is subtitled "a thoroughly reworked themebook," an allusion to a child's set of compositions. There are ten themes, or conversations, each of which involves a different dramatic situation. There are three speakers. In most of the conversations the speakers are alone. They are purposely indistinguishable from one another, though their collective personality may vary according to the situation: in the sixth conversation, for example, they dispassionately go through the motions of suicide and in the eighth they re-emerge as bawdy merchants in a bathhouse. They do not have names, but are referred to as "first," "second," and "third." When, in the "conversation about cards," one of the speakers suddenly acquires a name, the attempt at an identity seems ludicrous. The relationship between the name and the speaker is absolutely minimal.

Vvedenskii's characters are deprived not only of names, but of the ability to conceal the essence of what they are doing. They cannot hide behind the complexity of individual psychology or the uniqueness of surrounding events. Moreover, they lack certain social or linguistic conveniences that make our world familiar. "A gde zhe nashi, tot, chto byl devushkoi, i tot, chto byl zhenshchinoi" (And where is the one that was a girl and the other one that was a woman?) asks one of the card players, referring to a pair of past companions. Everything they do is reduced to its essentials, and nothing is concealed. Their only refuge is the fact that their behavior, like all human behavior, is fundamentally a mystery. The characters operate in the purest, most stripped-down of all Vvedenskii's worlds. There is a feeling of isolation and enclosure made explicit in the third conversation with its door that is "shut tight." There are few acts, and those that do take place are extended through repetition or intentionally slow description. The language, similarly, is bare and repetitious; sentences

are sometimes incomplete. "Respect the poverty of language," the author advises in the first conversation, "Respect impoverished thoughts." He is uncovering behavior in its purest possible form. When the language suddenly becomes complex -- turns into parodies of verse or bureaucratic speech -- it is always significant.

The construction of the conversations is basically circular. Most of them end the way they begin; the last conversation sends us back to the first one. There is a paradox inherent here, since anything that occurs is subsequently canceled out. Though it seems that the characters are acting, Vvedenskii makes it clear that they are only talking about acting. And to reduce it even further, we know from the beginning that they are not really talking at all, but merely exchanging thoughts. The conversations are in fact silent, and nothing is happening in them.

The first conversation is set at the entrance to a madhouse. The madhouse proprietor, "looking out his dilapidated window as though into a mirror," invites the three speakers to come in. They are sitting in a carriage and exchanging thoughts:

First: I know a madhouse. I have seen a madhouse.

Second: What are you saying? I know nothing. What does it look like?

Third: Does it look? Who has seen the madhouse?

First: What's in it? Who lives in it?

Second: Birds don't live there. Clocks run there.

The fact that there are no birds is significant for Vvedenskii, indicative of a bare world without comfort or beauty. But the clocks are going: in other words, there is time here, and death. The realization is frightening. "Nas ostalos' nemnogo, i nam ostalos' nedolgo" (We are running low, and time is running out), says the third speaker, and his companion echoes him in a different mode:

Лисицы бегают у нас,
Они пронзительно пищат.
Все это временно у нас,
Цветы вокруг трещат.

Here the foxes run about
Piercingly squeaking.
Everything is temporary.
Flowers are cracking.

That anxiety is expressed in light verse should hardly come as a surprise -- they are after all in a madhouse.

Alternating with the unfolding subject are certain elements which form a commentary on it, or indicate the parameters within which the action must be understood. Some of these serve to emphasize the fundamental paradox of the piece, the fact that nothing is really going on, and for this reason are particularly important in this first, introductory conversation:

> Проходит вечер. Никаких изменений не случается.
> Evening passes by. No changes come about.
>
> Уважай обстоятельства места. Уважай то что случается. Но ничего не происходит.
> Respect the particulars of the place. Respect what is going on. But nothing is happening.

Hidden in this commentary is a hint -- inexplicit without knowledge of how the conversations conclude -- of the way in which they were written:

> First: Write neatly. Write dully.Write richly. Write ringingly.
>
> Second: All right, that's what we'll do.

The first conversation is introductory in theme as well as theory. The madhouse, with its beckoning proprietor, is in some sense a metaphor for the conversations as a whole. The first speaker's poem begins:

Входите в сумасшедший дом
Мои друзья, мои князья.
Он радостно ждет нас.
Мы радостно ждем нас.

Enter the madhouse
My friends, my princes.
It awaits us joyously
We await us joyously.

The madhouse is inside us; we are invited to enter and have a look.

The next few conversations explore the dimensions of the madhouse. The second conversation is "about the death of poetry"; it is written in verse and portrays a bizarre recital in which the poet, singing about the death of poetry, eventually drops dead himself. The third conversation, "about remembering an event," concerns the futility of human communication and the impossibility of ascertaining the most trivial of truths. Two speakers, locked in a room, are trying to pinpoint the genesis of their quarrel, but the burden of language proves overwhelming and they ascertain nothing. The fourth conversation is "about cards." Once again there is an act that is all process and no conclusion: a protracted build-up that peters out precisely at the moment that it should reach a climax. The conversation shows three speakers talking about how much they love to play cards. The problem is that they never get around to playing -- in the end they decide that it is very late and they all go home. The next conversation, "about running around a room," takes up the futility of trying to make sense out of one's surroundings. In the first section, the speakers are running around the room and trying at the same time to figure out why they are doing it. We see them next in a garden, then on a mountain top, then at the seashore, and finally back in the room where they decide to commit suicide. Art is meaningless, philosophy is meaningless, life is a banal delusion: suicide is the only way out.

The focus of the first five conversations is to a large extent on language itself and its limits as a medium of communication. The focus is sharpest in the conversation "about remembering an event," in which certain conventions of ordinary language are overstrained to the point at which they no

longer function. The conversation is a triple trap: a picture within a picture within a picture. The characters are having a discussion (first picture) in which they are reiterating a quarrel that they had some time before (second picture) about whether or not they had met on the day before the quarrel took place (second past, third picture). The subject of the quarrel is not equal to its elaborate development and both come across as absurd. Since the content of the quarrel (past) and conversation (present) are precisely the same, verbal tense also comes across as meaningless. This is the way the conversation begins (note the frame, which stresses continuous events without ends):

> First: Let us recall the beginning of our argument. I said that yesterday I was at your place, and you said that yesterday I wasn't at your place. To prove my point, I said that yesterday I was talking with you, and to prove your point you said that yesterday I wasn't talking with you.
>
> Each of them was solemnly stroking his cat. Outside it was evening. A candle was burning in the window. Music played.
>
> First: Then I said: How could that be, when you were sitting here at place A, and I was standing here at place B. Then you said, No, what do you mean you weren't sitting here at point A and I wasn't standing here at point B. In order to increase the strength of my argument, in order to make it very, very powerful, I felt at once sadness and joy and tears and said: But there were two of us here yesterday, on these two adjacent points, point A and point B, can't you understand!
>
> Two men were sitting in a room. They were talking.

Empty language of this sort reflects Vvedenskii's views that the logical conventions of language are absurd. Most absurd for him is the part of language that is tied to time, and so, in this conversation, it is verbal tense that bears the brunt of the parody. In a broader sense, the separation of language from its function links Vvedenskii to many later

writers of the absurd. The Revzins' well-known study of non-communication in Ionesco's *Bald Soprano* is relevant in many ways.[2] Like Ionesco's play, the conversation "about remembering an event" can be analyzed as a violation of various requirements for a normal act of communication. Two of the violations are the most flagrant: that the sender must inform the receiver about something new, and that a common memory must result in some reduction in detail. Vvedenskii's speakers are not in the business of providing any new information, and despite the presence of an identical memory, everything is presented in the same detail as the time before.

The separation of language and event frequently results in a comic incongruity between the two. A hint of this can be seen toward the end of the quote just given, when the speakers begin to get upset. The language remains as bureaucratically precise as ever, but it takes on a note of incongruous emotionality. A broader use of the device comes in the conversation about cards. The speakers here are nonentities and their talk consists almost exclusively of cliches. The divisive note comes in the emotional fervor present in the words but completely absent in their wooden intonation:

> "Come on, let's play cards," the Second cried out anyway that evening.
> "I like to play cards." Said Sandonetskii,alias the Third.
> "They enliven my soul." Said the First.
> "And where is the one that was a girl and the other that was a woman?" asked the Second.
> "Oh, don't ask, they're dying." Said the Third, alias Sandonetskii."Let's play cards."
> "Cards are a fine thing." Said the First.
> "I love to play cards." Said the Second.
> "They excite me. I grow beside myself." Said Sandonetskii.Alias the Third.
> "Yes, when you die, you won't be playing cards any more." Said the First. "So let's play cards now."
> "Why such gloomy thoughts?" Said the Second."I love to play cards."
> "I'm also optimistic." Said the Third. "And I love to play too."

The clash of content and expression comes in a number of stylistic and syntactic irregularities. Colloquial expressions of emotion are undermined by stiff word order ("oni mne veseliat dushu") or deflated by a contrasting context ("cried out anyway," "therefore, let's play cards"). The impassive tone in which these passions are presented is suggested by the deadpan punctuation, and perhaps even more strongly by the awkward sentence divisions. By the time the reader hits completely regular expressions like "I'm also optimistic," the context has taken over.

Given the emphasis on the banality and meaninglessness of life that pervades the first five conversations, it is not surprising that in the sixth conversation we find the three speakers sitting on a roof committing suicide. Here the reader's expectations are jolted because the painstaking preparations for the suicide don't fail us, and the characters actually do as planned. The first one hangs himself, the second one shoots himself, and the third one jumps into the water and drowns. But things are not that simple. We remember from the first conversation that the speakers are doing nothing more than "exchanging thoughts" and indeed, each section of conversation is framed by a contradictory suggestion of total calm:

> They were sitting on the roof in complete tranquility. Sparrows were flying overhead.
>
> First: I am jumping from the stool. The rope is on my neck.
> Second: I am pressing the trigger. The bullet is in the barrel.
> Third: I have jumped into the water. The water is inside me.
> First: The loop is tightening. I am gasping.
> Second: The bullet has entered me. I've lost everything.
> Third: Water has filled me. I am choking.
>
> They were sitting on the roof in complete tranquility. Sparrows were flying overhead.

Here, as elsewhere in Vvedenskii, the boundary from life

to death is easily passed. The next two conversations take place in the world of the dead, where everything is brighter and wilder. In the seventh conversation, the three speakers are rowing across the River Styx, exchanging oars so swiftly, so continuously, that "their wondrous hands cannot be seen." The exchange of oars is a metaphor for the swift repartee of their conversation, which has abandoned flat prose for plays of sound and rhyme:

> Первый: Зажги же.
> Второй: Зажигай, зажигай же.
> Третий: Совсем как в Париже.
> Первый: Тут не Китай же.
> Второй: Неужто мы едем.
> Третий: В далекую Лету.
> Первый: Без злата без меди.
> Второй: Доедем мы к лету.
> Третий: Стриги.
> Первый: Беги.
> Второй: Ни эги.
>
> First: Light it, light it.
> Second: Lighter, lighter;
> Third: Just like Paris.
> First: It's no China.
> Second: Are we really going.
> Third: To far away Lethe.
> First: Without copper or gold;
> Second: Will we ever reach Lethe.
> Third: Cut.
> First: Flight.
> Second: Dark night.

The eighth conversation takes place in purgatory, here presented as a bathhouse. Two of the speakers are in mufti as merchants/bathers ("dva kuptsa kupaiutsia"). Like poor dumb beasts, they have only the dimmest awareness of what is happening. Deposited in the women's division (the men's being out of water), they stare at a series of fellow bathers in incomprehension:

> How oddly you are built. You almost don't resemble us at all. Your chest is not what it should be, and between the legs there is an essential difference.

The third speaker is the bathhouse attendant. Perched in god-like isolation beneath the ceiling, he delivers soliloquys in a style that might be described as solemn Oberiu:

Однообразен мой обычай:
Сижу как сыч под потолком,
И дым предбанный,
Воздух бычий,
Стоит над каждым котелком.

My habits are dull.
I sit like an owl beneath the ceiling
And the bathhouse steam
The ox-like air
Hangs above every bowler hat.

But all is not as it appears. The attendant, unhappy with his lot, is contemplating suicide (!):

Смотрю удачно крюк привинчен.
Оружье есть. Петлю отрежь.
Пускай купаются красавицы,
Мне все равно они не нравятся.

I see a hook in a good place.
I'm armed. Go cut the noose.
Let all the beauties bathe before me.
I know they'll never cease to bore me.

And the merchants, of course, are not merchants at all. There has been a hint of this earlier, in the author's explanation that followed the suicide of conversation six. "Why should we continue," he asks, "when everyone has died?" The answer is that the humanity of the speakers is a masquerade. *They* are not riding in a carriage, *they* are not arguing, *they* are not sitting on the roof. Perhaps three lions, three tapirs, three storks, three letters." Now, in conversation eight, the bathhouse attendant forsakes his place on the ceiling and makes the same discovery:

Bathhouse attendant: It turns out that you're predators.
Two merchants: What kind of predators?
Bathhouse attendant: Lions, or tapirs, or storks. Maybe even kites.
Two merchants: Bathhouse attendant, you are perceptive.

Bathhouse attendant: I sure am.
Two merchants: Bathhouse attendant, you are perceptive.
Bathhouse attendant: I sure am.

The two merchants make a fleeting appearance at the end of the ninth, "penultimate conversation with the title 'one man and war.'" The three speakers, who have been contemplating war and its destruction, think they see the merchants and are seized with the desire to ask them something. But the merchants are only a vision and disappear, clearing the stage for the final conversation.

The last conversation is an explanation for the entire piece. The three speakers, now the single voice of the author, describe his walk:

Первый: Я из дому вышел и далеко пошел.
Второй: Ясно, что я пошел по дороге.
Третий: Дорога, дорога, она была обсажена.
Первый: Она была обсажена дубовыми деревьями.
Второй: Деревья те шумели листьями.
Третий: Я сел под листьями и задумался.
Первый: Задумался о том.
Второй: О своем условно прочном существовании.
Третий: Ничего я не мог понять.
Первый: Тут я встал и опять далеко пошел.

First: I left my house and walked a long way.
Second: Of course I walked along the road.
Third: The road, the road it was lined
First: It was lined with oak trees.
Second: These trees rustled their leaves.
Third: I sat beneath the leaves and lapsed into thought.
First: I thought about
Second: About my own tenuously firm existence.
Third: I couldn't understand anything.
First: Then I stood up and again walked a long way.

The language of the conversation is poetry that has lost its terseness. There are no images requiring the reader to make metaphorical jumps: all the steps in thinking are given through the connective words that most poetry seeks to contract. Here they reflect the instruction to "respect the poverty of language, respect impoverished thought" with which

the conversations began.

In the course of the author's walk -- which took place, of course, in thought only -- the subjects of the conversations are repeated: "I thought about / About the carriage, about the bathhouse attendant, about verses and about actions." The new element is not in these themes, but in the refrain which forms the poem's concluding lines:

> Third: I couldn't understand anything.
> First: Then I stood up and once again walked a long way.

The conversations end with a confession of bewilderment and a promise of continuation.

Elka u Ivanovykh

At first glance, *Christmas at the Ivanovs'* seems to be an oddity among Vvedenskii's works: a conventional play. In fact it is a play on convention -- the spiritual emptiness of ordinary life -- and the genre is a deceptively normal, slightly parodic entrance into a perversely exaggerated world. The concerns and some of the devices are similar to those we have encountered in the conversations, but everything appears in an altered light.

The world of *Elka* is physically real in the sense that it is filled with personalities and objects, takes place in ordinary surroundings, and doesn't speculate about an afterlife. It is even given a precise historical setting -- the 1890's. Beyond this, of course, the events are utterly irregular. Like Kharms, Vvedenskii chooses selectively which laws of human existence he is to violate, and in describing them retains a completely deadpan tone. The result is a series of outrageous events which unfold in logical order and are accepted by the characters as normal.

The play opens with a scene in a bathtub, in which seven children, ranging in age from one to eighty-two, are being washed by their nurse. As in the conversations -- and much of

Kharms -- the motivating element is the situation itself. The idea of the bathtub and the overage children is unusually rich in possibilities, and contains the entire motivation for the future development of the play. What happens, briefly, is this: It is the night before Christmas. Sonia Ostrova, an outspoken child of thirty-two, makes one sexual innuendo too many and the nurse chops her head off with an axe. The parents come home and, while protesting their tremendous sorrow, decide to have the Christmas party anyway. The nurse is hauled off to the police station and finally to court. The Christmas party takes place, but it's not very jolly because everybody drops dead. Other characters whom we will meet in the analysis include Fedia, the nurse's fiance, some woodcutters chopping down the Christmas tree, a group of wild animals, and the family dog, Vera.

Like all of Vvedenskii's works, *Elka* is concerned with time, death, and nature, but here they appear in their most philistine aspects. The first indication that we have fallen into utterly unspiritual surroundings occurs in Vvedenskii's very literary stage directions:

> A bathtub. It is Christmas Eve, so children are having a bath. There is also a chest of drawers. To the right of the door, cooks are slaughtering chickens and slaughtering suckling pigs. Nurses, nurses, nurses are washing the children. All the children are sitting in one big bathtub, but Petia Perov, the 1-year-old boy, is having his bath in a basin which is directly in front of the door. A clock hangs on the wall to the left of the door. It shows 9:00 p.m.

The vision of bourgeois excess is immediately associated with philistine apprehension of time and nature. The clock shows nine o'clock, inferring a most limited understanding of time. From this point on, every scene will open and close with a reference to the clock and the careful progression of sequential time. The natural world appears on a similar level. In the opening (and conclusion) of the first scene, a group of cooks are slaughtering chickens and pigs. A similar event

occurs farther on: in a pang of conscience following a bout of lovemaking in the presence of her daughter's corpse, the mother cries out, "Oh Lord, our daughter died and here we are acting like animals." The perversion becomes all the more evident following a brief interlude in the forest, where a group of wild animals (including a piglet whose barnyard cousins were being slaughtered at the opening of the play) are engaged in a tranquil, poetic discussion of time and death:

> (Animals come out. A giraffe, a wonderful animal; a wolf, a beaver-like animal; a lion, the king; and the porky suckling pig.)
>
> Giraffe: The clock is going.
> Wolf: Like a herd of sheep.
> Lion: Like a herd of bulls.
> Porkish Suckling Pig:
> Like sturgeon gristle.
> Giraffe: The stars shine.
> Wolf: Like the blood of sheep.
> Lion: Like the blood of bulls.
> Piglet: Like the milk of a wet nurse.
> Giraffe: Rivers flow.
> Wolf: Like the words of sheep.
> Lion: Like the words of bulls.
> Piglet: Like the goddess salmon.
> Giraffe: Where is our death?
> Wolf: In the souls of sheep.
> Lion: In the souls of bulls.
> Piglet: In the spacious vessels.
> Giraffe: Thank you. The lesson is finished.
>
> (The animals -- the giraffe, the wonderful animal; the wolf, the beaver-like animal; the lion, the king; the piglet, just as he is in real life -- exeunt. The forest remains alone. . . .)

Death is a commonplace in this world, much as it was in the "conversation about cards." The characters are constantly aware of it as a possibility, and though they are made anxious by it, it is rarely a spiritual anxiety. The play opens with the comments of the one-year-old Petia Perov:

> Petia Perov, 1-year-old boy: Will there be Christmas? Yes, there will be. And then suddenly there won't be. Suddenly I shall die.

This comparatively elevated (and accurate) beginning is followed by a general discussion of sex, and the next time death is mentioned (and quickly dismissed) the context is much different:

> Misha Pestrov, 76-year-old boy: Children, stop fighting. At this rate you won't even live to see Christmas. And our parents have bought candles, candy, and matches to light the candles with.
> Sonia Ostrova, 32-year-old girl: I don't need candles. I have a finger.

In the contrasting reactions of Petia Perov and his older brother and sister we have a hint of something which is fundamental to the world view of the play: the existence of a hierarchy of understanding. The highest level is the profound absurdity of the wild animals, and it is unattainable by people. Thus, the woodcutters have absorbed the absurdity of the forest without its purity and vision: they come across as half-wits:

> Woodcutter: A fruit.
> Second Woodcutter: Jaundice.
> Third Woodcutter: Suspenders.

The patients in the insane asylum attain the same level through madness:

> (Patients sail away out of the room in a boat, pushing themselves along the floor with oars.)
>
> Doctor: Good morning patients, where are you going?
> Lunatics: To pick berries, to pick mushrooms.
> Doctor: Oh, I see.

All the other people (and the dog Vera) speak with a semblance of logic and thus remain outside the full circle of wisdom to idiocy. They fall into several groups. The nurse, her fiance Fiodor (and the dog Vera) are simple but emotionally honest; they react logically if banally and are almost -- but not quite -- aware enough to be observers. The dog Vera speaks in verse and understands a lot:

Я хожу вокруг гроба.
Я гляжу вокруг в оба.
Эта смерть - это проба.

I circle the bier
Looking far looking near
This death, it's a test.

but her animal wisdom is limited, presumably by her domesticity, and so her mourning for Sonia is marred by confessions that she "has a taste for ham." Like Fiodor and the nurse (and at times the mother and father), she speaks in banalities -- in fact, it is not even necessary for her to complete her statements:

Эта Соня несчастная Острова была безнравственна.
Но я ее.
This wretched Sonia Ostrova was immoral. But I.

Дайте мне стакан воды. Мне слишком.
Give me a glass of water. I can't.

The nurse operates on a similar level. She is the all too normal victim, an ordinary relic from a rational age. She reacts to her crime with appropriate feelings of moral and religious guilt:

Nurse: My hands are covered with blood. My teeth are covered with blood. God has abandoned me. I am insane. What is she doing now?

but her confessions, standard material for the nineteenth-century novel, are either ignored or misinterpreted:

Nurse (shouting): I can't live.
Secretary: You won't have to. We are meeting you halfway.

Fiodor, the third member of our group, comes to a happier end. Following his fiancee's arrest he tries to drown his grief by sleeping with another girl. But it doesn't work out and he makes an ordinary but honest discovery about love:

Maid: Her mother cried, and her father did too.
Fiodor (gets up off her): It's boring for me to be with you. You are not my fiancee.

Maid: So what?
Fiodor: You are a stranger to me spiritually. Soon I'll vanish like a poppy.
Maid: Do I need you badly? Besides, do you want to do it one more time?
Fiodor: No, no, I feel terribly sad. Soon I'm going to vanish like happiness.
Maid: What are you thinking about right now?
Fiodor: I'm thinking that the whole world has become uninteresting to me after you. I've lost the salt, the walls, the window, and the sky, and the forest. Soon I'll vanish like the night.
Maid: You're impolite. I'll punish you for that. Look at me. I'll tell you something unnatural.
Fiodor: Try it. You're a toad.
Maid: Your fiancee killed a girl. You saw the murdered girl. Your fiancee cut off her head.
Fiodor (croaks).
Maid (laughing): You know Sonia Ostrova. Well, it is her that she killed.
Fiodor (miaows).
Maid: What is bitter to you?
Fiodor (whistles like a bird).

In his grief, Fiodor touches the worlds of nature and poetry, and this momentary transcendence, with its unexpected feeling and sincerity, earns him a sincere, if slightly off the point, reward -- he severs his connection with the family and becomes a Latin teacher.

The older children, the parents, and the various functionaries form the great bourgeois center of the play. Their dishonesty and self-assurance increase in intensity in accordance with their ability to exercise power. Thus, if members of the family are merely stupid and self-centered, the doctor in the insane asylum has completely restructured the logical basis of his little kingdom. When we meet him he is shooting into a mirror and shortly afterwards has the following informative exchange with an orderly:

Doctor: How now? I don't like this little rug. (He shoots at it. The orderly falls as though dead.) Why did you fall down? I didn't shoot you but the rug.
Orderly (rises): It seemed to me that I was the rug. I made a mistake. . . .

The most interesting position in the hierarchy is held by the one-year-old Petia Perov, whose comment on death initiated this discussion. Petia is still young and unformed. When he is "talking with thoughts" (cf. the conversations) he is serious and profound:

> Nurse (waving an axe as though it were a small hatchet): Sonia, if you use bad language, I'll tell your father and mother, and I'll kill you with the axe.
> Petia Perov, 1-year-old boy: And you'll feel, for a brief moment, how your skin splits open and how the blood spurts out. And what you'll feel after that is unknown.

But his is a dual nature, and he is equally capable of acting like a member of the family. In his talk with the dog Vera, he begins by responding with the same measured thoughts he displayed in the opening of the play. But when she asks him to explain everything to her he suddenly regresses:

> Papa. Mama. Uncle. Auntie. Nanny.

And it is this aspect of his nature that he shows in conversation with his parents:

> Father P. (sighing): Yes, she is dead. Yes, she has been killed. Yes, she is dead.
> Petia Perov, 1-year-old boy: That's what I thought. And will there be Christmas?
> Mother P.: There will be, there will be. What are you children doing now?
> Petia Perov, 1-year-old boy: All of us children are sleeping now. And I'm falling asleep. (Falls asleep.)

The implication, of course, is that his awareness is a product of infancy and will shortly be outgrown.

The interplay between language and situation that was so evident in the conversations is, if anything, more prominent in *Elka*. Style of speech is a crucial factor in the play. Characters are defined by it, or disguised by it; they change their voices like masks. Contrasts of language and situation frequently underline a contrast of appearance and reality; how

things appear and what we know them to be. Perhaps the best example of this occurs in the very beginning of the play. We have just seen the murder and the scatalogical insults in the tub. Now the police arrive and everything changes: the children speak in verse (and in chorus) and the police, with turn-of-the-century refinement, respond in kind:

> Police: Where are your parents?
> Children (chorus): They are at the theater.
> Police: Have they been gone long?
> Children (chorus): Long, but not forever.
> Police: And what are they seeing
> A ballet or a drama?
> Children (chorus): No doubt it's a ballet
> We love Mama.
> Police: How nice to encounter
> Cultured people.
> Children (chorus): Do you always wear buskins?
> Police: Always. We saw the corpse
> And the head beside it.
> Here a person lies pointlessly
> Herself pointless.
> What happened here?

An expanded use of this device carries the entire scene in court, where instead of the protocol all present are treated to the recitation of a nonsense poem about the quarrel of Oslov and Kozlov concerning their respective donkeys ("osly") and goats ("kozly").

As in the conversations, the contrast of language-situation leads to the difusing of emotional cliches. But if in the conversations Vvedenskii was limited to playing off the woodenness of the speakers, here the characters are actively engaged in contradicting themselves. The result is more blatant:

> Mother P.(yawning): Oh cruel God, oh cruel God, why are you punishing us?
> Father P.(blowing his nose): We were like a flame, and you are putting us out.
> Mother P.(powdering herself): We wanted to decorate the Christmas tree for the children.
> Father P.(kisses her): And we will decorate it, we will, despite everything.

Mother P. (undressing): And it will be some Christmas tree, the Christmas tree of all Christmas trees.
Father P. (getting excited): You are so beautiful, and the children are so dear.
Mother P. (giving herself up to him): God, why does the couch creak so? How awful it is.
Father P. (finishing his business, cries): God, our daughter has died, and we are acting like animals.

In addition to its function as a mask, inappropriate language is used to sharpen elements of cultural parody. At the police station, for example, we meet still another policeman with a predilection for verse. The situation has abundant possibilities, one of which is of course a parody of the policeman (misplaced humanitarianism and delusions of grandeur). But this time the butt of the parody is more wide-ranging. The policeman, being something less than original, moves from one ill-conceived imitation to another, and the result is a parody of the turn of the century, both in content and form. The example given below begins with an obvious reference to Blok ("Noch', ulitsa, fonar', apteka") and moves on to a brief index of cultural commonplaces:

Ей-Богу,
Аптеки, кабаки и публдома
Сведут меня когда-нибудь с ума.
Да чем водить отравленных в аптеки,
Я б предпочел сидеть в библиотеке,
Читать из Маркса разные отрывки,
И по утрам не водку пить, а сливки.

It's true
Pharmacies, bars and houses of ill fame
Will someday drive me quite insane.
And why take poison victims to the pharmacy
When I'd rather be sitting in the library?
Reading Marx's works both long and shorter
And in the morning drinking cream instead of vodka.

It is in this aspect -- its precise cultural historical setting -- that *Elka* is farthest from the conversations. Generalities have been replaced by social parody; the merely empty world has become empty and perverse. The nurse is victimized

not only by the family, but by social institutions, each exploiting its particular possibilities. Nevertheless, though *Elka* presents an obvious social satire, it is not frightening or metaphysical in the sense of Kafka or even *Elizaveta Bam*. The travesty is too bright, the characters too schematic, and the victim herself is only a step removed from her oppressors -- they are all mediocrities. Here again, Vvedenskii plays at distancing his reader. *Elka* contains several ironical authorial asides in regard to its structure and the play ends with the reminder, reminiscent of conversation seven, that all this took place a long time ago, so why should we care? As in the conversations, Vvedenskii wants to keep the reader at bay, to turn him into a fascinated but detached observer. Here, true to form, we are continually detached, but the point is not lost.

Chapter VIII
TIME, HISTORY AND THE FOREST

The overview of Vvedenskii's work so far leaves one area untouched: the forest. Vvedenskii's forest is a kingdom undefiled by time and death. It is the closest he comes to an ideal, but it is an ideal unattainable by man. Attempts to penetrate its mute wisdom lead inevitably to failure:

> Но мы оставим в покое лес, мы ничего не поймем в лесу. Природа вянет как ночь. Давайте ложиться спать. Мы очень омрачены.
>
> But we will leave the forest alone. We won't understand anything in the forest. Nature fades like night. Let's go to bed. We're very gloomy.[1]

Vvedenskii's forest looks back, of course, to Khlebnikov's. It has even more in common with the forest of Zabolotskii's long poems of the thirties.[2] We have caught fleeting glimpses of it in "Konchina moria," at the end of *Krugom vozmozhno Bog*, and in the beasts' short poem in *Elka*. Here we will take a brief look at works in which it plays a more prominent role. One of these is a play in verse, *Ochevidets i krysa*[3] (The Eyewitness and the Rat, 1930-33). With its distortions of characters, and intentional confusion of space and time, it is similar in many ways to the works discussed in Chapter VI. The other two are lyric poems: "Mne zhalko chto ia ne zver'" (I'm sorry I'm not a beast, 1934[4]) and "Elegiia" (Elegy, 1940[5]). Because of their personal tone, the two poems are unlike almost anything else Vvedenskii wrote. "Elegiia," with its precise formal patterns, is a particular rarity: a throwback to an earlier era done without irony.

Vvedenskii's forest is evoked through a lyrical overview of small movements, almost a catalogue, as we can see in the opening of *Ochevidets i krysa*:

> Он: Маргарита, отвори
> мне окошко поскорей
> Маргарита говори
> мне про рыб и про зверей.
> Опустилась ночи тень,

всюду в мире свет потух.
Маргарита кончен день,
дует ветер, спит петух.
Спит орел на небесах,
спят растения в лесах,
будущие спят гробы,
сосны, ели и дубы.
Воин выходит на позор,
бобр выходит на грабеж,
и бросая в звезды взор,
счет ночам заводит еж.
Рыбы бегают в реке,
бродят рыбы по морям,
и скворец в своей руке
тихо держит мертвый храм.
И дрозды поют слегка,
и рычит печальный лес,
гонит Бог издалека
к нам на город облака,
и рычит печальный лев.

He: Margarita, quickly
open the window for me.
Margarita, speak to me
of fish and beasts.
Night's shadow has descended,
all over the world the light is out.
Margarita the day is done,
the wind blows, the rooster sleeps.
The eagle sleeps in the sky,
the plants sleep in the forest,
sleeping are the future coffins,
pines, firs and oaks.
The warrior sets out for disgrace,
the beaver sets out for plunder,
and casting his gaze toward the sky
the hedgehog makes the count of nights.
Fish run around in the river,
fish wander in the seas,
and the starling holds the dead temple
quietly in his hand.
And thrushes sing softly,
and the sad lion growls.
God drives the far off clouds
to us in the city,
and the sad lion growls.

The opening poem of *Ochevidets i krysa* is, for Vvedenskii, exceptionally musical. The repetition of metrical patterns, the reiteration of phrases and verbs and regular rhyme create

an incantatory effect. The content is promising. The window opens onto the natural world. Margarita opens it -- a very romantic view -- and the poet is "eyewitness" to the harmony of the forest. The possibility of communion with nature appears in similar tones in other works. Characteristic of these is a dramatic sketch of 1941 called "Gde" (Where). Here the dying hero recalls his moments of unity with a river:

Я приходил к тебе река
Прощай река. Дрожит рука.
Ты вся блестела, вся текла,
и я стоял перед тобой,
в кафтан одетый из стекла,
и слушал твой речной прибой.
Как сладко было мне входить
в тебя, и снова выходить.
Как сладко было мне входить
в себя, и снова выходить,
где как чижи дубы шумели,
дубы безумные умели
дубы шуметь лишь еле-еле.[6]

I came to you, river.
River, farewell. The hand trembles.
You were all shining, all flow
and I stood before you
in a caftan made of glass
and listened to your river surf.
How sweet it was for me
to immerse myself in you and then emerge.
How sweet it was for me
to immerse myself in me and then emerge
where oaks whispered like siskins
mad oaks were able
oaks whisper now just barely.

In "Gde," as elsewhere, the harmony is short-lived. With the hero's death, its gentle, spatial world turns into a sardonic, temporal companion piece called "Kogda" (When). "Kogda" is intentionally ugly: a deprecation of death, art, and the possibility of understanding. The same movement occurs in *Ochevidets i kryea*, where the Margarita poem is followed by three contradictory voices. The first of these appears immediately after the poem, and it is stylistically jarring:

> Она: Я не могу открыть задвижки у окна, понимаешь, эта задвижка очень упрямая. Задвижка никак не открывается. С этой задвижкой что-то случилось. Задвижка, задвижка, что с тобой.[7]
>
> She: I can't open the bolt on the window, you understand, the bolt is really stubborn. The bolt simply won't open. Something's wrong with this bolt. Bolt, bolt, what's wrong with you?

This is the first contradictory theme: ordinary life with its intrusive banality. The second follows immediately:

> Мы не верим, что мы спим,
> Мы не верим, что мы здесь.
> Мы не верим, что грустим,
> Мы не верим, что мы есть.
> Мы не видим, что звезда
> поднимается над нами.
> Мы не слышим, что вода
> плещет синими волнами.[8]
>
> We don't believe that we sleep.
> We don't believe that we are here.
> We don't believe that we are sad.
> We don't believe that we exist.
> We don't see that a star
> is rising above us.
> We don't hear that the water
> is splashing its blue waves.

In this voice, the poet expresses the alienation of the analytical thinker. The thinker is isolated from spontaneous life -- the province of the beasts -- and from the natural world. His isolation from nature is also an isolation from poetry. When, in the opening poem, Margarita opened the window to the forest, she was also opening it onto poetry. The connection, inherent in her role as romantic heroine and muse, is made explicit at the end of *Ochevidets i krysa:*

> Маргарита Маргарита
> дверь скорее отвори,
> дверь в поэзию открыта,
> ты о звуках говори.
>
> Margarita, Margarita
> Quickly open the door
> The door to poetry is opened

Speak of sounds.

Cut off from poetry as well as from nature, the analytical voice is completely prosaic:

> Я мысли свои разглядывал.
> Я видел в них иные начертания.
> Я чувства свои измеривал.
> Я нашел их близкие границы.
> Я телодвижения свои испытывал.
> Я определил их несложную значимость.
> Я миролюбие свое терял.
> У меня не оставалось сосредоточенности.
> Догадывающийся догадается.
> Мне догадываться больше нечего.[9]
>
> I have observed my thoughts.
> I saw in them other outlines.
> I have measured my feelings.
> I have found their close boundaries.
> I have tried my movements.
> I have defined their simple significance.
> I kept loosing my peacefulness.
> I have no concentration left.
> Let the guesser guess.
> There's nothing left for me to find out.

The hero's measurements of the possibilities of thought have led only to a knowledge of boundaries and limitations. It is the opposite of the "boundless" star of absurdity that figured in *Krugom vozmozhno Bog*. The last two lines of his speech suggest that there is nothing left to think about -- a suggestion that is followed up in the concluding lines of the entire piece:

> Он: Нам больше думать нечем.
>
> У него отваливается голова.
>
> He: There's nothing left to think with.
>
> His head comes off.

The third dissonant voice of *Ochevidets i krysa* is the historical-parodic. It is no surprise to find it as a counterbalance to the forest: history, as the concrete manifestation of time, is man's domain. Clearly it is nothing to be proud of.

The historical theme in *Ochevidets i krysa* appears as two interrelated stories, one a narrative, the other more like a play. The time is the nineteenth century. The twin plots concern the murder of a nobleman Stepanov-Peskov by Dvoretskii-Grudetskii the butler and the suicide of an unnamed "kursistka" (a participant in the Rumiantsev women's courses, and thus an emancipated intellectual). Commenting on the action is a chorus of 433 Spaniards sitting on plates. There are also some historically datable figures -- the historian Kostomarov, the writer Griboedov, and the interchangeable literary heroine "Margarita or Liza." The action is predictably inane. Nothing has any meaning, as the author takes pains to point out:

> Но это все было не важно. Важного в этом ничего не было. Что тут могло быть важно? Да ничего.[11]
>
> But all this wasn't important. There was nothing important in it. What could have been important about it? Nothing, obviously.

In the center of this absurd and meaningless world is the spectacle of history, or, as Kostomarov puts it:

> тринадцать лет
> двенадцать лет
> пятнадцать лет
> шестнадцать лет
> кругом одни кустарники[12]
>
> thirteen years
> twelve years
> fifteen years
> sixteen years
> nothing around but bushes.

The passage of time is on everyone's mind. "Который час? Они бегут, бегут," (What's the time? It's fleeing, fleeing) says the observer/hero and Dvoretskii-Grudetskii asks "Margarita or Liza" whether she would like tea or a clock. History is meaningless because it is canceled out by death. There is a hint in the speech of the writer Griboedov that art provides a means of circumventing this. He is visited, he tells us, by

"magical visions" and "otherworldly creations." But the visions disturb him and so he declares his intention to "go to Georgia today like everybody else." It is a decision to abandon art for history and it ends, as we well know, in his death.

In *Ochevidets i krysa*, the themes of time, history, and the forest are presented in a fugue of conflicting voices. The poems "Mne zhalko chto ia ne zver'" and "Elegiia" take up the same themes, but the tone is more subdued. Here there is only one voice present, that of the analytical thinker. In "Mne zhalko chto ia ne zver'," his subject is regret for his humanity:

> Мне жалко, что я не зверь,
> бегающий по синей дорожке
> говорящий себе поверь
> а другому себе - подожди немножко,
> мы выйдем с собой погулять в лес,
> для рассмотрения ничтожных листьев.
> Мне жалко, что я не звезда,
> бегающая по небосводу,
> в поисках точного гнезда
> она находит себя и пустую земную воду.
> Никто не слыхал, чтобы звезда издавала скрип,
> ее назначение ободрять собственным молчанием рыб.[13]
>
> I'm sorry I'm not a beast
> running along a blue path
> saying to itself, believe
> and to its other self -- wait a little,
> I and I go to the forest for a stroll
> to look at the worthless leaves.
> I'm sorry I'm not a star
> running along the firmament
> in search of its precise slot
> it finds itself and the empty earthly water.
> No one has heard a star give out a squeak,
> its purpose is to encourage fish by its own silence.

Here it is not only beasts that he envies, but also inanimate objects. The two are united in opposition to humanity because they have a natural place, because they are in harmony with the earth, and most of all because they are not cut off by time. It is time, and thus death, that is most frightening to the poet:

Мне трудно что я с минутами,
они меня страшно запутали.

It's hard on me to be among minutes.
They have confused me terribly.

Humans die suddenly, while the death of objects is gradual. Time in the nonhuman world is stretched out to the point that it is imperceptible:

Мне жалко что я не крыша,
распадающаяся постепенно,
которую дождь размачивает,
у которой смерть не мгновенна.

I'm sorry I'm not a roof
disintegrating gradually
wet by rain
whose death is not instantaneous.

The problem of time comes up in a different mode in "Elegiia" -- not discussed, but implicit. "Elegiia," the most personal of Vvedenskii's poems and the most traditional in form, concerns the poet's meditation on the failings of his generation. His thoughts come to him during a journey in a horse-drawn cart ("telega"). The cart is symbolic as well as real: it is moving, of course, toward death. The poem has three time frames, which are really settings. The first is mythic and connects the timeless natural world with the magical figures of legend. The second is the nineteenth century, which appears here in a serious rather than parodic guise. The third is contemporary time, the time of the poet.

"Elegiia" begins with the poet's contemplation of the natural world. His view is elevated: looking at the mountain tops, he seems to see the entirety of the world without man. Man comes into it only in the last line, with its reference to the hour of death:

Осматривая гор вершины,
их бесконечные аршины,
вином налитые кувшины,
весь мир, как снег, прекрасный,
я видел темные потоки,

я видел бури взор жестокий,
и ветер мирный и высокий,
и смерти час напрасный.[14]

Regarding the heights of the mountains
the endless mountain heights
the jugs filled with wine
the world magnificent as snow
I saw dark torrents
I saw the storm's cruel stare
and the wind, peaceful and sublime
and the futile hour of death.

In the verse that follows, the natural world is associated with the mythic. The warrior with whom the verse begins appeared also in the "Margarita" poem of *Ochevidets i krysa*. Here the mythic link is more obvious. As he enters his "unequal battle," a steed presents him with the "fire of swift flight." The warrior has "magic hands," and "twilight steeds" dance.

Вот воин, плавая навагой,
исполнен важною отвагой,
с морской волнующейся влагой
вступает в бой неравный.
Вот конь в волшебные ладони
кладет огонь лихой погони,
и пляшут сумрачные кони
в руке травы державной.

Now a warrior, swimming like a cod
filled with noble courage
enters an unequal battle
with the restless moisture of the sea.
Now a steed presents to magic hands
the fire of the reckless chase
and the twilight steeds dance
in the palm of the regal grass.

The third verse sets up the opposition of the forest to "we." The forest is associated with the freedom of open space and with simplicity. Its opposite -- mankind in general, but more specifically Vvedenskii's contemporaries -- is fixed on a "soulless star" (another contrast to the boundless star of absurdity). Where the forest gazes at "night's simple dress," mankind's night is full of torment. Men are burdened by empty

emotional complexity and the knowledge of their insignificance:

Где лес глядит в полей просторы,
в ночей несложные уборы,
а мы глядим в окно без шторы
на свет звезды бездушной,
в пустом смущенье чувства прячем,
а в ночь не спим томимся плачем,
мы ничего почти не значим,
мы жизни ждем послушной.

Where the forest looks out at the fields' expanse
at the simple pattern of nights
we look through a curtainless window
at the light of the heartless star.
In empty confusion we hide our feelings
we don't sleep nights, we suffer, we cry
we have almost no meaning
we await obedient life.

As can be seen in the first three verses, Vvedenskii's use of formal patterns is uncharacteristically strict. The rhyme and meter set up here are maintained throughout the poem's remaining six verses. Though Vvedenskii is not by inclination a traditionalist, the elegy is nonetheless reminiscent of Kharms's "excercises in the old style." The nineteenth century is present in the genre and title, in certain words, like the reference to the "vsadnik bednyi" that closes the poem, and in the epigraph:

Так сочинилась мной элегия
о том, как ехал на телеге я.

So was my elegy created
about my travel in a cart.

It is also present in the content, which in its castigation of a generation for joylessness, inability to feel and moral indifference, comes close to a reiteration of Lermontov's "Dumy." The closeness is most visible in the next three verses. Like Lermontov's contemporaries, Vvedenskii's are burdened by consciousness, doubt, and weakness; they are cold even in physical love; they are without morals; before them lies only emptiness and death:[15]

Нам восхищенье неизвестно,
нам туго, пасмурно и тесно,
мы друга предаем бесчестно,
и Бог нам не владыка.
Цветок несчастья мы взрастили,
мы нас самим себе простили,
нам, тем кто как зола остыли,
милей орла гвоздика.

Я с завистью гляжу на зверя,
ни мыслям, ни делам не веря,
умов произошла потеря,
бороться нет причины.
Мы все воспримем как паденье,
и день и тень и наслажденье,
и даже музыки гуденье
не избежит пучины.

В морском прибое беспокойном,
в песке пустынном и нестройном
и в женском теле непристойном
отрады не нашли мы.
Беспечную забыли трезвость,
воспели смерть, воспели мерзость,
воспоминанье мним как дерзость,
за то мы и палимы.

Delight is unknown to us
We are pressed, clouded, hemmed in,
we betray each other without honor
and God is not our leader.
We have raised the flower of misfortune,
we are our own forgivers,
to us, grown cold as cinders,
the carnation is dearer than the eagle.

I look with envy at the beast
believing neither thought nor deed,
the loss of mind has been accomplished,
there's no reason to struggle.
Everything we'll take for failure,
day and shade and joy,
and even music's hum
will not escape the void.

In the restless tide
in the spacious and disorderly sand
in the indecent body of a woman
we have not found rest.
We have forgotten lighthearted clarity,
we have glorified death, we have glorified
filth,

we do not dare to remember
and so are being burned.

The coincidence in themes between the nineteenth century and twentieth does not imply a contrast. The situation is similar to the one Vvedenskii put forward in "Chetyre opisaniia" (Four descriptions, 1930-33). The descriptions are of four deaths fixed historically in 1914, 1858, 1911, and 1920. The deaths are separated by an abundance of culturally and historically specific details, but the differences in specifics serve only to emphasize their ultimate equivalency. At the time that the tales are recited, the four dying minds exist in the same "timeless" frame and are about to become interchangeable. As in "Elegiia," all humans face the same predicament before death.

The real contrast in "Elegiia," as throughout Vvedenskii, is between human time with its rush toward death and the timeless world of forest and myth. The contrast reaches a crescendo in the eighth and ninth verses. In the eighth verse, the "mirror" steed and "crystal" brook are irrevocably separated from the poet. Their element is magical; his is death:

Пусть мчится в путь ручей хрустальный,
пусть рысью конь спешит зеркальный,
вдыхая воздух музыкальный -
вдыхаешь ты и тленье.
Возница хилый и сварливый,
в вечерний час зари сонливой,
гони, гони возок ленивый -
лети без промедленья.

Let the crystal brook speed along its path,
let the mirror-glass steed rush on,
breathing in the music air
you are breathing in decay.
Sickly and peevish coachman
in the evening hour of drowsy sunset
press the slow cart forward,
drive on without delay.

In the ninth and final verse there is a reversal of the victory formulas of folklore. The swans will not beat their wings

in celebration and the horn of victory will not sound:

Не плещут лебеди крылами
над пиршественными столами,
совместно с медными орлами
в рог не трубят победный.
Исчезнувшее вдохновенье
теперь приходит на мгновенье,
на смерть, на смерть держи равненье,
поэт и всадник бедный.

Swans do not splash their wings
over the festive tables,
neither they nor copper eagles
blow the victory horn.
Vanished inspiration
returns now for an instant.
Keep your sights on death, on death,
poet and poor horseman.

The poet can look forward only to death, and death is his only possible subject.

CONCLUSION

Kharms and Vvedenskii are most alike in certain aspects of stylistic development. In their early works, both seek to dissociate language from conscious control, to let words combine according to their "own rules." Kharms spoke of a "word machine" that would generate poetic language, and his concept can be easily applied to Vvedenskii's "experiments in semantic aphasia."[1] As both writers mature, their abandonment of rational ordering becomes more selective. In Vvedenskii's later works, the language remains more experimental and more erratically brilliant. For Kharms, distortions of language give way to distorted and irregular perceptions of the outside world.

In their prose works, Kharms and Vvedenskii have in common a perverse humor and a fantastically distorted reprodution of the outside world. Both are always more concerned with situation than with character. In Kharms, the characters are mechanized puppets, in Vvedenskii they are either caricatures or animated abstractions with a distant relationship to flesh and blood. The heroes of both writers perform in a world of insufferable banality whose central and most banal event is death. Few things in this world are marked by any psychological intensity, but those that are, are crucial. For Vvedenskii, this is fear of death and fascination with it; for Kharms, paranoia and the torment of the weak by the powerful.

The work of both writers is marked by the centrality of philosophical questions. The search for meaning occupies Vvedenskii from his very earliest works, which have the form of dialogues that take place after death. Later he focuses more on the mystery and absurdity of human behavior that leads up to it. Kharms's prose involves a constant play with the possibility of meaning, expressed in unexpected interconnections, and its absence, expressed in arbitrary violence and unmotivated, unimportant deaths. Related to their philosophical concerns is a fascination with logical systems, something they share with explicators of the irrational from Lewis Carrol to

Alexander Zinoviev. In Kharms, logical systems are most often undermined, as in "Ryzhii chelovek" (The red haired man) or "Vlast'" (Power). Vvedenskii both breaks them down and creates his own: thus his theories of time and death and the logical paradoxes of his "conversations."

There exist, of course, areas in which the two writers differ significantly. Most of these are matters of development, and grow stronger with time. Kharms's development involves an integration of his creative work with elements of biographical reality. His paranoia and hatred of the crowd, apparent as early as *Elizaveta Bam*, are symptomatic of a more intense personal relationship with the outside world. At the same time, Vvedenskii becomes more abstract and intellectually refined. Vvedenskii remains concerned with time, history, and death in a universal sense. Very few works of his may be said to involve the poet's individual voice, and these, like the poems "Eligiia" (Elegy) and "Mne zhalko chto ia ne zver'" (I'm sorry I'm not a beast), are not intimate works in the sense of Kharms's *Starukha* or his later poetry. A similar differentiation takes place in respect to the bits and pieces of ordinary life that find their way into these works. In Vvedenskii, elements of ordinary reality are almost purely satirical in function, while in Kharms, they are the source for all aspects of his creative vision.

There exist for both writers areas of thought which must be defined as sacred, if not inviolable. For Vvedenskii, this is the timeless, integrated world of nature, with its profound absurdity. But the cognizance of its incomparable beauty is invariably accompanied by a tragic awareness of the inability to merge with it. The result is bitterness and rejection; Vvedenskii has a far greater sense of the futility of living (and dying). In Kharms, the sacred involves a hope for illumination, a desire for a miracle of minor and necessarily irregular proportions. As a thinker, Kharms is a lot more modest than Vvedenskii: one need only compare his suburban woods, the

location for the understated enlightenment at the end of *Starukha*, with Vvedenskii's romantic forest.

The writers, of course, share literary sources, though these play themselves out in different ways and at different periods of their development. Both Kharms and Vvedenskii clearly grow out of the Futurist tradition. The influence of Khlebnikov can be sensed in the pantheistic concept of nature which is crucial for Vvedenskii, though only a passing flirtation for Kharms. More significant is the influence of Khlebnikov's language. Though the focus of experiment is not the same -- Khlebnikov worked with morphology while Kharms and Vvedenskii concentrated on syntax and phraseology - the idea of experiment is crucial. The two younger writers looked to Khlebnikov as a master, and were very much aware of their debt.

In reference to Kharms, mention must be made not only of Khlebnikov, but of Gogol and Kozma Prutkov. Gogol is a source for Kharms's comic grotesque and to a certain extent for his characterizations. If Gogol's characters can come to life within the confines of a single simile, Kharms's may make an appearance merely in order to perform a bizarre act or die a violent death. Like Gogol, Kharms has roots in puppet theater, though his use of it is more extreme. Perhaps a more important source is Kozma Prutkov, whom Kharms loved and knew well. The narrator of Kharms's happenings is an offspring of Prutkov, and the aphorisms of Kharms's Blue Notebook bear Prutkov's unmistakable mark. Kharms's stories, and even Vvedenskii's *Elka*, have a certain resemblance to Prutkov's plays. There are non-Russian sources too.For Kharms, educated in the Peterschule a special place was held by the German writers of the fantastic, particularly Hoffman. Knut Hamsun's *Mysteries* was one of his favorite books, and its suggestion of uncanny ties among people has a slight reflection in the philosophy of some of Kharms's prose.

In its very early period, Oberiu shows marked similari-

ties with Dada. Certainly this is true of the Oberiu evenings, with their exuberant artistic play. It is less true of the poetry itself. The poetic experiments of Kharms and Vvedenskii are far more radical, and less accessible, than those of Tzara or Apollinaire. More significant is the absence in Kharms and Vvedenskii of gratuitous or completely negative gestures. Kharms and Vvedenskii, as indeed all of the Oberiuty, were not "anti-art." The touch of nihilism that certainly exists in their world view did not extend to the belief that art itself is absurd and valueless.

Both Kharms and Vvedenskii are closer to the European Theater of the Absurd, though their work developed under vastly different circumstances. One could hardly imagine a more congenial environment than bohemian Paris of the 1950s. Official Leningrad was unremittingly hostile, and by the end of the 1930s, the authors' deaths were all but foregone conclusions. The closeness in vision and technique is, as noted earlier, more valid for Vvedenskii than for Kharms. Vvedenskii's frequent abstractedness, tempered by an element of vaudeville, his deliberate use of banal language, his circular plots (and the frustrating feeling of never getting anywhere, never reaching any solutions) -- all become important elements of absurdist drama of the 1950s and 1960s.

Like all writers of the absurd, Kharms and Vvedenskii present spectacles without explanations. This study has been an attempt to supply some missing links.

NOTES

Introduction

1. A comprehensive list would be long. In his study *Vol'naia russkaia literatura* (Frankfurt/Main: Posev, 1976), Yu. Mal'tsev mentions the "great" influence of Kharms on the "SMOG" group of writers of the mid-sixties, particularly Viktor Goliavkin (pp. 86-88). He notes the influence of Kharms and the other Oberiuty on Maramzin (p. 110). Ilya Levin, in his article, "The Fifth Meaning of the Motor-Car: Malevich and the Oberiuty" (*Soviet Union/Union Sovietique* 5, part 2, 1978), mentions Anri Volokhonskii, Leonid Aronson, and Iurii Mamleev (p. 289). Viacheslav Sorokin's "Malen'kie istorii iz tsikla 'liubimyi chelovek'" (Ministories from the cycle "A Beloved Man") (*Kontinent*, 20, 1979, pp. 94-106) are anecdotes about Lenin whose style and content are very reminiscent of Kharms's stories about Pushkin. Note should also be made of Sergei Slonimskii's musical settings of some of Kharms's and Vvedenskii's works for children.

2. The first collection of Kharms's work in Russian was prepared by George Gibian and appeared in 1974: Daniil Kharms, *Izbrannoe* (Wurzburg: Jal-Verlag, 1974). The first collection of Vvedenskii appeared that same year: Aleksandr Vvedenskij, *Izbrannoe*, ed. Wolfgang Kasack (Munchen: Verlag Otto Sagner in Kommission, 1974). Both editions are marred by textual errors, the inevitable result of working with purloined manuscripts out of their country of origin. The first reliable edition of Vvedenskii, edited by Mikhail Meilakh, was published by Ardis in 1980. Volume I contains all complete known texts; Volume II, which is not yet out, will include fragments and juvenalia in addition to various addenda of historical interest. Two volumes of a contemplated nine volume complete works of Daniil Kharms came out in 1978 (Daniil Kharms, *Sobranie proizvedenii*, ed. Mikhail Meilakh i Vladimir Erl' /Bremen, K-Presse/). The first two volumes contain poetry up to 1930. In addition to the books there have been numerous publications by A. Aleksandrov and M. Meilakh in the Soviet Union and by M. Meilakh and I. Levin in the West (see Bibliography).

English translations of Kharms's and Vvedenskii's prose appear in George Gibian's anthology *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1971). Gibian's translations include Vvedenskii's play *Christmas at the Ivanovs'*, Kharms's *Old Woman*, and many of Kharms's ministories and happenings. The translations of *The Old Woman* and *The Cashier* were reprinted in *Fiction of the Absurd: A Critical Anthology* edited by Dick Penner (Mentor: New American Library, 1980). *A Certain Quantity of Conversations* appears in English in *Ulbanus Review*, No. 1, Fall 1977. *Modern Poetry in Translation*, No. 6, 1970 includes translations of four of Kharms's very early poems. Another early poem, "Incident on the Railway," appears in

Russian and English in Vladimir Markov and Merrill Sparks, *Modern Russian Poetry* (Indianapolis, 1969), pp. 724-727.

Chapter 1

1. So as not to overburden the text, citations will not be made to individual memoirs unless excerpts have been quoted. Much of the historical material appears in more than one source.

The most precise and informative account is contained in M. Meilakh's introduction to Vvedenskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Ardis, 1980). Included here are details about Vvedenskii's last years and his death which are not obtainable elsewhere. Ilya Levin's article on Kharms and Malevich ("The Fifth Meaning of the Motor-Car," *Soviet Union/Union Sovietique*, vol. 5, part 2, 1978) and the short introduction to his publication of Kharms's prose (*Kontinent*, 24, 1980) contain interesting information on Kharms and his contacts. Of the secondary accounts published earlier, particularly notable are A. Aleksandrov's "Oberiu: predvaritel'nye zametki," *Ceskoslovenska rusistika*, 13 (1968), R. R. Milner-Gulland's "'Left Art' in Leningrad: The Oberiu Declaration," *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, New Series III (1970), and George Gibian's introductory article to Daniil Kharms, *Izbrannoe* (Wurzburg: Jal-Verlag, 1974).

Of the memoirs, the most informative are Igor' Bakhterev, "Kogda my byli molodymi," in *Vospominaniia o Zabolotskom*, Moskva: Sovetskii pisatel', 1971), pp. 55-85, and Alisa Poret, "Vospominaniia o Daniile Kharmse" (unpublished). The volume *Vospominaniia o Zabolotskom* includes several memoirs which provide interesting information about Kharms and Vvedenskii, notably Lidiia Ginzburg, "O Zabolotskom kontsa dvadtsatykh godov," and T. Lipavskaia, "Vstrechi s Nikolaem Alekseevichem i ego druz'iami." The names of Kharms and Vvedenskii make occasional appearances in Marshak's correspondence (Samuil Marshak, *Sobranie sochinenii v 8 tomakh*, vol. 8 (1972). One of Marshak's correspondents was Lidiia Chukovskaia, who provides her own recollections of Kharms and Vvedenskii as children's writers in the chapter on Marshak in her book *V laboratorii redaktora* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1960). B. Semenov in "Dalekoe -- riadom" (*Neva*, No. 9, 1979), L. Panteleev in "Iz Leningradskikh zapisei," *Novyi mir*, No. 5 (1965), and V. Lifshits in "Mozhet byt' prigoditsia," *Voprosy literatury*, No. 1 (1969) provide interesting anecdotes. The information about Kharms's arrest and death comes from Panteleev; the same story is told in Harrison Salisbury's *900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad* (New York, 1979), pp. 170-171. George Gibian was kind enough to show me notes from his conversations with Bakhterev, Khardzhiev, and others.

There are a number of sources that discuss children's publishing under Marshak. The most informative are Lidiia Chukovskaia's *V laboratorii redaktora*, and A. Aleksandrov's article, "Sredi veselykh 'chizhei' i veselykh 'ezhei,'" *O literature dlia detei*, vol. 18 (Leningrad: Detskaia literatura, 1974); both contain a lot of material about Kharms and Vvedenskii. The atmosphere of Marshak's "academy" is conveyed in numerous memoirs from the volume *My znali Evgeniia Shvartsa* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1966), and also in I. Rakhtanov's *Rasskazy po pamiati* (Sovetskii pisatel', 1969). The volume about Shvarts is a fruitful source for anecdotes about his close friend Oleinikov, who is also the subject of a number of articles (with presentations of his verse) that appeared during the 1960s and 1970s (see Bibliography). For an early, very positive critical assessment of Kharms as a children's writer, see the 1931 collection *Detskaia Literatura*, edited by Lunacharskii.

2. V. Lifshits, "Mozhet byt', prigoditsia." *Voprosy Literatury* No. 1 (1969).

3. Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, ed. George Gibian (Wurzburg: Jal-Verlag, 1974), pp. 71-72. All translations of Kharms and Vvedenskii, except where noted, are mine.

4. Alisa Poret, *op. cit.*

5. See Vvedenskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, p. xiii.

6. Zabolotskii's poem, "Proshchanie s druz'iami" (1956) is in memory of those friends, long dead.

7. Specifically *Torzhestvo zemledeliia* (The Triumph of Agriculture, 1929), *Bezumnyi volk* (Mad Wolf, 1931), and *Derevnia* (The Country, 1933). Similarities appear both in structure and content.

8. Doivber Levin, who was known less exotically as Boris or Boba, was born in a small village in White Russia in 1905. He preferred to go by the name Doivber, which Bakhterev says is his Hebrew name. As a Hebrew name it is a bit unorthodox, but the combination of two bears (Febrew *dov* and Yiddish *ber*) was apparently fitting, and Marshak, according to Panteleev, liked to call him a Himalayan bear." Levin wrote a number of books before his death on the front in the first days of the war (1941). Among his novels are *Desiat' vagonov* (1932), *Ulitsa sapozhnikov* (1935), *Vol'nye shtaty Slavicha* (1932), *Likhogo* (1934). The second edition (1969) of Rakhtanov's book *Rasskazy po pamiati* has a postscript devoted to him.

Of the other members, Georgii Katsman and Sergei Tsymbal appear to have lost contact with Kharms and Vvedenskii early

on; Tsymbal became a prominent literary critic. Bakhterev (b. 1908) lives in Leningrad and continues to write in the Oberiu vein.

9. Konstantin Vaginov (1899-1934) was already well known as a poet at the time of his passing association with Oberiu. In all, he published three books of verse: *Puteshestvie v khaos* (1921), *Stikhotvoreniia* (1925), *Opyty soedineniia slov posredstvom ritma* (1931), and three novels: *Kozlinaia pesn'* (1928), *Trudy i dni Svistonova* (1929), and *Bambochady* (1931). *Trudy i dni Svistonova* contains some interesting parodies of literary evenings, a possible reference to Oberiu.

10. Quoted in Aleksandrov, "Oberiu: predvaritel'nye zametki," p. 297. The note "unclear" is Aleksandrov's.

11. B. Semenov, "Dalekoe -- riadom" (*Neva* No.9, 1979), quoted in Vvedenskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 1, pp. xxi-xxii.

12. Nikolai Makarovich Oleinikov (1898-1938) was a singular figure. A Cossack and Red Army officer, he served at various times as the editor of the children's journals *Chizh* and *Ezh*. His close friend, the writer Evgenii Shvarts, called Oleinikov "my best friend and bitter enemy." (L. Panteleev in *My znali Evgeniia Shvartsa*, p. 50) The combination of what Shvarts called Oleinikov's "demonic" nature with his gift for light verse found its outlet in his marvelous parodic verse. Some of Oleinikov's poems have been published with commentary (see Bibliography). There is a lot of anecdotal information on him in the collection of memoirs *My znali Evgeniia Shvartsa*.

13. Igor' Terent'ev was a theorist of *zaum'* and a good friend of Kruchenykh, his associate in the Futurist group 41°. Vvedenskii earlier worked under Terent'ev in the phonology section of Malevich's GINKHUK. At the time that Oberiu became attached to Dom pechati, Terent'ev was the director of its theater. His production of Gogol's *Revizor*, mentioned in the Oberiu manifesto, "began with all officials sitting on toilets and the mayor punctuating his soliloquy with pauses for groans of defecation." Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (London: MacGibbon and Key, 1968), p. 362.

14. The connection between Tufanov, Malevich, and Oberiu was first noted by Ilya Levin in his article "The Fifth Meaning of the Motor-Car: Malevich and the Oberiuty," *Soviet Union/ Union Sovietique* 5, Part 2 (1978), pp. 287-300. Levin sees the polemic between Oberiu and *zaum'* more specifically as a polemic between the Oberiuty and Tufanov. The Oberiuty, as Levin points out, do make occasional use of *zaum'* words. Despite this, their manifesto includes a spirited denunciation

of it: "Even today, there are those who call us *zaumniki*. It's hard to understand what this is -- a complete misunderstanding, or a hopeless failure to comprehend the fundamentals of literary art. There is no school more hostile to us than *zaum'*." (Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 290.) According to Levin, what they are objecting to is in fact the extension of *zaum'* proposed by Tufanov (probably following Malevich). Tufanov wished to do away not only with the familiar words of the real language, but with the word itself as a unit of poetry. He believed that the transrational element should be the phoneme rather than the word. "Objectness and the word are impotent," writes Tufanov in his treatise "Fonicheskaia muzyka i funktsiia soglasnykh phonem" (Phonetic language and the function of consonant phonemes) quoted in Levin, *ibid.* The emphasis placed by the Oberiuty on both objects and words makes it seem as though they are indeed centering their attack on their former teacher. "We who are real and concrete to the marrow of our bones," they declare in the manifesto, "are the first enemies of those who castrate the word and turn it into an impotent and senseless mongrel." Still, in stating their opposition to Tufanov's version of *zaum'*, the Oberiuty were not particularly aligning themselves with the *zaum'* of Kruchenykh or Khlebnikov. Their insistence on concreteness serves as well to distinguish their platform from that of the originators of *zaum'*. The word *concrete* is after all used in a negative sense by Krychenykh in his "Declaration of Transrational Language" (1921):"*Zaum'* awakens and frees the creative imagination, without offending it by anything concrete." "Deklaratsiia zaumnogo iazyka," in Markov, ed. *Manifesty i programmy russkikh futuristov* (Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1967), p. 180. And one must keep in mind the warning Kharms made in the introduction to his first, unpublished collection of verse: "To the reviewer . . . Before you line me up with the futurists of the past decade, read them and then read me again." Quote in Aleksandrov, "Oberiu: predvaritel'nye zametki," p. 298.

15. See Katsman's comments on the theatrical orientation of Radix, quoted in Vvedenskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij*, p. xvii.

16. Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 297. The translation is Gibian's from *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd*, p. 202.

17. Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 296.

18. G. Fedorov, "Vokrug i posle 'Nosa'," *Sovetskaia muzyka*, 9 (1976), pp. 41-50. See also Solomon Volkov, "Dmitri Shostakovitch and 'Tea for Two,'" *The Musical Quarterly* 45, No.2 (April 1978), p. 224.

19. Fedorov, p. 49.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

21. Toward the end of 1926, a note in Kharms's diary states that he obtained Malevich's "absolute agreement" to join their group. See Vvedenskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij*, vol. 1, p. xviii.

22. See note 14. There are several good sources for Malevich's writings on poetry. His article "O poezii," *Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo* 1 (1919), pp. 31-35 shows the same concept of poetry as that seen in his letters to Matiushin (K. S. Malevich,"Pis'ma k Matiushinu," publikatsiia E. F. Kovtuna, *Ezhegodnik rukopisnogo otdela Pushkinskogo doma 1974*,(Leningrad, 1976),pp. 277-295. See also his statement in *Tainye poroki akademikov* (Moscow, 1916), pp. 31-32. The two articles appear in English in Malevich, *Essays on Art*, Vols I and II, Troels Anderson, ed. (Copenhagen, 1968).

23. In their article "O Nikolae Oleinikove" (*Den' poezii* /Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1964/), Bakhterev and Razumovskii give an account of the meeting of Kharms and Vvedenskii with then editors Shvarts and Oleinikov. During the intermission of an Oberiu performance, Shvarts and Oleinikov came backstage and introduced themselves, Oleinikov not inappropriately, as a "grandson" of Koz'ma Prutkov. According to Bakhterev and Razumovskii, it was Oleinikov who got the idea of inviting the Oberiuty to write for children -- with Marshak's enthusiastic approval.

24. Marshak in a letter of Makadonov, in Marshak, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 8, p. 509.

25. L.Panteleev in *My znali Evgeniia Shvartsa*, p. 42.

26. Rakhtanov, *Rasskazy po pamiati*, pp. 176-177. The translation, to preserve the joke, is free.

27. "Legenda o tabake" (A. Galich, *Pokolenie obrechennykh* /Frankfurt-Main: Posev, 1972/, pp. 124-128). The poem is dedicated to Kharms, "who in fact disappeared, just walked outside and disappeared."

28. Lidiia Chukovskaia, *V laboratorii redaktora*, p. 263.

29. Lev Lifshits-Losev, "O vyzhivanii futuristicheskoi poetiki: pochemy absurdisty stali pisateliami dlia detei," talk given at AAASS National Convention, New Haven, Connecticut, October 1979.

30. D. Kal'm, "Fakty i avtografy," *Literaturnaia gazeta* 30 (December 1929), quoted in Lidiia Chukovskaia, *op. cit.*, p.295.

31. E. Flerina, "S rebenkom nado govorit' vser'ez," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, December 30, 1929, quoted in Chukovskaia, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 294.

33. See the account in Chukovskaia, *op. cit.*, pp. 295-304. Also see Aleksandrov, "Sredi veselykh 'chizhei' i veselykh 'ezhei'."

34. See the introductory article to Vvedenskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij*, *op. cit.*, p. xxiv.

Chapter II

1. The Oberiu manifesto, translated by George Gibian in *Russia's Loet Literature of the Absurd* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 202.

2. The excerpts from *Elizaveta Bam* are all taken from the version published by George Gibian in Daniil Kharms, *Izbrannoe* (Wurzburg: Jal-Verlag, 1976). The translations are all mine.

3. It is published in Daniil Kharms, *Sobranie proizvedenij*, ed. Mikhail Meilakh and Vladimir Erl', vol. I.

Chapter III

1. Except where noted, the excerpts from Kharms's poems are taken from Daniil Kharms, *Sobranie proizvedenij*, Vols. I and II, ed. Mikhail Meilakh and Vladimir Erl' (Bremen: K-Presse, 1978). The translations, which attempt no more than a literal rendering, are mine.

2. Unpublished; a copy in my possession.

3. Unpublished; a copy in my possession.

4. The article appears in Russian and English in Ilya Levin, "The Fifth Meaning of the Motor-Car: Malevich and the Oberiuty," *Soviet Union/Union Sovietique* 5, Part 2 (1978).

5. Meilakh and Erl', *op. cit.*, Vol II, 178 (notes).

6. Some commentary on the word *kolpak* and its appearance in Kharms's verse is found in Meilakh and Erl', *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 194.

7. Kharms explains this in a private letter to Raisa Il'inichna, 1931, a copy in my possession.

8. Unpublished; a copy in my possession.

9. Unpublished; a copy in my possession.

Chapter IV

1. A. Aleksandrov and M. Meilakh, "Tvorchestvo Daniila Kharmsa," *Materialy XXII nauchnoi studencheskoi konferentsii* (Tartu: Tartuskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 1967), p. 105.

2. Unpublished; a copy in my possession.

3. Unpublished; a copy in my possession.

4. Unpublished; a copy in my possession. Marina was Kharms's second wife; the writer Boris Zhitkov was then associated with Detgiz.

5. Unpublished; a copy in my possession.

6. Unpublished; a copy in my possession.

7. Daniil Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, ed. George Gibian (Wurzburg: Jal-Verlag, 1974), p. 120. The translation is mine.

8. Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 48. The translation is mine.

9. Eric Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Unoversity Press, 1976); Tsvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975).

10. V. Shklovskii, "O tsvetnykh snakh," *Literaturnaia gazeta* 47 (1967).

11. Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 94. The translation is mine.

12. The original is in Kharms, *Izbrannoe*. The translation is Gibian's, from *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd*, p. 79.

13. From "O iavleniiakh i sushchestvovaniiakh No. 24," *Kontinent* 24 (1980), pp. 280-281.

14. Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 98.

15. From "O iavleniiakh i sushchestvovaniiakh No. 2."

16. The original is in Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 47. The translation is from Gibian, *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd*, p.3.

17. The original is in Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 102. The translation is mine.

18. The original is in Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 116. The translation is Gibian's, from *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd*, with some changes.

19. A. Flaker, "O rasskazakh Daniila Kharmsa," *Ceskoslovenska rusistika* 2 (1969), p. 80.

20. Flaker, p. 79.

21. The original has been published by Ilya Levin in *Soviet Union/Union Sovietique* 6, Part 2 (1979).

22. The original is in Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 51. The translation is from *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd*, p. 60.

23. A. Aleksandrov and M. Meilakh, p. 103.

24. The original is in Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 63. The translation is from Gibian, *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd*, pp. 51-52.

25. Unpublished; a copy in my possession.

26. The original has been published by Ilya Levin, *Kontinent* 24 (1980), p. 282.

27. The original is in Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, pp. 74-76. The translation, with minor changes, is Gibian's, from *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd*, pp. 45-47.

28. The original is in Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 109; the translation is mine.

29. *Ibid.* pp. 293-295.

30. Unpublished; a copy in my possession. Iakov Semenovich is Y. S. Druskin (born 1902), a musicologist and philosopher who was close to Kharms.

31. The original is in Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, pp. 123-125. The translation is Gibian's, from *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd*, p. 82.

Chapter V

1. I would like to thank Professor Henry Orlov of Williams College for his fruitful discussion of Druskin's connection with Kharms.

2. "Ia idu po Liteinomu," unpublished; a copy is in my possession.

3. The desire to smoke is more of an intrusion than it may seem at first glance, since the narrator, like Kharms, does not have enough money for tobacco. His spiritual longings are being thwarted not by a lighthearted desire, but by a whole complex of problems involving his poverty and his difficulties coping with everyday life.

4. Unpublished; manuscript in my possession.

5. The quotes from *Starukha* come basically from the version published in Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, corrected against a more reliable copy in my possession. The translations are mine.

6. George Gibian mentions this incident in the introduction to *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd*. Two more things about it are worth noting. First, its value is not only metaphoric. It has an important place in the development of events: because the pot cracks, they eat the frankfurters raw, as a result of which the narrator gets stomach cramps and has to spend his train ride in the toilet, thus allowing his suitcase to be stolen. Second, both this incident and the narrator's eventual breakthrough are prefigured in his reason for going home after he first sees the old woman: he forgot to turn off his electric stove.

7. The wording "zalozhil ruki za spinu" appeared earlier in reference to Sakerdon Mikhailovich, though the old woman's hands were behind her back as well. The phrase "golova opushchena na grud'" was used earlier to describe the old woman.

8. "Ia dolgo smotrel na zelenye derev'ia," in Daniil Kharms, *Izbrannoe*. Gibian notes this resemblance in his introduction to *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd*.

9. Note should be made of the sociological overtones involved in the (intellectual) narrator's fear of the workers and little boys on the street. The overtones are more explicit in the continuation of "I am walking along Liteinyi." Many of Kharms's happenings, particularly those involving predator and victim, have a discernible class bias.

10. The little boys are the same ones whom the narrator longs to inflict with tetanus at the beginning of his adventures. Later, while he is waiting for the streetcar, suitcase in hand, he runs into them again and they become the focus for his paranoia. The two workers who persecute the stranger are mirrored in the worker and "provincial dandy" who are the only passengers on Kharms's train as he heads out toward the swamp. If you accept a realistic explanation, one of them

stole the suitcase.

11. The original has been published by Ilya Levin in *Soviet Union/Union Sovietique* 6, Pt. 2 (1979).

12. Other references to Dostoevsky are taken up in Ellen Chances' unpublished study, "Chekhov and Kharms: Story/Anti-story." Chances sees *Starukha* as a parodic negation of *Crime and Punishment*.

13. Unpublished; a copy in my possession.

Chapter VI

1. M. Meilakh has chosen 1929 as the boundary between Vvedenskii's juvenalia and his mature works (private conversation).

2. A. Aleksandrov and M. Meilakh, "Tvorchestvo A. Vvedenskogo," *Materialy XXII nauchnoi studencheskoi konferentsii* (Tartu: Tartuskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 1967). They note the influence on Vvedenskii's language of his interest in certain aspects of children's thought (alogical connections, objectness) as well as his experience as a children's writer.

3. In his article on Vvedenskii's language, "Semanticheskii eksperiment v poeticheskoi rechi," *Russian Linguistics* Nos. 3/4 (December 1974), M. Meilakh refers to patterns of this sort as matrices and gives the following example: я сидел в своей гостиной/ я сидел в своей пустынной/ я сидел в своей картинной/ я сидел в своей старинной/ я сидел в своей недлинной/ за столом. In this particular example, true of Vvedenskii's slightly later verse ("Chetyre opisaniia" /1930-33/), all of the words which fall into the matrix are thematically motivated. The article appears in a revised version in *Russian Literature*, vol. 4 (October 1978). See also the discussion of Vvedenskii's language in M. Meilakh, "O poeme Aleksandra Vvedenskogo 'Krugom vozmozhno Bog'," *Echo*, No. 2 (Paris, 1978).

4. From *Sviatoi i ego podchinennye*, Vvedenskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij*, p. 56. All translations from Vvedenskii are mine.

5. From *Ochevidets i krysa*, *ibid.*, p. 121.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 30

7. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

8. *Fakt, teoriia i Bog*, *ibid.*, p. 63

9. "Chelovek veselyi Frants," *ibid.*, pp. 51-53

10. *Krugom vozmozhno Bog* is published in Vvedenskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij, op. cit.*, pp. 77-101. M. Meilakh published a short analysis in *Echo* No. 2 (Paris, 1978), which differs in some respects from the one presented here.

11. Vvedenskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij, op. cit.*, p. 47.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 61-63.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

16. Unpublished; a copy in my possession. For an interesting discussion of time and language in Vvedenskii's verse, see O. G. Revzina, "Kachestvennaia i funktsional'naia kharakteristika vremeni v poezii A. I. Vvedenskogo," *Russian Literature*, vol. 4 (October 1978). Revzina's article begins with an intriguing comparison of Vvedenskii with European writers of the absurd.

17. Both are published in Vvedenskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij, op. cit.*

18. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

Chapter VII

1. *Nekotoroe kolichestvo razgovorov*, in Vvedenskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij, op. cit.*, pp. 142-156; *Elka u Ivanovykh, ibid.*, pp.157-173. The translations are all mine. My English translation of the conversations appeared in *Ulbandis Review*, No. 1 (Fall 1979).

2. O. G. Revzina and I. I. Revzin, "Semanticheskii eksperiment na stsene," *Trudy po znakovym sistemam*, vol. 5 (Tartu: Tartuskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 1971).

Chapter VIII

1. From Vvedenskii's *Grey Notebook*, unpublished; a copy in my possession.

2. Zabolotskii's forest, with its philosophical undertones, is well known (see A. Pavlovskii, "Nikolai Zabolotskii: filosofskii mir, poetika, traditsii.") His long poems "Torzhestvo zemledeliia," "Bezumnyi volk," and "Derevnia" (1930-33) are close in tone and in some extent even in technique to Vvedenskii's work of the same period. For Zabolotskii also, the forest possesses some key to the understanding of death denied to the logical mind of man ("Prirody vekovechnaia davil'nia / Soediniala smert' i bytie / V odin klubok, no mysl' byla bessil'na / Soedinit' dva tainstva ee," Zabolotskii, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy*, Biblioteka poeta, Moscow-Leningrad, 1965, p. 68). The separation of man and nature in Zabolotskii is not as tragic and permanent as in Vvedenskii. A student of Tsiolkovskii, Zabolotskii maintained a vision of the ultimate transformation of nature united with man (see Pavlovskii, above, and also Boris Paramonov, "Bukva 'zhivot' (Molodoi Zabolotskii)," *Grani*, pp. 111-112 (1979), pp. 330-350.

3. *Ochevidets i krysa* appears in Vvedenskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij*, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-126

4. *Ibid.*,pp.129-131.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 174-175.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

7. This section is missing in Meilakh's redaction (*ibid.*), although it appears both in Kasack's edition (*op. cit.*, p. 44) and in the copy I have in my possession.

8. Vvedenskii, *op. cit.*, p. 120. The last four lines do not appear in this redaction, although it appears in Kasack's edition (*op. cit.*, p. 45) and in the copy I have in my possession.

9. Vvedenskii, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 174-175.

15. The borrowing from Lermontov's "Duma" is mostly a matter of theme rather than language. Still, the identities can be charted in a fairly precise manner (the text of "Duma" is taken from M. Iu. Lermontov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, Moscow-

Leningrad, 1961, vol. 1).

Лермонтов	Введенский
... под бременем познанья и сомненья	Я с завистью гляжу на зверя, ни мыслям, ни делам не веря
... и жизнь уж нас *томит*	а в ночь не спим *томимся* плачем
к добру и злу постыдно равнодушны	мы друга предаем бесчестно, и Бог нам не владыка
... мы вянем без *борьбы*	*бороться* нет причины
так тощий плод, до времени созрелый	цветок несчастья мы взрастили
И царствует в душе какой-то холод тайный, Когда огонь кипит в крови	и в женском теле непристойном отрады не нашли мы

Lermontov's phrase, "и к гробу мы спешим без счастья и без славы," if the glory is underemphasized, would characterize Vvedenskii's entire poem.

Conclusion

1. Term of Aleksandrov and Meilakh.

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I. P. S M I R N O V

DIACHRONIČESKIE TRANSFORMACII LITERATURNYCH ŽANROV I MOTIVOV

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