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## The Ordinary, the Sacred, and the Grotesque in Daniil Kharms's *The Old Woman*

The work of Daniil Kharms was lost to the West for many years. A poet and black humorist, creator of Russia's short-lived literature of the absurd, Kharms shared the fate of many of his contemporaries. His work, which was passed from hand to hand after his disappearance in 1941, began to surface in print only in the late 1960s. But in spite of a number of recent publications,<sup>1</sup> Kharms remains largely unknown and misunderstood. His eccentric, often grotesque stories are too easily dismissed as lacking depth.<sup>2</sup> Part of this misunderstanding stems from an incomplete knowledge of Kharms's work: because Western readers are limited to published materials, they are unable to perceive the strong religious strain that underlies much of Kharms's writing. The aim of the present article is to cor-

1. The most important is certainly Daniil Kharms, *Isbrannoe*, ed. and with an intro. by George Gibian (Würzburg: Jal-Verlag, 1974). This book, the first large-scale publication of Kharms's work in the original is marred by some textual errors, the result of difficulties involved in obtaining and correcting typed manuscripts. The poetry is taken principally from Kharms's early works and tends to give a mistaken impression of his poetry as a whole. In the Soviet Union, A. Aleksandrov, M. Meilakh, and V. Er! have published selections of Kharms's poetry and prose, and Meilakh is presently preparing a major publication of Kharms's collected works. The first appearance of Kharms's work in English translation is the anthology, *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd*, trans. and ed. George Gibian (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1971). A. Aleksandrov and M. Meilakh's article, "Tvorchestvo Daniila Kharmsa," in *Materialy XXII nauchnoi studencheskoi konferentsii* (Tartu: Tartuskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet, 1967), was the first critical introduction to Kharms's work. A. Flaker's article, "O rasskazakh Daniila Kharmsa," in *Československá rusistika*, 14 (1969), is an analysis of Kharms's happenings and very short stories. Critical observations can also be found as introductions to publications of Kharms's work in Soviet journals, such as A. Aleksandrov, "Tumoristicheskie paradoksy Daniila Kharmsa," *Voprosy literatury*, 1973, no. 12. Kharms's early literary activities are mentioned in several articles on Oberiu: A. Aleksandrov, "Oberiu: Predvaritel'nye zametki," *Československá rusistika*, 13 (1968); R. R. Milner-Gulland, "'Left Art' in Leningrad: The Oberiu Declaration," *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, n.s., vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); and M. Arndt, "Oberiu," *Grani*, no. 81 (1971).

2. Note, for example, Clarence Brown's review of George Gibian's anthology, *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd*: "In official Soviet reference works the *ob'erinty* are put down as writers for children. This is a half-truth, distorted for the usual ideological reasons, but about Xarms it is not far from being the truth *tout court*" (*Slavic and East European Journal*, 17, no. 3 [Fall 1973]: 339).

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rect this misconception. Though a number of works, both published and unpublished, will be examined, the main focus of the article is the story *The Old Woman*.

Daniil Kharms (pseudonym of Daniil Ivanovich Iuvachev) was born in St. Petersburg in 1905. In 1929, together with Alexander Vvedenskii,<sup>3</sup> Oleinikov, Zabolotskii, and others, he formed a literary group called "Oberiu" (the Association for Real Art). The group, whose activities consisted of a series of Dadaistic literary evenings, lasted for a single year. Its importance for Kharms is largely as an apprenticeship,<sup>4</sup> although its influence can be felt in the dramatic bias and fantasy of his later works. Kharms's growth as an artist involved a shift from experimental exuberance to precision and clarity. His best works, both poetry and prose, were written in semi-isolation during the eleven years between the demise of Oberiu and his death. Only a portion of his mature works has been published. The best known of these works, the *Sluchai (Happenings)* and the very short stories, are fantasies, sometimes gentle, more often nightmarish, involving chains of odd events and the torment of the weak by the powerful. The characters in these brief works—the parables of Kharms's eccentric philosophy—are peculiarly bloodless. In one story, old ladies fall out of windows and shatter on the sidewalk like fragile vases; in another, the hero turns out not to have any physical features and finally not to exist at all. The comic tone of many of these stories may give the casual reader a mistaken impression. If their plots seem perverse and arbitrary, the basis for this is quite serious. As Kharms wrote about one of his poems, "I see in it . . . the mournful tone in which one talks about man's incomprehensible destiny on earth."<sup>5</sup>

To be properly understood, Kharms's work must be seen in light of his serious poetry (most of which has not been published) and his notebooks and letters, many of which involve his belief in or longing for God. This private side of Kharms is absent in his happenings and short stories, except in a negative sense, as in his vision of a meaningless and Godforsaken world, and it slips into his prose only rarely, and then in such a way that the reader who is unprepared for it may overlook it. This is certainly the case in *The Old Woman*.

*The Old Woman*, Kharms's longest and probably finest work, was written in late spring of 1939. At first glance it has much in common with his happenings—the same grotesque humor and appearance of arbitrary events. But the ending of *The Old Woman* is suggestive of something different: the narrator, having isolated himself from everything around him, gets down on his knees and declares his faith in God, at which point the narrative breaks off. Such a strongly emphasized ending implies the presence of some sort of motivation in the plot, and the motivation does exist in *The Old Woman*. If the story is read more carefully,

3. Alexander Vvedenskii (1905–41) was an absurdist poet and dramatist. Like his close friend Kharms, with whom he is often paired, Vvedenskii was involved in Oberiu, did his best work after the association disbanded, and published almost nothing during his lifetime. Some of Vvedenskii's work (much more extreme than Kharms's) has been published (see Aleksandr Vvedenskii, *Izbrannoe*, ed. Wolfgang Kasack [Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner in Kommission, 1974]).

4. Only a few first-rate works from this period have survived, among them the play *Elizaveta Bam* and several poems. (Many works have been lost.) Kharms's poetry of this period constitutes an interesting experiment in syntactic and narrative fragmentation which is largely abandoned in his later works.

5. Letter of September 21, 1933; copy in author's possession.

the impression of arbitrariness disappears. *The Old Woman* is in fact a story about the narrator's enlightenment.

The line of development that leads to *The Old Woman* 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 1930s. They are also present in the philosophical writings of Ia. S. Druskin,<sup>6</sup> a friend of Kharms and (like Kharms) a member of the circle which included the philosopher L. S. Lipavskii and the philosophically oriented Alexander Vvedenskii. Druskin's philosophy—in particular, the idea that through prayer one can glimpse the transcendent state that lies just beyond the surface of ordinary life—seems particularly relevant to *The Old Woman*.

In his own life, Kharms seemed to delight in the possibility of a miracle arising suddenly in the most commonplace setting. This idea, which recurs in his poetry and letters, is most vivid in an unfinished story of 1931. At the opening of the piece, the narrator is longing for a miracle: "I am walking along Liteinyi past the bookshops. Yesterday I asked for a miracle. Yes, if only there could be a miracle right now."<sup>7</sup> 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." The association of the spiritual and the everyday can be seen in a poem written in 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

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

6. The philosopher Ia. S. Druskin was one of the few figures close to the *obierinty* to survive. At least one of Kharms's own works is dedicated to Druskin, as is Sergei Slonimskii's musical setting of Kharms's children's poetry. Druskin's philosophical essays have not been published.

7. "Ia idu po Liteinomu"; photocopy in author's possession. All further excerpts from Kharms's work are taken from unpublished materials with the exception of quotes from *The Old Woman*, published in Kharms, *Izbrannoe*.

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

March 28, 1931, 7 P.M.

This prayer for enlightenment does not stray far from the detail of the poet's real life: he is a writer, it is the middle of the day, he is tired. In *The Old Woman* the spiritual theme is similarly integrated with everyday occurrences. There is, however, an important difference: the spiritual in *The Old Woman* 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.

Because the plot of *The Old Woman* is not well known, it seems worthwhile to begin with a simple cataloging of events as they occur. In the short summary that follows, two points should be noted: first, the spiritual underside of the story is established at the very outset in the character of the old woman; second, despite a multitude of overwhelmingly unspiritual preoccupations, the question of God never quite disappears from the narrator's mind.

The story opens with an old woman standing in a courtyard and holding a wall clock that has no hands. The narrator asks her for the time, and, despite the seeming contradiction, she glances at the face of the clock and gives him a matter-of-fact reply. She clearly wants to speak to him—she calls after him as he walks off—but he pays no attention and almost forgets about her. He goes home and tries to write a story, the subject of which is obliquely relevant: “a miracle worker who lives in our time and doesn't work any miracles.” 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 without hands was mentioned as an oddity and dismissed, but now her appearance seems to have a purpose:

Somebody knocks at 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 and lock the door,” 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 old woman? 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. . . .<sup>8</sup>

When one looks 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 makes him prostrate himself before her. He feels ridiculous but is powerless to disobey, and as he lies before her he loses track of time—a significant fact in a story which makes constant reference to passing minutes.

When the narrator regains consciousness, it is nighttime. Not only is the old woman still in his armchair, but it soon becomes apparent that she is dead. The narrator is annoyed and he eventually kicks the old woman in the face, an act that makes matters serious. The mark is visible and it looks as though he has killed her. Contemplating his situation, the narrator is seized by an inappropriate but irresistible desire to eat and he goes out to buy some food. In the bakery, he is pursued by a "nice young lady." He succumbs to temptation and they are about to go to his room when he recalls the dead old woman. To avoid explanation, he sneaks away and ends up drinking with his friend Sakerdon Mikhailovich. In the middle of a long conversation between the two, the narrator asks his friend—as he had earlier asked the young lady—a simple question about belief in God. When the slightly drunk and now desperate narrator returns to his room, he sees—or thinks he sees—the old woman crawling toward him on all fours. Maintaining his self-control with difficulty, he stuffs her body into a suitcase and sets off to deposit it in a swamp outside of town. On his way to the streetcar he sees the young lady he had met and he tries to catch up with her, but the suitcase is, of course, too heavy. The young lady slips away, and the narrator reaches his train without incident. On the train, however, the suitcase disappears. It has probably been stolen. Not knowing what to do, the narrator gets off the train as planned and here the story reaches its unexpected end.

In summary, *The Old Woman* seems to develop out of a series of arbitrary events, but the 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 bewilderment,

8. Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, pp. 132–33.

his friend gets up and starts tearing down the curtains. It is only later that the purpose for this becomes clear: they had forgotten to put water in a pot, the enamel had cracked, and the curtains were necessary as potholders.<sup>9</sup> The incident is mentioned a second time when the narrator "for some reason" recalls it in the moments after his suitcase has been stolen. 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 the center. The existence of this system points to a premise that appears elsewhere in Kharms: that events are not arbitrary, but are a part of an odd order.<sup>10</sup> The significance of the internal mirroring in *The Old Woman* does not end with an understanding of this system. 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 related to his search for faith.

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 indifference. Their association is underscored by interesting coincidences in language. The narrator's first contact with both women is followed by an action that is described in similar terms: "The spring sun is very pleasant. I go on foot, squinting and smoking my pipe" (contact with 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*]" the young woman tells the narrator, offering to buy him bread. "Now you and I are going to settle accounts," says the narrator to the old woman in an entirely 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 the young woman are held in tandem by the plot. On two occasions, the old woman's presence prevents the narrator from meeting his nice young lady: once when he cannot take her to his home because of the dead old woman in his room and again when he is unable to catch up with her because of the dead old woman in his suitcase. The old woman's meddling is not merely annoying; there is a serious reason for it: she 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

9. George Gibian mentions this incident in the introduction to Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 37. There are two more aspects worth noting: First, the significance of the incident 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 foreshadowed in his reason for going home after he first sees the old woman: he forgot to turn off his electric stove.

10. See, for example, "Sviaz'," in Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 123.



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 the narrator is not permitted to attain happiness with the young woman; instead, he is forced to conclude his adventure with the old one, and as a consequence arrives at something more valuable. It is significant that the narrative ends with his prayer: at that point there is 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. Compare 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"—with the description of Sakerdon Mikhailovich, sitting on the floor under his window, in which identical phrase sequences and many of the same words are used—"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,' said 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 be implying 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 a third time in a more likely mirror: Maria Vasilievna, the narrator's neighbor. This time the resemblance involves a set of false teeth. The old woman's false teeth manage to unnerve the narrator twice: first by flying out of her mouth when he kicks her in the face, and later by disappearing altogether. Maria Vasilievna is also an old woman, and her false teeth, though not mentioned outright, are certainly the cause of her lisp:

"Shome old man wazh ashking for you."

"What old man?" I asked.

"I dunno," answered Maria Vasilievna.

"When was it?" I asked.

"I dunno that either," said Maria Vasilievna.

"Did you speak to him?" I asked her.

"I shpoke to him," said Maria Vasilievna.

"Then why don't you know when it was?" I said.

"About two hourzh ago," said Maria Vasilievna.<sup>11</sup>

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

11. Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 151.

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.<sup>12</sup> 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."

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 *The Old Woman* is shaped by the association of the sacred with these other elements. To understand the story, 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 *The Old Woman* creates an illusion of autobiography. The narrator, who is never called by name, is one of Kharms's re-creations of himself. He is a writer, he suffers from insomnia, he has barely enough to eat, and he 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 *The Old Woman* and shares many of his working habits.<sup>13</sup> The objects that surround the poet—a pipe, a chair by a window, a watch—appear again in *The Old Woman* and seem to belong to Kharms.

Kharms's more clearly autobiographical writings—diary entries and poems—often involve a search for something beyond himself. But the spiritual nature of the search is understated and what we are most aware of is the narrator's attentiveness to his small movements in a sparse and simplified world. The severe limitations of the narrator's world play an important role in *The Old Woman* 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 and are expressed in the same words—and in his tendency to make everything that happens to him important. It is partly because of this attitude that passing characters gain unexpected significance, and the web of interconnections comes through so strongly.

The sense of autobiography in *The Old Woman* is enhanced by its diary-like form. It takes place in slightly over twenty-four hours, with the time continually marked, and, with one exception, it is limited to things the narrator actually sees and does. The continual notations of time serve a dual function: besides 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.

12. 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.

13. "Ia dolgo smotrel na zelenye derev'ia," in Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 256. Gibian notes the resemblance in his introduction to the volume on page 36.



As in many of Kharms's shorter pieces, fantastic elements are balanced by a strong physical sense of the story's setting. Ordinary details of Kharms's city are recorded precisely: thus the entire series of train stops between Leningrad and Lisii Nos are described. 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 the author and narrator share the same memory, but they live in the same place: the narrator's walk home, just like Kharms's, takes him up Nevskii Prospekt to the corner of Liteinyi, and both must climb several flights of stairs.

The feeling that what we are reading is not a created work, but a meticulous, nonintrospective record of daily events has several effects. In part, it serves to de-emphasize the spiritual side of *The Old Woman*, turning it into simply another minor occurrence 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 the story is a declaration that such things are indeed possible; it is the realization of Kharms's wish for the sacred to manifest itself in his own life.

If the familiar outlines of the narrator's ordinary world link *The Old Woman* 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 thoughts 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."<sup>14</sup>

This excerpt differs from Kharms's happenings in one important respect: what would ordinarily be a discrete story is here embedded into the narrator's thoughts. The grotesque in *The Old Woman* does not involve the kind of antic, or "impossible," events that make up the happenings. The closest thing to them is the series of events that surround the old woman, and even here the grotesque is accompanied by intimations of the spiritual. The grotesque is evident again in the desires and reactions of the narrator. He is the one who daydreams about infecting some noisy little boys with tetanus and later kicks the dead old woman in the face. But the narrator's flashes of perversity are balanced by his final flash

14. Kharms, *Isbrannoe*, p. 153 (as corrected by A. Nakhimovsky).

of belief. The implication seems to be that both, as extraordinary states, are bound closely together: the presence of one does not preclude the possibility of the other.

Related to the grotesque is the atmosphere of paranoia surrounding the narrator which grows stronger as his situation gets more complicated and which is partly responsible for his enlightenment. 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 it reaches an extreme when the suitcase is stolen. More generally, it can be felt in his hatred and suspicion of the little boys<sup>15</sup> and in his hatred and fear of the dead old woman. His inner state is externalized in yet another fleeting double, this time a stranger who passes his vision three times in the course of the story: the "man walking with his stick and artificial leg," who is persecuted by the little boys, two workers, and an (unknown) old woman is a symbolic extension of the narrator's own predicament. This undertone of hatred and paranoia is present in many of Kharms's earlier works, beginning with *Elizaveta Bam*, but the resemblance to *The Old Woman* is strongest in "I kicked up dust," a short piece written four months earlier, in February 1939:

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, my teeth were chattering, and I tapped my 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 steam shelf. 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 "I kicked up dust" is far more horrifying than that of *The Old Woman*: a nightmare compared to a daydream. But the figures are the same: fragile old people and awful, sickly children who are pursuing him, but upon whom he is inflicting terrible and unwarranted pain. In "I kicked up dust," the horror dissolves in a conclusion that involves purification (the bathhouse) and death. The ending of *The Old Woman* is much brighter, but the

15. The sociological overtones involved in the (intellectual) narrator's fear of the workers and little boys on the street should be noted. 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.

motivation for it is also based partially in the grotesque. Note that in *The Old Woman* 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 curious ways.

Kharms seems to delight in the reconciliation of opposites, in 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 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.<sup>16</sup>

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 a question that must be approached gingerly, through innuendo and euphemism.

This same complex of factors—the narrator's shyness in asking his question and the introduction of the profane as a euphemism—appears in his conversation with Sakerdon Mikhailovich. The narrator broaches the subject almost as soon as he enters but obviously has difficulty doing so: "For some time we are silent. 'I wanted to ask you,' I say at last. 'Do you believe in God?'" Sakerdon

16. Kharms, *Isbrannoë*, p. 141.

Mikhailovich, sharing the narrator's reticence, refuses to give him a direct answer. Their conversation then turns to an interpretation of belief in God as belief in immortality. The subject—possibly a reference to Dostoevsky<sup>17</sup>—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 good 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 concrete form. His inner struggles are focused on external objects: an old woman whom he wants to get rid of, a young woman whom he wants to win. In this Kharms story meaning is not conveyed in its traditional way, through introspection and analysis; instead, it is a matter of odd juxtapositions and the final, sudden moment of recognition.

For most of the story, spiritual elements are either surrounded by the comic grotesque or restated in terms of it. The most extended example of this sort of circumlocution is the series of events which 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, where, 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, a 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.<sup>18</sup>

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

17. It is widely known that belief in God and belief in immortality are frequently linked in Dostoevsky: "Their whole lives they didn't know each other, and when they leave the inn they won't know each other for another forty years," says Ivan Karamazov to Alesha. "Well, and what will they discuss when they've seized a minute in some inn? The eternal questions, of course—is there a God, is there immortality?" (F. M. Dostoevskii, *Brat'ia Karamazovy*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v desiati tomakh*, vol. 10 [Moscow, 1958], p. 293). See also *ibid.*, pp. 170–71 (conversation between Fedor Karamazov, Ivan, and Alesha); and *ibid.*, p. 91 (Miusov's reiteration of Ivan's beliefs). There is nothing particularly Dostoevskian in Kharms's treatment beyond the rapidity with which these questions become the primary topic of conversation. There is, however, a delightful similarity between a statement made about Stavrogin ("If Stavrogin believes, then he doesn't believe that he believes. And if he doesn't believe, then he doesn't believe that he doesn't believe" [F. M. Dostoevskii, *Besy*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v desiati tomakh*, vol. 7, p. 640]); and Sakerdon Mikhailovich's skeptical retort in *The Old Woman* ("That means, those who don't want to believe already believe in something. And those who want to believe, believe in nothing from the very start").

18. Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 163.

The train stops again. It's Ol'gina. 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.<sup>19</sup>

When he returns to his seat, the two passengers and the suitcase are gone.

The disappearance of the old woman recalls a desperate wish made by the narrator when the corpse was locked behind his door: "What if there's no old woman any more? I walk into the room and the old woman is gone! My God! Is there no such thing as a miracle?" For the narrator, a miracle means a return to his former state. But the miracle that occurs has nothing to do with the fulfillment of earthly desires.<sup>20</sup> The old woman is not an end in herself but rather the means to an end, and the miracle, though it may be said to begin here, concludes on a completely different level.

When the physical burden of the old woman is lifted, it leaves in its stead a spiritual burden—fear and guilt—that is all the more intense, setting the stage for the narrator's enlightenment. It is at this point that the tone of comic grotesque finally dissolves. The last few paragraphs of the story take place in a completely serious atmosphere and in a natural setting that appears very rarely in Kharms's work. Leaving the train, the narrator goes to the woods behind the station. His attention is captivated by a caterpillar; 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."<sup>21</sup>

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:

19. Ibid.

20. Perhaps this is why the miracle worker of the narrator's own manuscript does not perform cheap tricks: "He knows that he is a miracle worker and can work any miracle he wants, but he doesn't do this. They throw him out of his apartment. He knows that all he has to do is wave his finger and the apartment will be his, but he doesn't do this, he meekly leaves the apartment and goes to live in a shed outside of town. He can turn the shed into a beautiful brick house, but he doesn't do it—he continues living in the shed and finally dies, not having performed a single miracle in his life."

21. Kharms, *Izbrannoe*, p. 165.

Вот грянул дождь  
Остановилось время  
Часы беспомощно стучат  
Расти трава, тебе не надо время  
Дух бóжий, говори, Тебе не надо слов

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 *The Old Woman* is simple and traditional: 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 daily existence (the “miracle” that Kharms was waiting for) and its development through the comic grotesque.