Mitki and Kharms

by

Elias P. Hetko
Class of 2011

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Russian Language and Literature

Middletown, Connecticut
April, 2011
Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank my advisors Susanne Fusso and Priscilla Meyer, who were incredibly helpful to me throughout this project and in the years of studying Russian literature that led up to it. I would also like to thank Irina Aleshkovskaya, Duffield White, Joe Fitzpatrick and Yuriy Kordonskiy for their roles in shaping my thoroughly enjoyable experience with Russian at Wesleyan; Alexandra Sviridova, Eugene Zubkov and Alexandar Mihailovic for connecting me with the “Mitki” and their work; the staff of Olin Library in general, and the Interlibrary Loan Department in specific for their help in locating materials; Matvei Yankelevich for pointing me in the right direction with regards to Kharms; Yury Shtapakov for his perspective on the local art scene; Dmitri Shagin and Igor Smirnov-Okhtin for graciously granting me interviews; Benjamin Lussier and Rustem Salakhatdinov for going with me through puddles of slush and underneath enormous icicles to find the “Mitki”; Sasha Semenov and Fedor Artiushkov for introducing me to the Petersburg underground; and my parents Paula Weiss and Joe Hetko for, among countless other things, helping me get back to Russia. Finally, a big thank you to my friends and classmates at Wesleyan who have offered me support and encouragement along the way.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword....................................................................................................................3

Introduction: Who are the Mitki? Who is Kharms?.............................................4

1. The “Mitki” Remember Daniil Kharms.........................................................19

2. Kharms versus the mitki as Artists...............................................................33

3. Kharms versus the mitki on Alcohol Abuse, Violence and Sex ...........52

Conclusion..............................................................................................................69

Appendices: Translations

Remembering Daniil Kharms by Igor Smirnov-Okhtin.........................73

The Filthy Personage by Daniil Kharms.........................................................102

Reference List....................................................................................................104
Foreword

Much of this thesis is based on sources originally published in Russian. Unless otherwise noted, translations of these sources are my own. In cases where it seemed called for, I placed a transliterated Russian version of the passage in front of its English translation. These transliterations follow the Library of Congress system of Romanization, with a few exceptions that are worth mentioning here. Where a public figure’s name has a recognized Latin-character spelling that does not line up with the Library of Congress system, I have used the popular version of the name (e.g. Mayakovsky, as opposed to Maiakovskii). I have chosen to render the Russian group names mit’ki and “Mit’ki,” both of which recur often in this paper, as mitki and “Mitki.” The apostrophe in the middle of the word represents a soft sign, a non-voiced Russian letter whose function is to show that the preceding consonant is palatalized. This letter is omitted when the “Mitki” themselves Romanize their group’s name, and with this in mind I have left it out as well. I have also chosen to transliterate the Russian mitek as mityok, to encourage proper pronunciation and to maintain consistency with earlier English-language works.
Introduction: Who are the Mitki? Who is Kharms?

On September 23, 1984, at around two in the afternoon, Leningrad artist and writer Vladimir Shinkarev\(^1\) was on the way to a shift at his day job as a boiler room attendant (Shinkarev 2010, 260). At the time, the thirty-year-old Shinkarev was already a known entity in the underground, self-published world of Leningrad samizdat, appreciated for his snarky yet poignant prose. His most notable work to date was the ironic series of short stories, diary entries and haikus *Maksim i Fyodor*, which had appeared from 1978 to 1980 in the journal “Obvodnyi Kanal” (Dolinin 2003, 373). Like many other creative people of his generation, Shinkarev took advantage of what was essentially paid down time as a menial laborer by working on his literary projects.

During this particular walk to the boiler room an idea occurred to him: his next book would be a manual describing a way of life. The manual would incorporate a smattering of the real-life habits and idiosyncrasies of his artist friends, mixed with the characteristics of a certain perennial Leningrad slacker type and rounded out with a healthy dose of Shinkarev’s own literary imagination. The way of life would be "a youth movement like hippy or punk," and its ideal follower would, among other things, act extremely tender in a way that bordered on the idiotic, quote tirelessly from Soviet television serials, use folksy euphemisms instead of vulgar language and dress entirely without regard for the fashion of the time (Shinkarev 2010, 7). That day, September 24, 1984, Shikarev began to write a samizdat series, each installment of

\(^{1}\) Pronounced Shin-kar-YOV.
which constituted a chapter of the manual. A few of the chapters included serious content, but the prevailing tone was lightly self-satirizing. Shinkarev’s manual would expand for five years until official publication in book form, as *Mit’ki (The Mitki)*, in 1990. The beginning of this samizdat series inspired the genesis of a cultural movement that continues, albeit in a changed form, to this day: the St. Petersburg Mitki.

There are two stories about the way in which Shinkarev received inspiration for the name of the group. The first, which has been repeated often to the press, traces the origin of the name to Dmitri Shagin’s childhood. Dmitri Shagin is a St. Petersburg painter. Shinkarev, who was his good friend, chose him as the “founder and classic image” of the Mitki. Shagin made a likely candidate for this title due to the fact that he embodied many of the movement’s ideals (Shinkarev 2010, 7). When Shagin was young his family called him Mitya or Mityok affectionately. Mitya is a fairly common nickname for Dmitri. Mityok, on the other hand, has a certain rustic sound to it. When his friends found out about this second, cutesier nickname they were greatly amused and took to calling him by it to tease him. The collective name came about by a simple pluralization of Mityok, which renders Mitki.

The second story, which Shinkarev made public more recently, involves a less conventional source of inspiration: the layout of the Russian keyboard itself. “Reader,” he writes, “look at a typewriter - more precisely, on a computer, where the keyboard is analogous. Right in front of you, in the center of the [Russian] keyboard, you see four letters,” (Shinkarev 2010, 273).
These four letters – M, I, T and the soft sign – are the first four in the Cyrillic spelling of Mitki. Shinkarev goes on to explain that this name, like the name of his character Maksim, was determined simply by which keys were the most convenient to type together. By making something out of the first letters that fell under his fingers he was able to circumvent the writer’s block caused by the otherwise boundless number of possible combinations. In this variant of the story the group name does not evolve from a personal name. Rather, by serendipity the collective name emerges whole from the keyboard, and the singular form, mityok, comes about only afterward. However it was that the naming occurred, the appellation stuck.

A real group of artists rallied around the banner of the Mitki way of life once Vladimir Shinkarev had set its tenets down on paper. Several of them had been featured as characters in Shinkarev’s narrative since that September afternoon and already displayed some Mitki characteristics. In addition to Shinkarev himself, this initial group included the aforementioned Shagin, Aleksandr and Olga Florenskii, Andrei Filippov, Viktor Tikhomirov and several others. Together these artists put on small-scale exhibitions, dabbled in film and music and, most importantly, lived the Mitki lifestyle. One of the major facets of this lifestyle as Shinkarev explains it is a lack of desire for, or even concept of, success or glory. A Mitki member should be able to subsist on a diet of processed cheese, salami and bread without complaining or finding anything odd about it (Shinkarev 2010, 16). He should earn very little and remain in his home city with his good friends. The Mitki were, by
Shinkarev’s estimation and in the eyes of the Leningrad underground, destined to remain as they were by virtue of their own lack of desire for recognition. The movement grew and grew, however. Its many various participants, as listed by Shinkarev in 1992, came to include, among other categories: the core group of artists, an honorary members’ list, musicians, a foreign contingent and a lone psychologist (Shinkarev 2010, 109-11).

The Mitki have moved up in the world. Gone is the constant threat of police raids during unofficial apartment exhibits, as are the cramped, steamy hours spent tending boiler rooms to make ends meet. The group has graduated to a comfortable combined gallery and studio space on Marata street and well attended exhibit openings in places like Manezh Hall, an imposing Greek revival style building just a few hundred yards away from the venerable golden dome of Saint Isaac’s Cathedral. The “classic image” of the movement, Dmitri Shagin, gained popularity throughout the 90s, and has become a man about town on the St. Petersburg art scene. To this day, he still occasionally gives interviews on the news. In 1997, Shagin performed alongside rock-star friends, including Yury Shevchuk of DDT and Sergei “Chizh” Chigrakov of Chizh and Co., in an elaborately staged Mitki music video shoot aboard the Cruiser Aurora (Alekseev 2006). The Mitki have even earned a place in the Russian language. 1995’s *Dopolnitel’nyi Russko-Angliiskii Slovar*, a supplementary dictionary of slang used in the 90s, includes several Mitki-specific terms such as *mityovka* (defined as “gathering
of mit’ki”) and mit’kovskii (the adjectival form of mityok) (Marder 1994, 229). Clearly, the Mitki’s period of obscurity is no more.

Also passed into the realm of history is what Shinkarev calls “the epoch of heroic drinking” - nights flowing with cheap port wine and days spent nursing hangovers, former hallmarks of the Mitki lifestyle. The majority of the Mitki have overcome their alcoholism in the years since 1993, when Shagin and Shinkarev set an example by going to America for rehabilitation at Father Martin’s Ashley clinic (Olgeirson 1993). Shagin now serves on the board of directors of Dom Nadezhdy na Gore (House of Hope on the Hill), a unique center that offers treatment free of charge for Russians struggling to overcome alcohol addictions (House of Hope on the Hill n.d.).

In addition to this important lifestyle adjustment, there have been changes in the group’s personnel. Several of the group’s collaborators have died, including the celebrated poet and artist Oleg Grigor’ev and the bard Alexei Khvostenko. Vladimir Shinkarev left the Mitki in 2008, publicly citing his opposition to Shagin’s support of Dmitri Medvedev as the reason for his departure (Trofimenkov 2008). In November 2010 Shinkarev went on to publish a final chapter on the movement entitled “Konets Mit’kov” (“The End of the Mitki”), in which he elaborated on his other reasons for leaving. Foremost among these reasons was the increasing amount of commercialism that had become associated with the Mitki name. Shinkarev introduced this new work into the canon of Mitki literature by packaging it in a single volume that included all of his other writing about the movement. He called the
resulting book *Mit’ki*, replacing the original 1990 version by taking on its title and incorporating its entire text. A few others have strayed from the fold for reasons similar to those described by Shinkarev. This reduction in membership has left Dmitri Shagin as the dominant personality of the Mitki to an even greater degree than before.

Dmitri Vladimirovich Shagin grew up in Leningrad’s central region on a street called Maiakovskaia. The street, previously known as Nadezhdinskaia, had been renamed in 1936 in honor of the brilliant poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (Shagin 2011). Shagin’s upbringing by bohemian parents, the artists Natalya Zhilina and Vladimir Shagin, exposed him to a colorful group of local art figures.2 These included, among others, the painters Aleksandr Arefyev, Sholom Schwartz and Rikhard Vasmi, and the bard Roald Mandelstam. These artists shared an admiration for Western painters, particularly the Impressionists, and a disdain for Socialist Realism. Collectively their group was known as the Leningrad neorealists, or the Arefyev circle.

The elder Shagin and Arefyev were close friends. They lived very romantic-sounding lives, in which creating art, evading the police, maintaining very few possessions and sleeping in graveyards were all part of the routine. Arefyev could often be seen wearing a blue and white striped sailor shirt known in Russian as a *tel’niashka*, popular for its comfort, warmth, and affordability (Volkov 1995, 528-529). The *tel’niashka* already had a long

---

2 Unless otherwise noted, information cited about Dmitri Shagin’s life and work comes from an interview which I conducted with him in January 2011.
history in Petersburg as a part of the port city’s seafaring traditions. It would go on to gain another symbolic meaning as it became the most prominent visual symbol of the Mitki, the inheritors of the Arefyev circle’s legacy.

Just across the street at number eleven Nadezhdinskaia lived the writer Daniil Ivanovich Yuvachev (Fond imeni D.S. Likhacheva 2005). Dmitri Shagin speculates that, had Yuvachev not passed away in 1941 when Shagin’s father was only nine years old (or eleven, depending on which version of his life story one chooses to believe) the writer would surely have become an acquaintance of the Shagins’ (Shagin 2011; Shagin 1999, 5).

Over the course of his short, vibrant life Yuvachev went by many pseudonyms, including Daniil DanDan, Chorms and Shardam. But the name that stuck with him for good - the one to which he felt so attached that he allegedly scribbled it into his passport by hand - was Daniil Kharms. During his life Kharms published only two poems for adults. Until 1937, when he and his friends were forced to stop working amidst a clampdown on any art that did not reflect Socialist Realist ideals, Kharms subsisted entirely on his salary as a children’s book writer (Yankelevich 2007, 19, 22-23).

Kharms was an attention grabbing person; his dandyish style of dress and penchant for performance art antics kept him very literally in the public eye. Leningrad cultural critics gave Kharms and his coterie of avant-gardist friends a fair amount of attention as well, although it was almost universally negative during his lifetime (Yankelevich 2007, 24-25). More unfortunately, he also attracted the attention of the Stalinist regime – the simple fact that
Kharms had traveled abroad was enough to raise the suspicions of the paranoid leadership, and he was placed under surveillance and arrested several times. The last of these arrests took place in 1941. The fact that this time Kharms was not coming back, and that this prison sentence would prove fatal (he probably died of starvation during the Blockade of Leningrad) became clear only years later. Kharms’s friends and loved ones were left wondering what had become of him. Fortunately, his literary accomplice Yakov Druskin had the foresight to remove a suitcase containing the manuscripts of Kharms’s unpublished work from the missing man’s apartment. In the 1960s these manuscripts resurfaced, as publishers like Vladimir Erl’ recognized their worth and introduced them into the samizdat underground (Cornwell 1993, 3-5; Yankelevich 2007, 33). Since then, Kharms’s work has come to be recognized as an important missing link not only of Leningrad unofficial writing, but also of world countercultural literature.

Although their movement started out underground, the Mitki have had a much easier time bringing the full range of their work to public attention. Almost since the moment the Mitki first came together, there has been writing about their art, their aesthetic, and the personalities that comprise their group. Much of it has been introspective writing by the group members and those close to them, and some of the best of these compositions are printed in catalogs designed for major Mitki exhibits. In addition, the Mitki used to publish their own zine-like underground newspaper series called the Mitki-
gazety (Mitki-gazettes), which featured a wealth of articles about the movement.

Other Petersburgers, primarily from the art world but also a handful with backgrounds in literature, took note of the Mitki as a popular-culture phenomenon relatively early on. British expatriate writer and St. Petersburg resident John Nicholson included a chapter on the Mitki called “A Conversation” in his 1994 book of short essays The Other St. Petersburg (not to be confused with The Other Petersburg, a book about gay culture in Petersburg). “A Conversation” consists mostly of a translation of Shinkarev’s exaggerated, partially fictional portrait of the Mitki lifestyle, adapted by the author to read more like a naturalistic description of actual people’s lives. The scholarly value of the work is questionable. For one thing, Shinkarev is never mentioned in the text despite his being the direct source for most of the anecdotes. Nicholson’s writing is light in its tone; his primary concern seems to be in showing off the Mitki as quirky but lovable Petersburg characters.

This kind of status as contemporary popular culture figures may contribute to the fact that the Mitki have only recently begun to catch the attention of academics. Musicologist and cultural scholar Solomon Volkov’s 1995 book St. Petersburg: A Cultural History makes note of the Mitki as cultural icons with a far-reaching web of collaborators, citing rock musician Boris Grebenshchikov and the aforementioned poet Oleg Grigor’ev as well-known Mitki affiliated artists. Volkov also mentions the Mitki as examples of the continuing relevance of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival.
According to Bakhtin’s theory, “carnival opened up a space for a free and frank investigation of forms that were otherwise represented as ‘natural’ or eternally ‘given’, and was a site for the invention of improbable collocations and associations,” (Cunliffe 1993, 50). As I will discuss later in this paper, the Mitki engage in Bakhtinian “carnivalization” through their deliberate mixing of high and low culture and their tampering with enduring symbols of Russian and Soviet power.

*Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, anthropologist Alexei Yurchak’s 2006 study of what he calls “the last Soviet generation,” characterizes the Mitki as proponents of the *stiob* style of Soviet satire. Yurchak defines *stiob* as “a peculiar form of irony that differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision, or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humor...it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mix of the two.” (Yurchak 2006, 250). Yurchak, thinking in the same vein as Volkov, mentions the link between this satiric form and Bakhtin’s model of carnivalization, but adds the qualifier that “Soviet stiob was not limited to temporally and spatially bounded and publicly sanctioned ‘carnivals,’”(Yurchak 2006, 250). The information Yurchak gives about the Mitki is thought provoking, but relatively brief - it represents just one section of a chapter in a longer work.

In the past five years or so, literature scholars in the English speaking academic community have just begun to examine the Mitki in depth. Professor of Russian Language at Hofstra University Alexandar Mihailovic
has written two compelling articles about the group. The first, entitled “In the Heat of the Boiler Room,” describes the complex relationship between the Mitki and the history of the Russian navy. The second, “The Riddle of Masculinity and the Poetics of Failure in the Work of the St. Petersburg Mit’ki,” restates many of the themes of the first article, and discusses the subtext of gender politics in the Mitki’s work. Professor Mihailovic is currently at work on a book further exploring the complexities of the Mitki. In 2007, Williams College literature student Casey Drosehn completed a senior thesis called “On Mitkiness: Satire and Performance in a Transitioning Russia.” Drosehn’s paper gives an overview of the history of the Mitki, shows how the group is situated within the context of perestroika, and pays special attention to Shinkarev’s original text Mit’ki. In summation, Mitki-focused scholarship does exist, but it is a very new phenomenon.

Kharms, in contrast with the Mitki, has been a subject of study by literature scholars for about forty years, and there are quite a few books focused entirely or in large part on the man and his work. George Gibian in the 1970s and Neil Cornwell in the early 1990s were among the first to bring Kharms to an English-speaking readership, and both of them wrote criticism as well as translation. Graham Roberts’s The Last Soviet Avant-Garde: OBERIU - Fact, Fiction and Metafiction and OBERIU: An Anthology of Russian Absurdis, edited by Eugene Ostashevsky, offer criticism and translation respectively on the work of the OBERIU, or Union of Real Art, the most prominent of several artistic groups that featured Kharms as a member.
Swiss scholar Jean-Phillipe Jaccard’s 1991 work Daniil Harms et la fin de l’avant-garde russe deserves a mention as perhaps the most comprehensive book on Kharms’ literary world.

All signs point to the conclusion that interest in Kharms is still on the rise: “REAL Kharmsa,” Andrei Rossomakhin’s pamphlet on Kharms’s fascination with the occult, hieroglyphics and numerology, Today I Wrote Nothing, Matvei Yankelevich’s excellent book of Kharms translations and commentary, and Daniil Kharms: Writing and the Event, Branislav Jakovljevic’s book exploring what the “event” means in Kharmsian terms, are all good examples of Kharms scholarship from the past decade. Another indicator of the continuing growth in Kharms’s popularity is the 2003 publication of Sluchai i veshchi, a handsome leather bound collection of Kharms’s writing gorgeously illustrated by printmaker Yury Shtapakov.

This paper is not the first work to establish a link between Daniil Kharms and the Mitki. For one thing, the Mitki themselves are proud to count Kharms among their predecessors. They have demonstrated their feelings of kinship with him in various ways, which will be discussed in detail in the chapter to follow. In fact, the connection between the Mitki and Kharms is prominent enough that it has already been brought up at least three times in English-language works, a noteworthy amount of recognition given the small quantity of scholarship that mentions the Mitki at all. Matvei Yankelevich notes that “the Mit’ki artists…compiled jokes attributed to Kharms” (Yankelevich 2007, 33). In Yankelevich’s essay this tantalizing aside serves
simply as an example of Kharms's influence on the next generation of Leningrad artists, and no further detail is provided. Casey Drosehn dedicates a section of her thesis to the Mitki’s descent from the avant-gardists of years past, including the observation that “[Kharms’s] disregard for traditional storytelling methods echoes in the discursive structure and self-conscious, equivocating tone of The Mitki” (Drosehn 2007, 40). She makes perceptive comparisons between their bodies of work, citing the shared elements of fragmented, incident-based narrative structures, fondness for neologisms, and “mock formality coupled with conversational roughness” (Drosehn 2007, 41). John Nicholson’s way of introducing the connection is, predictably, less careful. “In a sense there have been Mitki in St. Petersburg for almost as long as there have been communists. Kharms and the OBERUItists were prototype Mitki. Then came Dovlatov, Brodsky, Rein and the artists at Pushkinskaya 10. And in a broader, extended, sense the name ‘Mityok’ can, I suppose, be given to anyone at all who perseveres with the unlikely project of trying to be a human being in St Petersburg,” (Nicholson 1994).

The use of the word “prototype” immediately jumps out at me from this passage. I find it provocative because of Kharms’s stature both as an artist and as a figure of renown for the Leningrad underground. It seems strange to retroactively place someone so boldly original into a mold made by later artists. Why not instead call the Mitki an imitation of the OBERIU? Furthermore, labeling the OBERIU members, known as oberiuty, as prototypes for another group suggests that something about the work of these
oberiuty was unfinished; that they were just setting the stage for what was to come. Perhaps “prototype” was simply a poor choice of words on Nicholson’s part, or perhaps he chose his wording fully aware that he was going out on a limb – after all, this passage is written in a tone that sounds more speculative than decisive.

Wording aside, Nicholson’s claim raises an excellent question about the nature of the relationship between the Mitki and Kharms. Beyond being an artistic predecessor for Shinkarev, Shagin and their friends, could Kharms actually be considered an early mityok? In order to properly address this question, we must define our terms. Who are the Mitki, and who is Kharms?

Even as he announces the end of an era with “Konets Mit'kov,” Vladimir Shinkarev creates a distinction that is very helpful in thinking about the movement, both as it was in the past and in its current form. He writes, “…the mitki, with a lowercase letter and without quotes – is a mythical mass youth movement (these mitki, similarly to the Platonic ideals, eidos, never come to an end, never get sick and never die), but now we are talking about a real group of artists, whose name is written with an uppercase letter and in quotes,” (Shinkarev 2010, 250). From this point on I will make a distinction between the two – not as strict as Shinkarev’s division of the mythical and the real, but based along the same lines. The term “Mitki” will refer to the factual group of artists who started putting on exhibits together in the mid-1980s, and the term mitki will refer either to the characters in Shinkarev’s book or to those who live in the spirit of the lifestyle described therein. In my understanding
there is an overlap between the two categories even to this day, though there is unquestionably enough difference that the separate names will be helpful.

Branislav Jakovljevic views Kharms’s artistic identity as closely tied in with his membership in the OBERIU, and in a second, private group called the chinary. Jakovljevic writes that “…these groups are important because the rigor of Kharms’s ideas is rooted precisely in the plurality that these groups represent. The question, who is Kharms? remains without a definitive answer. The dialogic principle, inseparable from the idea of plurality, brings into question the notion of a stable identity,” (Jakovljevic 2009, 4). Kharms welcomes, and in fact thrives on, the company of like-minded writers. Much like a mityok, he lives on the periphery of mainstream society but not in solitude. For this reason, it will be productive to look at Kharms in the context of his membership in artistic groups as well as in his private life writing “for the desk drawer.” Finally, because Kharms is as much of an invented character as he is a person, I will consider the attitude and style of the authorial voice in his fictional compositions along with biographical information from the life of Daniil Yuvachev as crucial pieces of the puzzle that is Kharms.

In this paper I will closely examine every point of contact I have found between the mitki aesthetic and Kharms’s persona. If the mitki are never-ending, as Shinkarev describes them, and if they constitute a type that transcends the actual circle of people called the “Mitki,” my goal is to determine whether or not Kharms could be considered an example of this timeless type.
The “Mitki” Remember Daniil Kharms

Neither the passage of time nor the death of the man himself has stopped Petersburg artists of a certain type from treating Daniil Kharms as more than just an inspiration. Regardless of whether they were born years or decades after his final arrest, these artists accord Kharms a type of respect mixed with playful familiarity usually reserved only for deceased friends or family. In this chapter I will analyze the various ways in which the members of the artists’ group “Mitki” have established a beyond-the-grave connection with Daniil Kharms, most of which have involved commemorative art. As I review these instances it will become clear that the pairing of the mitki with Daniil Kharms in this thesis was not chosen at random. This connection has been developed consciously by the latter group over the course of quite a few years, and provides a window into the way the “Mitki” treat their predecessors as well as an interesting study of the lineage of the St. Petersburg avant-garde.

In February of 1998, the “Mitki” fan page mitki.kulichki.net announced the publication of a book which in truth had already been out for about a year, billing it with the phrase “Mitki remember Daniil Kharms.” At first glance, Vspominaia Daniila Kharmsa (Remembering Daniil Kharms) seems to be just that – a book about Kharms authored by the “Mitki.” It is a collection of snappy anecdotes in a Kharmsian voice assembled in a mitki-like jumble and illustrated charmingly by Dmitri Shagin. It is certainly a “Mitki”-related project, with Shagin as a contributor important enough to be credited with co-
authorship (Smirnov-Okhtin and Shagin 1997). In addition, the all-enveloping
stiob and pervasive, insistent anachronism of the book reflect an undeniably
mitki-friendly sensibility behind its creation. For these reasons I have
translated and annotated the story and included my translation, which,
according to the author, is the first to be done of the text, as an appendix to
this thesis. It may come as a surprise, however, that the original creator of
the book, Igor Smirnov-Okhtin, has never been a member of the group “Mitki.”

Igor Smirnov-Okhtin, now a resident of Munich, Germany, got his start
as a writer in the Leningrad underground of the 1960s while the future “Mitki”
were still children (Smirnov-Okhtin 2011). Smirnov is his legal name, but like
Kharms he felt compelled to create a pseudonym for himself. The second
part of his hyphenated surname, Okhtin, is an invention of his own (Kudriats
2004). Smirnov-Okhtin’s krug obshcheniiia, which translates literally to circle
of intercommunication or more loosely to social circle, included Sergei
Dovlatov, Andrei Ar’ev and Yakov Gordin. Dovlatov went on to gain
considerable recognition as an émigré writer in the United States. Ar’ev and
Gordin are now both editors of respected literary magazines in St.
Petersburg. Smirnov-Okhtin himself has won acclaim for his novel Kruzhitsia
Veter (The Wind Swirls), a work that combines real and imagined events into
the form of a novel. Musings in the style of Kharms’s “Anegdotes from the
Life of Pushkin” came to him spontaneously as he worked on more serious

---

3 Unless otherwise noted, information cited about Igor Smirnov-Okhtin’s life and work comes from an
interview which I conducted with him in January 2011.
projects, and although he did not consider himself a follower of Kharms he jotted these ideas down until eventually there were enough of them to fill a book. When he realized that he had enough material on his hands to warrant publication, Smirnov-Okhtin first found a publisher and then decided to seek an illustrator. The text, he felt, called for art that was “i primitivnoe, i dobroe, i smeshnoe” – primitive, kindhearted and funny. Following these criteria Smirnov-Okhtin decided to contact Dmitri Shagin, who read the story and took to the project with enthusiasm. The final product of their collaboration is a slim volume enclosed in a bright yellow jacket with an inscription on the front flap: “All versions of history and culture not corresponding with this book are LIES, FALSEHOOD AND DECEPTION OF THE PEOPLE,” followed by the names of the authors. With this proclamation, the stiob begins before the story has even started. Smirnov-Okhtin and Shagin cast themselves in the roles of censors, asserting the sanctity of their absurd narrative above all others just as Soviet historical revisionists in positions of real power had asserted their own twisted narratives (Smirnov-Okhtin and Shagin 1997).

A short blurb found on the back cover of a later edition, which combines the book and its sequel, gives an even more enlightening look at the authors’ motives. “Iumor knigi – eto iumor absurda, i v etom smysle on blizok oberiutskoi traditsii. No v to zhe vremia kniga parodiruet i samu estetiku oberiutov, vstupaia s ikh tvorchestvom v opredelennyi dialog” (“The humor of this book is humor of the absurd, and in that sense it is close to the OBERIU tradition. But at the same time the book parodies that same
OBERIU aesthetic, entering into a definite dialogue with their creative work”) (Smirnov-Okhtin and Shagin 2009). On the front cover of this volume, entitled Pushkin, Kharms i Drugie (Pushkin, Kharms and Others), Smirnov-Okhtin and Shagin are credited not as co-authors but instead as pravdopistsy, or truth-writers. By labeling their bizarre creation as factual, the authors again slyly comment on the practice of offering absurdity as truth that was all too common among mainstream historians and politicians of the Soviet era in general, and of the Stalinist times in particular.

The text of Remembering Daniil Kharms is comprised of fairy tale-like versions of stories from history, most of which are focused on Russia. The loose narrative starts with Pushkin’s death in a duel and concludes after the Yalta Conference, but somehow all of the action takes place within the space of a single generation. Historical figures from various time periods are introduced as characters, but their personalities and actions are either formed on the basis of warped stereotypes or made into fiction entirely. Kharms makes his appearance as one of the major villains of the story – perhaps it would even be fair to call him the most prominent antagonist. He is violent, cruel and vindictive, exploiting his power as “boss of all writers” to intimidate and terrorize his subordinates. Stalin, on the other hand, is depicted as humble and caring. In a textbook example of Bakhtin’s carnival theory in practice, Smirnov-Okhtin switches the temperaments of two of the story’s main characters. The tyrannical dictator becomes mild and the genteel writer
becomes aggressive - the power dynamic between them is entirely turned on its head, and Stalin fears Kharms's wrath instead of the other way around.

In one anecdote, the villainous Kharms is described as having the tendency to "just grab on and bite" any author who writes displeasing work. When Kharms loses his teeth, and therefore his power to reprimand his subordinates with violence, everyone is relieved. The relief does not last for long, however, because Kharms orders the construction of a set of iron teeth, with which he is able to wound even more viciously. Kharms bites the nose off Gogol, in a move that echoes throughout the canon of Russian literature. The lost nose from Gogol's own short story "The Nose" is evoked most vividly, but connections could also be drawn with Stavrogin's ear biting in Dostoevsky's *The Demons*, the frequent severing of body parts in Kharms's short pieces and the severed ears that turn up in relation to Van Gogh and Evander Holyfield in various pieces of "Mitki" art. Smirnov-Okhtin is not focused narrowly on Kharms's legacy in this book. Instead, he uses Kharms's style to present his own broad commentary on recurring themes in Russian history and literature.

It is worth noting that in Shagin's illustrations Kharms is drawn in a plain work shirt and simple cloth cap rather than his signature top hat and fancy suit. This advances the book's agenda of stripping away Kharms's persona and remaking him entirely new. Without the aid of the props that usually give him an aura of mystery, he is more easily forced into his new role as a hardnosed bureaucrat.
Smirnov-Okhtin and Shagin's book is far from the last “Mitki” effort to commemorate Kharms. “Nogu na nogu zalozhiv Daniil sidit / On zhiv!” “With one leg placed upon the other Daniil sits / He’s alive!” These words are written in the upper right hand corner of a drawing by Ionna Mart’ianova, who is Dmitri Shagin’s daughter and a second-generation contributor to “Mitki” art shows. The subject of the piece is none other than Daniil Kharms himself, sitting in the position described in the rhyme. This drawing presents him in an aspect that is markedly less intimidating than usual – the face that stares gauntly out of most photographs of Kharms, even from his childhood, is seen here wearing a fairly neutral expression that could be interpreted as content or contemplative. The top hat and pipe that often lend him an air of mystery look more like jaunty accessories here. The phrase “He’s alive!” in the inscription recalls both the slogan “Lenin zhil, Lenin zhiv, Lenin budet zhit!” (“Lenin lived, Lenin is alive, Lenin will live on!”) attributed to Mayakovsky and
the “Tsoi zhiv!” (“Tsoi is alive!”) graffiti that began to show up after the untimely and tragic death of rock singer (and friend of the “Mitki”) Viktor Tsoi. All three of these statements are proclamations of the immortal influence of an iconic figure – the death of the body is no barrier to a truly great hero, they seem to say. The exclamation point in each expresses a fervent level of enthusiasm that is common to Communist ideologues, diehard rock fans and mitki.

The text that Mart’ianova uses in this drawing is in fact a variation on a Kharms composition called “Viktoru Vladimirovichu Khlebnikovu” (“To Viktor Vladimirovich Khlebnikov”). Kharms wrote it in 1926, four years after the death of Viktor Khlebnikov. Khlebnikov was a transrational poet who clearly influenced the oberiuty, but from whom they ultimately diverged (Janacek 1996, 335). Viktor Khlebnikov is and was better known by the pseudonym Velimir. Strangely, Kharms uses Khlebnikov’s birth name in the title and pseudonym in the text. Kharms’s fragment reads “Nogu na nogu zalozhiv / Velimir sidit. On zhiv. / Vse.” (“With one leg placed upon the other / Velimir sits. He’s alive. / That’s all,”) (Kharms 2004, 31). Kharms’s verse is almost identical in content to Mart’ianova’s copy - Velimir’s immortality is asserted in the face of the incontrovertible fact of his death. The tone of this assertion, however, is entirely different. For one thing, the exclamation point is absent. Kharms’s words read like a casual, nonchalant statement rather than as a slogan. The connotation is that Velimir’s deathlessness is self-evident – after all, he is sitting right there in front of the speaker – and for that reason there is
no need to shout. The word “vse,” meaning that’s all, is a crucial part of Kharms’s verse that is absent in Mart’ianova’s adaptation. This final word contributes to the nonchalance of the tone, even to the point of sounding somewhat flippant. It boldly states that “Viktoru Vladimirovichu Khlebnikovu” is a complete work despite being a fragment, and that there is nothing more to be said on the matter.

In stark contrast with the vicious, bloodthirsty Kharms of Smirnov-Okhtin’s story, Ionna Mart’ianova’s drawing remembers Kharms as significantly more tender and friendly in his appearance than he seems to have been in real life. The subtle changes that Mart’ianova makes to the wording of “Viktoru Vladimirovichu Khlebnikovu” create a new tone, so that the pronouncement sounds joyful rather than matter-of-fact. Instead of casting Kharms in the role of a power-mad writer bureaucrat, which creates a distance between the author and Kharms, she chooses to discreetly make him more like a mityok and thus pull him closer.
Some of the elder “Mitki” artists have also tried their hands at visually representing Kharms. Founding member of the group Aleksandr Florenskii made a beautiful silkscreen print entitled simply “Kharms” in 2005. As in Mart’ianova’s drawing, Kharms looks friendly – from the expression on his face to his posture to the position of his arms, everything about him seems open and guileless. The subject is wearing a suit jacket and a stylish tie with a pinkish red pattern on a green background. He has a dandyish black hat perched on his head, but is missing his usual pipe. The background of the piece is very simple, with a field of black on the right and white on the left with no indication of any kind of setting. There are no distractions standing in the way of the central focus of the print. Kharms is indicated with an arrow, above which is a caption that gives the name Daniil Ivanovich Yuvachev along with date of birth and estimated date of death. Although the piece is
called “Kharms,” the titular pseudonym is nowhere to be seen. Florenskii’s silkscreen is a humanizing portrait of a person who so often gives the impression of being larger than life. Rather than remake him in yet another fictional pose or celebrate him as deathless, Florenskii chooses to present the man behind the persona. He decides to portray Yuvachev in a posture based on a well-known photograph of the writer, reproduced later in this thesis. In Florenskii’s version, however, the stiff lines of the original are replaced by gentle curves. His work is far more relaxed in mood than its source material, and therefore its subject comes across as less Kharmsian and more mityok-like. This simple fact makes the print a radical reimagining in its own right.

Aleksandr Florenskii, “Kharms”

Dmitri Shagin has created images of Kharms on a number of occasions outside of his work with Smirnov-Okhtin. Most recently, he produced “Russkaia Literatura: Shli gody…” (“Russian Literature: The years...”)
passed…”), a collection of drawings and text published as both a booklet and a 2009 calendar. Starting from Gogol and Pushkin, the publication covers many of the giants of Russian literature: Nekrasov, Dostoevsky, Gorky and more. For each writer there is a block of between six and ten small paintings, showing the stages of life from childhood to near death. Most of these illustrations are accompanied by segments of text taken from the letters of composer and literature enthusiast A.K. Liadov (Shagin 2009).

Conspicuously, the only writer who is missing a text segment is the last of them, Daniil Kharms, whose literary career had not yet begun when Liadov died in 1914. It is telling that when Shagin had to select a single person from among all post-Gorky Russian writers to act as the capstone for this project, he chose Kharms. This spot as the final link in a two-hundred-year literary tradition puts him in place as the standard bearer for his generation. Shagin paints Kharms at nine years old, in the year of Liadov’s death, and then at twenty one, twenty six, twenty nine, thirty two and, finally, thirty six, one year before his own death. The typical Kharmsian gloom comes through in the illustrations: his pipe is present in two of the paintings, and his eyes look sad and pensive in all of them. Most of the paintings are based on photographs of Kharms, and the painting for age twenty-nine is based on a self-portrait. When Shagin sets out to remember Kharms on his own, he does so quite faithfully (Shagin 2011).

The public culmination of the “Mitki” preoccupation with Kharms was an art show mounted in January of 2005 at the St. Petersburg gallery “Borei.”
The show, called “Mitki:Kharms,” was one part of a broader push among Russian artists and Kharms scholars to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of Kharms’s 1905 birth. Mikhail Trofimenkov covered the exhibition for the Russian newspaper Kommersant and mixed some insightful commentary into his review. This is the same Trofimenkov who wrote about Vladimir Shinkarev’s split from the “Mitki” a few years later, and not coincidentally – Trofimenkov is listed on Shinkarev’s roster as an “iskusstvovedushka” (a pet name given to art historians sympathetic to the “Mitki”). In his review of the exhibit, Trofimenkov writes that “K Kharmsu mit’ki otnosiatsia tak zhe, kak, naprimer, k kotam: nezhno i bezalaberno. Na fone svoistvennogo Peterburgu istericheskogo kul’ta pisatelei eto osobenno priatno: chego-chego, a kul’ta lichnosti Kharmsa u mit’kov net,” (“The mitki relate to Kharms just as they do, for example, to cats: tenderly and casually. Against the background of the hysterical cult of writers characteristic of Petersburg this is especially pleasant: all else aside, the mitki don’t have a cult of personality around Kharms,”) (Trofimenkov 2005). Trofimenkov emphasizes the difference between the cool and collected attitude of the “Mitki” and the rabid adoration of other Kharms fans in Petersburg. The “Mitki” have been quietly appreciating Kharms for years, and therefore have no need to prove themselves by praising him to excess (Trofimenkov 2005).

Not everything Trofimenkov has to say about the “Mitki” is entirely positive, however. “Dvoetochie v nazvanii vystavki mozhno legko zamenit’ na znak ravenstva. So svoistvennoi im lozhnoi skromnost’iu mit’ki vkliuchili v
ekspozitsiiu stat’iu literaturoveda Anatoliia Aleksandrova. Ob’iasniaia, kto takie ‘chinari,’ kak imenovali sebia obertiuty, on sravnil s nimi mit’kov, uchastnikov ne menee igrovogo i ne menee ser’eznogo, chem OBERIU, soobshchestva, geneticheski sviazannogo s iskusstvom Leningrada 1930-x godov,” (“The colon in the title of the exhibition could easily be changed into an equals sign. With their characteristic false modesty the mitki included an article by the literature scholar Anatolii Aleksandrov in the exhibition. In his explanation of the ‘chinary,’ as the obertiuty called themselves, he compared them with the mitki, participants in an association no less playful and no less serious than the OBERIU, genetically connected with the art of Leningrad in the 1930s,”) (Trofimenkov 2005). When he mentions the mitki’s “characteristic false modesty” and shows how they slyly promote themselves in the midst of an exhibit ostensibly dedicated primarily to another artist’s work, Trofimenkov hints at a commercial side of the “Mitki” that conflicts with the openness and naiveté that they claim to embrace (Trofimenkov 2005).

Trofimenkov’s article later quotes Dmitri Shagin as saying, “My seichas v p’ese Kharmsa zhivem,” (“We are now living in a Kharms play”). Evidently Shagin still sometimes feels this way six years later. In the winter of 2010-2011, a large part of the ceiling of Shagin’s studio space caved in because snow run-off had infiltrated several stories down from the roof. The appearance of a calamitous leak in an apartment only halfway up a building struck Shagin as entirely topsy-turvy. He referred to this occurrence, and the debacle involved in getting it repaired, as “polnoe Kharmstvo,” “complete
Kharmism.” Describing the most bizarre parts of life as “Kharmstvo” is a way of putting them in context. When it seems that the events around us belong more to the realm of fiction than to the real world, Kharms is a good point of reference for measuring their strangeness.

While there is no “Mitki” cult of personality around Kharms, the ways in which they acknowledge his importance are pervasive and numerous. Whether it is through light satire, straightforward artistic portrayal or simply referring to him in conversation, all of the ways in which the “Mitki” remember Kharms are informed by a deep affection.
Kharms versus the mitki as Artists

In this chapter I will look at Kharms and the mitki as artists, noting the similarities and differences between their respective ways of producing and thinking about their creative output.

In their introduction to *Laboratory of Dreams*, a collection of articles about the Russian avant-garde, John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich describe the way in which Russian artists have gone beyond the limitations of conventional venues and times for sharing art. “Perhaps the most important contribution of the Russian avant-garde was what the Symbolists called ‘life creation’ and their followers in the 1920s ‘life building’. One of the characteristic features of Russian artists and writers as a whole was their transcendence, or blurring, of the dividing line between ‘life’ (the social, ritualized conventions of private and public comportment) and ‘art’ (the creation of aesthetic objects),” (Bowlt and Matich 1996, 8). Yuvachev/Kharms and the “Mitki” are excellent examples of participants in this phenomenon. The alter egos that they created for themselves, Kharms and the mityok, became more than just artists’ monikers: they became inextricable parts of the lives of their creators. When Yuvachev recited his poetry from atop a chest of drawers in performance with his fellow oberiuty and lay down on the bustling Liteinyi Prospect until a crowd of gawkers formed around him, he did so as part of the work of art that was Daniil Kharms. The name was not exclusively a sign-off for his literary creations, but a label for the life he was building.
The mitki are “life creators” as well. There are certain small procedures that an ideal mityok should perform in his daily life, including, for instance, kissing someone three times on the cheeks upon meeting, telling the same stories over and over again ad nauseam and adding the diminutive suffix “-ushka” to words that don’t usually warrant it.⁴ The repeated execution of these practices as a sort of performance shapes the mityok’s life into a whole that is no less of a work of art than the canvases that members of the group “Mitki” produce. In fact, creating art is not even an essential part of being a mityok – hence the presence of a psychologist in their ranks. Familiarity with the tropes of the mitki lifestyle is more central for the would-be mityok than involvement in what is classically considered to be art.

Both Kharms and the mitki are notable for recusing themselves from taking an overt political stand in eras when the mere refusal to participate on one side or the other was in and of itself a political statement. The Soviet Union of Kharms’s era was a terrifying place for nonconformists. Stalin’s purges were underway, ultimately imprisoning, killing and exiling many of the brightest lights of the generation’s progressive intelligentsia. Writing that he was “interested in life only in its absurd manifestation,”⁵ Kharms refused to engage openly with politics (Cornwell 1993, 11). As many scholars have pointed out, however, a political subtext can be read beneath his superficial

---

⁴ Though they could be given credit for helping to re-popularize this last practice, the mitki did not invent it. An example can be found in the title of a folk song from the Leningrad region, “Soldatushki-Rebiatushki” (“Little soldiers-little guys”).

⁵ Translated by Neil Cornwell.
refusal to engage. His “Iz doma vyshel chelovek” (“A man walked out of his house”), published as a children’s poem, provides one of the clearest examples for proponents of this theory. The titular man leaves home one day and never returns, in what has widely been interpreted as a reference to the arrests and subsequent disappearances that were happening all around during the purges. Kharms was in essence an anti-society artist, and as such his concern lay more in coming up with his own idea of how to live than in trying to correct the flaws of the world around him. According to this theory, this tendency did not preclude him from making thinly veiled commentary through works like “Iz doma vyshel chelovek” – absurd on only the most superficial level and sobering if analyzed more closely.

Matvei Yankelevich presents an insightful objection to this view of Kharms’s work. “Kharms’s writing is often forced into political paradigms, thus making it possible to read his stories and even poems as parables of totalitarianism, comments on the violence of power and the absurdity of Soviet life…In fact, Kharms consistently denies us our desire to draw any moral conclusions from his work…" (Yankelevich 2007, 28). Yankelevich argues that we are doing Kharms’s legacy a disservice by reducing him into a victim and nothing else. Kharms did suffer from repression, to be sure, but to interpret all of his work through this lens is to downplay the importance of his own artistic motives, which were primarily apolitical.

The mitki emerged in another tumultuous period of the city’s history. They started their movement toward the end of the Soviet period, at a time
when the reforms of *glasnost’* and *perestroika* were just about to crack open the floodgates of artistic expression. In this heated climate, many were either rabidly for reform or rabidly against. The mitki did not openly embrace a political standpoint of any kind, progressive or conservative. Alexandar Mihailovic, summing up the mitki position on politics, writes that “the *mit’ki*’s insistence on gentlemanly passivity disguises a complex political and aesthetic agenda. The *mit’ki* adopt a deliberately ambiguous stance before emblems of authority that would seem incompatible with their Soviet dissident provenance,” (Mihailovic 2006, 51). Mihailovic goes on to describe the mitki agenda below the surface-level passivity: their goals include “[searching] for a democratic legacy in Russian history” and focusing on failure as a means of “demystifying ideological pieties” surrounding Russian masculinity and military might (Mihailovic 2006, 51, 53). This shared reputation for political apathy is a decisive link between the mitki and Kharms, both of whom appear to be apathetic because they have consciously dropped out from politics with a particular agenda in mind. If political stance were the only criterion involved in making the decision, Kharms would definitely fall into the category of mityok.

Both Kharms and the mitki include dressing up as a part of their life creation. One “Mitki” exhibit, entitled “Mitkipolaroid blow-up,” saw the artists engage in an unusual kind of dress-up by editing their own faces into paintings of their favorite movie characters (Gruppa Mit’ki 1996). Most often, however, the mityok dresses in a particular stylized sailor outfit, typically
consisting of a rag-tag combination of a *tel’niaskha*, quilted jacket and pants, a furry hat with sticking-out ear flaps, and warm boots. Their philosophy runs in direct opposition to the dress code established by a certain subset of Soviet youth, called *stiliagi* by derisive onlookers. These youth would make it their business to follow European and American fashion trends as closely as possible, sporting brightly colored patterns and coiffed hair that defied the norms of Soviet times (Yurchak 2006, 170-75). The mitki, Shinkarev writes, are categorically opposed to this sort of attire; “…mitek odevaetsia vo chto popalo, no ni v koem sluchae ne proizvodit vpechatlenie popsovo odetogo cheloveka” (“…a mityok dresses in whatever comes along, but this in no case produces the impression of a person dressed in a pop style”) (Shinkarev 2010, 24).

Kharms absolutely did not subscribe to the mitki school of thought when it came to clothing. In fact, he could almost be considered a proto-*stiliaga* with his penchant for wearing foreign-made finery. His pose as Sherlock Holmes involved dressing up in a deerstalker cap and fancy English...
suit. Another character that he created and occasionally embodied, a fictional Kharms brother called Ivan, was also snappily dressed, wearing a suit, monocle and bowler hat. No less fashionable was the pose of Kharms itself, which usually called for a dramatic outfit including a top hat, elaborate watch and chain, stiff collar and chic tie. Kharms did not keep these outfits private as he did with so much of his writing. He wore them on the street, making his dress-up experiments into performances for all of Leningrad.

The preceding discussion of differing attitudes about clothing reflects a deeper question. Ever since Pushkin’s writing heralded the dawn of modern Russian culture, it has been the basis of one of the most poignant and
insistently recurring dialogues in literature and art: should Russia look to the
West as an inspiration for modernization, or should it instead stay as faithful
as possible to its Slavic roots? Modernizers after the tradition of Peter the
Great have advocated for the adoption of European, and more recently
American, innovations and habits as a way of keeping up with the rest of the
world. On the other side of the issue, figures like Fyodor Dostoevsky have
touted the wisdom of common Russian folk and the spiritual foundation
offered by the Orthodox Christian faith as paragons for the rest of the world to
follow. The mitki and Kharms have, inevitably, each been forced to deal in
their own way with the ramifications of this important ideological divide.

The mitki generally take a stance against Western things. This
opposition exists mostly in the realm of fashion, as discussed above, but can
at times be seen in other places as well. Shinkarev describes the mitki’s
distrust of complex-seeming items manufactured outside of the Soviet Union.
These unfamiliar items, which range in scale from a can of Heineken beer to
the Pershing rocket, are associated with the creeping in of Western influence
on daily life. A mityok should refer to these foreign objects with the somewhat
rude-sounding neologism *shmudaki* and, in a somewhat strange personifying
twist, treat them “strogo, no spravedlivo” (“strictly, but fairly”) (Shinkarev 2010,
65-67). David Bowie, as a purveyor of Western pop music, is singled out as a
particular antagonist of the mitki. In their stories, his use of *shmudaki* and
stylish dress place him as the antithesis of mitki simplicity. The mitki
eventually succeed in assimilating Bowie by dressing him up in a *tel’niashka*
and adding diminutives to the end of his name, replacing his individualized Western identity with a communal Russian one.

The mitki’s relationship with Western culture is complicated by the obvious impact of French Impressionists and other European artists on their painting style. For example, the broad brush strokes and overall dream-like quality of mityok Vladimir Tikhomirov’s “Pristan’” (“Wharf”), not to mention the tranquil waterside setting, strongly bring to mind the work of Claude Monet in particular.

Vladimir Tikhomirov, “Pristan’”

This interest in the Impressionists can be traced back to the elder Shagin and his compatriots in the Arefyev circle of neorealists. Roald Mandelstam was a member of the group who joined at a time when most of the other artists involved already knew one another. “Poznakomilsia s
khudozhnikom Sh. Shvartsem, a cherez nego – s gruppoi molodykh
khudozhnikov, izgnannykh iz khudozhhestvennoi shkoly za uvlechenie
zapadnym iskusstvom,” (“[Mandelstam] became acquainted with the artist Sh.
Schwartz, and through him – with a group of young artists who had been
kicked out of art school for their interest in Western art,”) (Dolinin 2003, 264).
One of the defining factors that held the mitki’s artistic forefathers together as
a group was their shared use of a mix of Western European painting styles
and Russian avant-garde style, deliberately excluding the Socialist Realist
style, to depict Russian life. The mitki do not exactly reject Western culture
despite their stated opposition to its trappings. It would be more accurate to
say that they first attempt to treat it with their trademark tenderness until they
can eventually russify it, and what they cannot russify they leave by the
wayside.

Kharms, on the other hand, succumbed to the allure of Western culture
in a few unambiguous ways. His fascination with England is among these.
Kharms scholars suspect that his pseudonym is a combination of the English
word “charms,” the Germanic family name Harms, and Holmes, the surname
of the most famous creation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, an Englishman who
was among Kharms’s favorite writers. Kharms’s fondness for Conan Doyle’s
work is given further testimony by the aforementioned deerstalker cap and
pipe outfit.

One way in which Kharms did hold fast to a Russian identity was in his
practice of the Orthodox faith. Kharms was a consistent churchgoer even at
the height of the early Soviet push toward atheism. His faith was passed down to him by his father, Ivan Yuvachev. The elder Yuvachev was an imposing figure; a former sailor who had become a political prisoner for his activity with the revolutionary group “The People’s Will,” he found a new zeal for Orthodoxy during his exile and went on to write religious tracts, become friends with Anton Chekhov and correspond with Lev Tolstoy (Yankelevich 2007, 18). His son Daniil also devoted a great deal of his time to pondering matters of spiritual importance, writing many speculative journal entries on topics like paradise and holding forth on theology with friends. These friends included the group known as the chinary, a private coterie that overlapped a significantly in membership with the OBERIU. One of the non-oberiut chinary with whom Kharms certainly discussed religion was the Jewish born Orthodox Christian scholar Yakov Druskin, future savior of Kharms’s manuscripts.

In his manual, Shinkarev describes Orthodoxy as one of the mitki ideals. He writes, in a tone hinting at stiob, that the mitki are believers in the tsarist motto “pravoslavie, samoderzhavie, narodnost” (“Orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality”), but are usually too easygoing to commit to upholding these principles (Shinkarev 2010, 7-8). Perhaps it is partially because of this easygoingness and partially because of the religious background of many of their teachers – Arefyev, Schwartz and Vasmi of the Arefyev circle were all Jewish – that the “Mitki” as a group of artists do not lean very heavily on the rhetoric of Christianity in practice. They do, however, maintain a relative
seriousness on the topic that seems out of keeping with their overall tendency
toward lightheartedness and irreverent humor.

In 1990 a text by Kharkov writer Mikhail Shil'man called “Evangelie ot
mit’kov” (“The Gospel according to the mitki”) began to circulate. It is a brief
document that recounts the story of Jesus in a mitki-like voice. One of the
most memorable moments is a verse in which an angel proclaims to Mary
“…rodit’sia u tebia, sestrenka, krutoi chuvak i budet on nastoiashchim
mit’kom” (“...little sister, a cool dude will be born to you, and he will be a real
mityok”) (Shil'man 2000). The “Mitki” reacted to the proliferation of this text by
writing an open letter. In this letter they announce that the “Evangelie ot
mit’kov” has no relationship to the group “Mitki,” and that “Evangelie zhe ‘ot
mit’kov’ mit’ki sovetuiut zashvyrnut’ podal’she, ne chitaia ili ‘povesit’ v sortir’,
особенno tem, kto v Boga Veruet,” (“The mitki advise throwing this gospel
‘according to the mitki’ in the trash without reading it or ‘hanging it up in the
john,’ especially for those who believe in God,”) (Severov 1997). Though it is
lighthearted, this very deliberate creation of distance between the “Mitki”
themselves and a mitki-inspired document that could be considered heretical
points to some sort of reverence for Russian Orthodoxy that, while it does not
rival Kharms’s devotion, should certainly be considered a part of their group
aesthetic.

Another example of the mitki behaving in a way that might seem out of
sync with their overall image is their rejection of the label “avant-garde.”
Shinkarev expresses his feelings about the term in an essay on Aleksandr
Florenskii’s painting. “Eshche ia slyshal, chto Florenskogo nazyvali maloponiatnym slovom ‘avangardist’. Kak v literature avangardisty – obychno te, kto ne umeet pisat’ interesno, tak v izobrazitel’nom iskusstve – eto, kto ne zanimaetsia khoroshei zhivopis’iu. Tak chto ia Florenskogo ‘avangardistom’ sovsem ne schitaiu” (“I have also heard that they’ve called Florenskii by the hard-to-understand word ‘avant-gardist’. Just like in literature, where avant-gardists are usually those who can’t write interestingly, in graphic art it is those who don’t make good paintings. And so I don’t consider Florenskii an avant-gardist at all”) (Shinkarev 2010, 161). In one stroke, Shinkarev distances himself and his group from the title of “avant-garde” and praises his friend’s artwork by setting up a negative definition for the term and contrasting Florenskii with it. Although he too is often dubbed an “avant-gardist,” Kharms chose the label “Left” to describe the work of the OBERIU. By doing so he was “catching the end of a now very dangerous wave,” as the word was rapidly falling out of favor in the ever-changing cycle of Stalinist terminology (Yankelevich 2007, 21). Their creation of progressive art combined with their mutual refusal to define it by currently popular terms constitutes another link between the mitki and Kharms.

The trend of circles of collaborators like the mitki and the OBERIU coming together to make, discuss and present their creative work has been enormously important in the history of Russian art, music and literature. The formation and dissolution of these groups is sometimes connected with the beginning or end of cultural eras, but is just as often traceable to the
whimsical nature of personal relationships between artists. Some groups have been quite formal about defining themselves as a unit, choosing fanciful names and drawing up statements to prove the superiority of their brand of art. The influential Moscow Futurists of Hylaea are an example of this type. Their bold manifesto declared that they were the true poets because of the specific way in which they thought about and created art, and that the cultural giants of bygone days, including but not limited to Pushkin, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, were to be rejected (Burliuk, et al. 1988). Other groups, like the Arefyev circle formed by Dmitri Shagin’s father Vladimir and his friends, had interests in common that led them to band together but never felt obliged to write a manifesto or settle on a made-up name (Volkov 529).

The OBERIU and the “Mitki” are both somewhere in the middle of this spectrum of Russian artistic collectives. They are each legitimatized by a name and a written document. In the case of the OBERIU that document is a manifesto, and in the case of the “Mitki” it is Shinkarev’s serial novel. Neither collective, however, binds its members with any kind of a strict obligation to make art in a certain way. The “Mitki” organize shows together, but some artists are regarded as members of the group despite participating only occasionally. The OBERIU was a much shorter-lived group, and therefore did not accrue the same sort of legacy of members coming and going. Their manifesto states that “My, oberiuty, - chestnye rabotniki svoego iskusstva” (“We, the oberiuty, are honest laborers of our art”). Similarly to the mitki and the Futurists, the oberiuty had a broad definition of “our art.” Their group was
not confined to one genre, but included visual artists, musicians, film-makers and others among its ranks in addition to writers. Kharms and his friend and fellow poet Aleksandr Vvedensky could loosely be considered analogous to Shagin and Shinkarev as a pair of close friends instrumental in the founding of their artistic movement.

Oleg Grigor’ev is perhaps the most vital link between the mitki movement and the OBERIU. Grigor’ev was a close friend and inspiration to the “Mitki.” He died in 1992 of a liver ailment stemming from substance abuse, leaving behind around ten books. Most of these are made up of poetry but some feature artwork or prose. One book, compiled between 1991 and 1993 and published posthumously, is a collection of Grigor’ev’s poems with prints, based on the poems and created by “Mitki” artists, surrounding them as illustrations (Dolinin 2003, 159-60). Another testament to the enduring affection the “Mitki” feel toward Grigor’ev is Shagin’s huge painting of the poet. He is depicted in a pose reminiscent of the Orthodox Saint Seraphim or the Catholic Saint Francis, wearing a tel’niashka and rolled up trousers and feeding doves in the light-blue shallows at the edge of the Gulf of Finland.

Born in 1943, Grigor’ev was older than the core members of the “Mitki,” and was a friend to the Arefyev circle as well. He was an underdog who got into trouble with the law over petty matters, a heavy drinker, a painter, printmaker and genius poet who earned a living as a watchman, boiler room attendant and courtyard caretaker (Dolinin 2003, 160). For all these reasons
Grigor’ev came as close as anyone to living the life of the archetypal mityok. To this day, however, when someone seeks a point of reference for describing Grigor’ev’s poetry, the stock phrase is something along the lines of “a continuation of the OBERIU tradition.” Like Kharms, he turned his skills to children’s poetry as well as grown-up fare. The connection between all of his work and the work of his OBERIU predecessors is immediately evident, but there is also a certain quality to Grigor’ev’s writing that deviates from Kharms’s style (Iasnov 2002). A careful look at Kharms’s poem “Petrov i Komarov” alongside Grigor’ev’s “Komary” presents one example of this close relationship. Kharms’s poem reads:

Petrov:
Ei Komarov!
Davai lovit’ komarov!

Komarov:
Net, ia k etomu eshche ne gotov;
Davai luchshe lovit’ kotov!

(Kharms 2004, 140)

In Matvei Yankelevich’s translation, as “Petrov and Moskitov”:

Petrov:
Hey Moskitov!
Let’s catch mosquitoes!

Moskitov:
No way, I’m not ready for that;
Let’s better catch cats.

(Kharms and Yankelevich 2007, 49)

While Grigor’ev’s poem reads:

Moi priiatel’ Valerii Petrov
Nikogda ne kusal komarov.
Komary zhe ob etom ne znali
I Petrova chast’ kusali.

(Iasnov 2002)
In my own prose translation:

My acquaintance Valery Petrov
Never bit mosquitoes.
The mosquitoes didn’t know that
And they bit Petrov often.

The commonalities between these two poems are striking. Both consist of two rhyming couplets that combine to tell a simple, childlike story. Not only are mosquitoes central to both Kharms’s and Grigor’ev’s verses, but the same end rhyme – the genitive plural form of the word for mosquitoes (komarov) paired with a surname ending in “-ov’ - is used for the first couplet of each. This similarity combined with the recurrence of the name Petrov seems to be enough to indicate that the likeness between the two compositions is not just a coincidence. It seems likely that Grigor’ev read Kharms’s poem and deliberately created his own verse as an homage.

That said, there are a few key differences in style that set the poems apart. Kharms’s “Petrov i Komarov” is entirely absurd from start to finish. The characters are presented without any sort of commentary or back story from the narrator, and their dialogue proceeds in a way that is completely bizarre. Petrov’s initial suggestion that the two should catch mosquitoes is no more or less strange than Komarov’s answer that it would be better to catch cats. There seems to be no logic guiding the exchange between the two, and no clear moral or punch line to be gleaned from its conclusion. In fact, the whole thing seems rather like a clever play on words – in a tongue twister-like way, each line has the same final syllable.
Grigor’ev’s “Komary,” like a lot of children’s literature, is quite absurd in a fundamental way. It proceeds from the initial idea that a man might intentionally bite mosquitoes, and that other mosquitoes might be aware of whether or not he did so. Be this as it may, the poem has many of the qualities of a conventional narrative that are missing from Kharms’s verse. There is some degree of context given by the authorial voice: Petrov is introduced as an acquaintance of the speaker and he is at least given a first name, additions which approach character development. The piece advances from one couplet to the next with its own bizarre internal logic; although the set-up is strange, it feeds directly into the punch line. In this poem, Grigor’ev’s writing seems to operate within pre-established literary conventions. He partially observes the conventions of children’s literature, and partially observes the conventions of Kharmsian nonsense. This studious obedience to the patterns of earlier forms is absent from most of Kharms’s writing. Beyond that distinction, there is more alike than different in the styles of the two poets.

One thing that Kharms and the mitki certainly have in common is a strong, almost obsessive fixation on the heroes of Russian literature. In both cases, Pushkin and Gogol are the recipients of the lion’s share of this attention. Moreover, both Kharms and the mitki use their own versions of Pushkin and Gogol as characters in fiction. True to form, Kharms depicts the two revered writers in utterly absurd situations. His short dramatic work “Pushkin i Gogol’” (“Pushin and Gogol”) has the two physically tripping over...
one another, exclaiming in surprise each time (Kharms 2003, 144).

“Anegdoty iz zhizni Pushkina” (“Anegdotes from the Life of Pushkin”) finds Pushkin throwing rocks and falling out of chairs together with his foolish sons (Kharms 2003, 490-91; Kharms and Yankelevich 2007, 82). In both cases, Kharms reverses the respect usually accorded to these literary greats. By making them act like buffoons, he pokes fun at their omnipresence in Russian culture and turns them into clowns instead of heroes.

The mitki, also true to form, treat Pushkin, Gogol and many other classic Russian literary figures as friends of the group. Ignoring the Futurists' call to “Throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity,” the mitki entirely disregard the chronological gap that makes actual friendship with these writers impossible (Burliuk, et al. 1988, 51). Shagin’s drawing “Nu shto, brat Gogol?” (“What's up, brother Gogol?”), featured on the cover of the “Russkaia Literatura: Shli gody…” calendar, is typical of this attitude. Gogol and a tel’niashka-wearing mityok are standing close to one another, holding a friendly conversation. Over their shoulders is Peter and Paul Fortress, a Petersburg landmark that has remained unchanged in appearance since Gogol’s time, and which can thereby act as a bridge between the mid-19th and late 20th centuries. A print by Shinkarev, found in his collection Sobstvenno Literatura (Actually Literature), has a mityok holding a mug and standing next to Lermontov and Pushkin. Beneath them is the caption “Mit’ka nagrazhdaiut zolotoi kruzhkoi” (“They present a mityok with the golden cup”) (Shinkarev 2000, 222). A note explains that the
golden cup is an award dating back to Petrine times that allows the bearer to drink cheaply at taverns operated by the tsar.

By choosing Lermontov and Pushkin as the givers of this gift, Shinkarev makes them complicit in the mityok’s lifestyle. In fact, they even look a little like mitki themselves in the print. It is possible, after all, to ascribe the term “mityok” to someone not associated in the least bit with the movement. This is, to be sure, an irreverent way to treat some of Russia’s greatest literary heroes. It is a different brand of irreverence, however, than the kind displayed by Kharms. When the mitki refer to Pushkin, Gogol and Lermontov as their brothers, they welcome them into their group. The same is not true of the term oberiut. A sense of independence from time that allows for such anachronistic inclusiveness is one of the characteristics that set the mitki apart from the oberiuty.
**Kharms versus the mitki on Alcohol Abuse, Violence and Sex**

**Alcohol Abuse**

As bohemian artists, Kharms and the mitki often confronted topics considered taboo. In this section I will examine their attitudes concerning alcohol abuse, sex and violence.

The following excerpt from Kharms’s journal entry for January 24, 1938, allows a glimpse into the kind of life the writer led even as he was running out of money for food. “Seichas 9 chasov utra. Ia tol’ko chto vernulsia s Petrogradskoi storony. Snachala byl u Valentiny Efimovny. Tam byli Mikhailov i Anna Semenovna. V 1 Anna Semenovna poshla domoi; ia provodil ee i poshel k Lipavskim. Tuda zhe prishli Mikhailov i Valentina Efimovna v 2 ch. U Lipavskikh v gostiakh Slonimskie. Mnogo vodki i piva. Okolo 4 chasov vse razoshlis’.” (“Now it is 9 o’clock in the morning. I only just returned from the Petrograd side [a region in St. Petersburg a bit north of the city center]. First I was at Valentina Efimovna’s. Mikhailov and Anna Semenovna were there. At 1 Anna Semenovna walked home; I accompanied her and then walked to the Lipavskiis’. Mikhailov and Valentina arrived at that same place at 2. The Slonimskiis were there as guests of the Lipavskiis’. Lots of vodka and beer. Around 4 o’clock everyone dispersed”) (Kharms 2003, 802).

The late nights spent socializing with friends and fellow artists, the coming and going of guests at all hours of the night and the communal heavy drinking described in Kharms’s journal all match up with typical parts of the
way of life of the mityok as Shinkarev originally describes it. In fact, if the names of Kharms’s drinking companions were switched to, for example, Vladimir Shinkarev, Andrei Filippov, the Florenskiis and the Shagins, this entry could easily be taken for a description of a mid to late 80s mityovka (mitki gathering).

The early years of the “Mitki” art group, and the early versions of the mitki characters as described by Shinkarev, were marked by an almost superhuman level of alcohol consumption. Shinkarev explains that the mitki’s binge drinking behavior is actually a sort of ritual contest. Each mityok tries to one-up his companions by drinking the most, and complaining the most bitterly when others seem to be hogging the bottle. The three mitki methods of sharing wine illustrate this mock-competitive spirit. “To share evenly” actually means to pour out even servings, but if a mityok offers “to share like brothers” he will drink most of the wine himself, and if wants “to share like Christians,” it means that he intends to take all of the wine (Shinkarev 2010, 10). For the first eight years of the mitki movement, drinking to excess was the foremost social activity in the group’s lifestyle. Although the majority of the “Mitki” have been sober for nearly twenty years now, the group’s nostalgia for besotted days gone by has yet to fade. From 2007 to 2009, the “Mitki” mounted a traveling exhibition called “Etiketi,” consisting entirely of paintings of wine and beer labels (Skobkina 2010, 40, 46). Even in their sobriety, the “Mitki” reserve a special place in their hearts for imagery associated with drinking.
In Kharms’s fiction, drinking is an occasional set-piece rather than an omnipresent theme. In the story “Starukha” (“The Old Woman”), for example, the anxiety-laden narrator twice attempts to unwind by drinking vodka with his friend Sakerdon Mikhailovich. The first time takes place during the rising action of the story. After parting with Sakerdon, the narrator returns home with the express intention of writing something impressive. His erratic behavior during this time, including “shiver[ing] all over with anticipation” could be explained away as the product of his excitement and his recent (and presumably copious) vodka consumption. After the narrator’s attempt at writing fails, an old woman enters his apartment and dies. He is, understandably, very distraught, but does not go to the authorities.

The second time Sakerdon and the narrator drink together a climactic moment takes place over the table. When Sakerdon jokingly explains his preference for dead people over children, saying “You have to admit, dead people don’t barge into our lives like that,” the narrator retorts with a cry of “They do barge in!” (Kharms and Yankelevich 2007, 100). At this moment in the story, it seems that perhaps the narrator is trying nobly to tell his friend the dreadful truth about the corpse lying in his apartment, but is rendered ineloquent by his intoxication. As the story progresses, however, it becomes increasingly evident that mere drunkenness cannot explain this man’s abnormal behavior and crooked narration. Heavy drinking is a relatively

6 Matvei Yankelevich translates this story beautifully (Kharms and Yankelevich 2007, 89-112). My English quotations from “Starukha” come from his translation.
minor factor when considering the reliability of a narrator who is, in all likelihood, entirely insane. Kharms uses alcohol as one of many contributors to the absurdity of his scenario, granting it no more power than any other contributor to the chaos.

**Violence**

"Mitki nikogo ne khotiat pobedit'!" ("The Mitki don’t want to defeat anyone!") is the oft-repeated motto of the mitki, coined by Dmitri Shagin. The spirit of this motto extends to all facets of life for the true mityok, encouraging tenderness in every interaction with people and animals and sympathy for anyone who is in a tough spot. It follows then that a mityok should abhor physical violence as the antithesis of tenderness and as a method of defeating others. For the most part, this hypothesis seems to hold true in practice.

"Mitki" member Vasilii Golubev’s beautiful woodcut "Mit’ki otbiraiut pistolet u Maiakovskogo" ("Mitki take the pistol away from Mayakovskoy") drops two mitki into Moscow in the year 1930 and has them stop the suicide of a poet whom they admire. One calls for help on the telephone while the other grabs Mayakovskoy’s gun-wielding arm, saying “Eto ne vykhod!” ("This is no way out!"). By placing figures that resemble him and his mitki friends into a historical scene and having them disrupt its violent outcome, Golubev reaffirms that at least in theory, mitki tenderness is not bounded by the constraints of the possible.
This mixture of excessive tenderness and boundless compassion, quite rare in the Soviet Union or Russia, or anywhere in the modern world for that matter, is the mityok’s preferred method of bridging the gap between people. Physical violence is rare in the world of the mitki, and when it does occur it is cause for an uproar. “Iashcheritsa i zakon,” (“The Lizard and the Law”) and “Nevesta Fila” (“The Fiancée of Fil”) are two of the classic mitki stories whose primary purpose is to rise to the realm of legend by being repeated over and over again by members of the movement (Shinkarev 2010, 60-62, 51-53). Each of these two stories contains an episode of violence that, in the grand scheme of things, is a minor incident. In each case the mityok
telling the story blows this moment of cartoonish violence completely out of proportion, making it out to be a devastating tragedy.

“Iasheritsa i zakon” is a tale from Shinkarev about the family of Boris Grebenschchikov,7 the first internationally known Soviet rock star and a friend and musical member of the “Mitki.” In the story, Grebenschchikov receives a beautiful green lizard as a gift. He and his wife are very fond of it, but his young son, Gleb, feels an inexplicable hatred for the creature. One day Gleb shoots the lizard with a pistol, killing it. His parents are very distraught, and Gleb is characterized as nearly demonic in his remorseless bloodlust. A retelling of this story follows, however, in which Dmitri Shagin recasts Gleb as a hero for his deed. Shagin starts off by explaining that the year in which the action took place, 1988, was a year of the dragon. Because a dragon-like beast is said to be the antithesis of Christ, the sudden appearance of dragon images all around have made the young boy wary. Equating the lizard at home with the dragons he sees on the street, Gleb decides to take a stand and vanquish the creature for the good of humanity, thereby repeating the feat of St. George. Whether Gleb is a menace or a savior, it is clear that the mitki narrating his story view his act in epic terms. This killing, whether it is a murder in cold blood or a feat of bravery, is blown up into the centerpiece of

7 Grebenshchikov has a Kharms connection of his own. His song “Marina” starts with the phrase “Marina mne skazala” (“Marina said to me”). This phrase is closely based on the opening line of a Kharms composition, “Odnazhdy Marina skazala mne” (“One day Marina said to me”). Marina was the first name of Kharms’s second wife.
these two stories precisely because its violence breaks the tranquil routine of the mitki lifestyle.

In “Nevesta Fila,” the young mityok Andrei Filippov, nicknamed Fil, brings a woman named Olen’ka into the studio of his friend and fellow mityok Aleksandr “Florenych” Florenskii. Olen’ka ends up leaving the encounter upset, with a superficial knife wound underneath her eye. The intrigue of the story lies in the fact that there are two entirely different accounts of what went on inside Florenskii’s place – Fil’s version and Florenych’s version. In Fil’s version, Olen’ka is his intended bride and although he is “tired as a dog,” hungry and nervous about the reception they will get, Fil is excited about the prospect of introducing her to Florenych. When they arrive Florenych is already very drunk. In an extraordinary display of drinking prowess, he hastily drains the entire bottle of wine that Fil has brought as a gift. Florenych has prepared a plate of eggs and ham, which he proceeds to eat up promptly without offering any to his hungry guests. He treats Olen’ka boorishly, groping her and carrying on with no thought to his friend’s feelings. Fil, unable to contain his anger, throws a knife at Florenych, but it goes wide and grazes Olen’ka’s face instead. In this version, Florenych is portrayed as the aggressor, and it is he who is ultimately responsible for driving Fil to an act of violence. The audience is meant to side with Fil because he is the underdog in this scenario, someone downtrodden yet noble who, most importantly, entered the situation with no desire to start trouble.
The second version has Florenych sitting alone in his studio, hungry and “tired as a dog.” Fil enters drunkenly, holding two women under his arms. One of them, Olen’ka, he calls his fiancée, but only as a cruel joke. Fil immediately sits down, eating Florenych’s supper and drinking up all of his wine. He then begins to fondle the other woman, at which Olen’ka becomes visibly unhappy. Florenych, wishing to calm the distressed Olen’ka, tries to make the case that Fil is only acting as he is because he has had too much to drink. Overhearing this, Fil is overcome with rage and reacts by, again, taking a knife from the table and throwing it at Florenych. In this version as well, the knife misses him and grazes Olen’ka beneath the eye. Fil is the villain of this story, and Florenych its hero. As in the first variant, the blame for the violence falls to the aggressor. This time, Fil is the guilty party not so much because he was the one to throw the knife, but because he was the one who entered the situation in a position of power which he abused.

After both versions of the story have been told in full, the narrator reveals that neither of them actually happened. Filippov and Florenskii do in fact have a friend named Olen’ka who has a scar under her left eye, but the scar was from a childhood accident and has nothing whatsoever to do with her association with the mitki. What’s more, Shinkarev adds wryly, there never have been and never will be any eggs and ham in Florenskii’s studio. Shinkarev explains that “Oba rasskaza nesut v sebe odnu i tu zhe nekhitruiu moral’…Otritsatel’nyi personazh – sytyi, p’ianyi, dovol’nyi, pol’zuiushchiisia uspekhom; polozhitel’nyi – bednyi, bol’noi, golodnyi,” (“Both stories carry
within themselves one and the same guileless moral...The negative character is well-fed, drunk, satisfied, enjoying success; the positive is poor, sick, hungry") (Shinkarev 2010, 53). Taken together the stories comprise a sort of fable, the purpose of which is to encourage the reader to identify with the downtrodden. Pedantic messages of this type are rare in Shinkarev's writing, where sardonic wit is usually the weapon of choice. This moment of more or less earnest moralizing brings home the sincerity of the mitki’s dedication to nonaggression.

The only parts of the mitki aesthetic that don’t seem to line up with their general attitude about violence are their exaggerated love for television serials and movies featuring soldiers, gangsters and the like, and their enthusiastic appropriation of Soviet and Russian military imagery. The first seeming incongruity is easy to explain. As Vladimir Shinkarev explains in the mitki manual and Shagin confirms, both real and fictional mitki endlessly watch and quote from films like 1969’s “Beloe Solntse Pustyni” (“White Sun of the Desert”), an adventure story about a Soviet officer whose goal is to get back home from an assignment on the shore of the Caspian Sea by any means necessary (Shinkarev 2010, 24-25; Shagin 2011; Kuznetsov 1969). Films like this one include violence that is highly stylized and exaggerated, often serving more as an excuse to cheer for the heroes and jeer at the villains than anything else. Furthermore, although the mityok is naïve, he is not so naïve as to be unable to separate fiction from reality. He is able to
enjoy the action going on in a film without endorsing physical violence in real life.

The mitki’s admiration of the military is a somewhat tougher question to sort out. The navy is the military branch that the mitki glorify most conspicuously, by wearing the blue and white tel’niashki typical of sailors and by creating art like Tatiana Shagina’s collage “Ura podvodnikam!” (“Hurray for submarines!”). It is not exactly the contemporary Russian navy nor the Soviet navy that is being glorified, however, but rather, as Alexandar Mihailovic notes in his article “In the Heat of the Boiler Room,” a somewhat romanticized version of the late-19th and early-20th Century Russian imperial navy. The Russian imperial navy of this era is not celebrated for any victories it may have achieved so much as it is remembered for being soundly defeated in 1905’s Battle of Tsushima, a decisive moment in Russia’s loss of the Russo-Japanese War. The mitki consider failure an acceptable outcome, especially when the alternative is defeating someone else. As Mihailovic points out, “the mit’ki use the relatively egalitarian ideals of the pre-revolutionary Russian naval officers corps as a touchstone for their anti-hierarchical social principles, taking on the behavior of a company of sailors whose members devote themselves wholeheartedly to the ethical sustenance of the group,” (Mihailovic 2006, 51). Even with regards to the armed forces, the mitki

---

8 Interestingly, failure is also a recurring theme in Kharms’s work. For Kharms, it manifests most often as failure to write. The aforementioned failure of the narrator to write in “Starukha” is a good example, as is Kharms’s fragment “Today I wrote nothing. Doesn’t matter,” (Kharms and Yankelevich 2007, 120).
consider it more important for comrades to treat each other as brothers than for them to form a unit that is effective at accomplishing its goals. The comparisons made between the mitki and Western hippies, although sometimes rather shaky, seem more credible when one takes into account this preference for a military that promotes brotherhood over conquest.

Kharms’s world, in distinct contrast to the tender lifestyle preferred by the mitki, abounds with unabashedly gory, gratuitous violence. In Kharms’s compositions someone is almost always being defeated in one way or another, and more often than not the defeat comes as a result of a brutal physical attack. What’s more, the defeated person is not lionized as he is in the mitki universe, but rather trampled on and silenced by the victor. Mark Lipovetsky advances a theory about the internal logic of violence in Kharms’s “Sluchai” (“Incidences” in Neil Cornwell’s translation and “Events” in Matvei Yankelevich’s). He argues that “in acts of violence Kharms’s characters are literally not themselves: they expand their being toward the other, taking the notion of ‘getting in touch with your fellow man’ to an extreme. Naturally, if the expansion of the ‘self’ outside its limits into the territory of the ‘other’ is consistent enough, it leads either to the ousting of the other or, more frequently, to his or her complete elimination. The equivalence between violence and communication excludes the necessity of a cause for the former.” (Lipovetsky 2007, 203). Causeless violence, and not overwhelming tenderness, is the method by which boundaries are transcended in Kharms’s
world. This characteristic of his writing certainly calls into question the viability of labeling Kharms as a mityok.

The short piece “Griaznaia Lichnost’” (“The Filthy Personage”), from a different Kharms cycle called “Garmonius,” contains two scenes of senseless murder that follow the same pattern that Lipovetsky notices in “Sluchai.” The story follows a nasty, lecherous man named Fedka. At the very beginning of the story a fight is recounted play by play until it concludes with Fedka killing his opponent, and no motive is ever given. “Senka whacked Fedka in the face and hid under the dresser. Fedka pulled Senka out from under the dresser with a fire poker and tore off his right ear. Senka wriggled out of Fedka’s grip and ran off to the neighbors with the torn-off ear in his hands. But Fedka caught up with Senka and launched a sugar bowl at his head. Senka fell and, it seems, died. So Fedka put his things into a suitcase and left for Vladivostok.” Since these are the first sentences of the story and no information has been given about either character, we have no way of knowing how the brawl started or what is at stake. All that is shown is the brawl itself, entirely stripped of context. In this stark setting, the back-and-forth does indeed seem very much like a twisted form of conversation.

As the story draws to a close a second episode of violence occurs as a matching bookend to the first. Fedka brawls with a new character called Nikolai who, like Senka, is given no introduction or distinguishing characteristics of any kind. This second fight is almost exactly the same as

---

9 I have included my translation of the full text of “Griaznaia Lichnost’” as an appendix.
the first, with the exception of a few minor details: Nikolai hides under a bureau instead of under a dresser, he has his mouth lacerated in place of getting his ear torn off, and he is killed with a beer tankard rather than with a sugar bowl. In this case the violence ends just as abruptly as in the fight with Senka: “Nikolai, with his mouth lacerated, ran off to the neighbors, but Fedka caught up with him and hit him with a beer tankard. Nikolai fell and died. Then Fedka gathered his things and left Vladivostok.” These murders are pivotal moments in the story. Their shocking cruelty transcends the routine filth of Fedka’s day-to-day life, and they ultimately serve as the impetus for him to pack his things and flee town in fear of retribution. Without the disturbing violence of the killings, the story would have no momentum. In Kharms’s fiction brutal violence is not just present, it is essential.

Sex

There used to be a saying that “there is no sex in the Soviet Union.”\textsuperscript{10} One has to look no further than the “desk drawer” writing of Daniil Kharms to find convincing evidence to the contrary. Kharms’s journal entries frequently reflect a preoccupation with and desire for sexual contact that would rival the obsessions of the most crazed adolescent. His erotic poetry goes a step further, featuring the author himself as an active participant in graphically detailed sexual situations. The poem “Zhene” (“To My Wife”), for example,

\textsuperscript{10} This saying was coined by a Soviet woman giving an answer on “US-Soviet Space Bridge,” a 1980s television program in which Soviet and American citizens could pose questions for each other during town hall-style meetings.
explicitly has the speaker, clearly analogous with Kharms in this case, overcome writer’s block by performing oral sex on his wife:

…priamo chmokal mezhdu nog
gde liubovnyi sok techet
a zhena menia stydlivo
obnimala teploi liazhkoi

(Kharms 2003, 98-99)

In my own prose translation:

…I smacked right between her legs
where the love juice flows
and my wife bashfully
embraced me with a warm thigh

Kharms, perhaps aided by the certainty that these works would not be published in his lifetime, fearlessly gives details of his personal life that a Soviet censor would have considered the utmost obscenity. The fact that a beloved children’s writer chose to write such wanton erotica behind closed doors speaks to the deep divide between Kharms’s public and private personae.

The subject of sex is another case in which a part of the Kharmsian aesthetic seems to be fundamentally at odds with mitki ideals. Andrei Filippov’s article “Mit’ki i Sestrenki” (“Mitki and Little Sisters”), referenced and lightly mocked by Vladimir Shinkarev in the fourth part of *The Mitki*, can be boiled down to the decisive statement that “Mit’ki ne seksual’nye” (“Mitki are not sexual”) (Shinkarev 2010, 47). Other mitki have also weighed in on the question of sex. Dmitri Shagin’s story “Seksualnaia Travma” (“Sexual

---

12 *Sestrenki* is a mitki slang term for women, and does not indicate biological relationship.
Trauma”) is, on the surface, an example of the mityok’s complete ignorance of sexual behavior (Shinkarev 2010, 57). Shagin, wearing his coat, quilted pants and boots and sprawled across a broken child-sized bed, wakes up to find his grandmother standing over him. She immediately begins to shame him, asking how he will be able to explain himself to his wife and children. When Shagin asks her what’s wrong, she holds up a pair of white lacy women’s underwear. The grandmother insists that the underwear could not possibly belong to Shagin’s wife. The mityok, for his part, acts bewildered, and the story ends with him asking for a drink. No sexual boundaries seem to have been broken. It seems unlikely that the underwear could belong to a secret lover. After all, the mityok has woken up fully clothed, lying uncomfortably in a tiny bed.

Alexandar Mihailovic suggests that a gender-bending subtext can be found beneath the surface of Shagin’s story: “If a mityok is asexual, sleeps in a bed which is not large enough for one adult, let alone two, there may be only one answer to this riddle: the women’s underwear was not something left by a sexual partner, but had been worn at some point by the mityok himself,” (Mihailovic 2008, 17). Whether or not the private deviant side that Mihailovic describes is actually present, the mitki’s public stance is that conventional sexuality is something foreign, to be looked upon in the same way that a person at a zoo would look at an animal.

On the matter of “otnosheniya muzhchin i zhenschin” (“the relations of men and women”) Filippov goes so far as to say that “Kak tol’ko mitek
skatyvaetsia na obshchechelovecheskoe ponimanie etogo voprosa, on perестaet byt’ mit’kom…” (“As soon as a mityok descends to the common human understanding of this question, he ceases to be a mityok…”)

(Shinkarev 2010, 41). I read the phrase “common human understanding” to mean having a basic level of comfort with the concept of human sexuality. As asexual beings, the mitki lack the most fundamental understanding of sexuality. If this is the case, Kharms cannot be a mityok on the grounds of his sexual awareness and openness. On the other hand, if we follow Mihailovic’s reasoning we might instead interpret “common human understanding” as a matter of being in line with the norms of conventional, standardized sexual behavior, and the mitki’s rejection of this understanding as a further hint not merely of asexuality but of gender-bending and other variations on the Soviet sexual norm from within their ranks. Under this interpretation, Kharms’s uncommonly forward sexuality might be seen as compatible with the mitki’s refusal to reconcile with the “common human understanding.”

Although Kharms demonstrates an unquestionable enthusiasm for sex, he expresses a deep dissatisfaction with married life, writing on October 10, 1934, “Kak mne nadoelo byt’ zhenatym. O, kak ia khochu byt’ vnov’ kholostym, no chtoby vse oboshlos’ krasivo, mirno i bez skandal,” (“How fed up I am with being married. O, how I want to be single again, but in such a way that it would all come about prettily, tranquilly and without scandal”) (Kharms 2003, 800). The stifling commitment of marriage is too much for Kharms, who revels in the freedom of his fantasies.
The mitki express no such trepidation about the institution of holy matrimony. This may have something to do with the fact that the founders of the “Mitki” group were already in their thirties and happily married in the early years of the movement. Shagin had a wife and three young children, and Shinkarev was married as well. Aleksandr Florenskii was not just married - his wife Olga Florenskaia was a key member of the group from the beginning. More recently, Andrei Filippov’s wife Svetlana Badelina has also become an important painter in the group. Although the concept of conventional sexuality is something foreign to the mityok, this by no means precludes him from settling down with a wife and children. The mityok is a multifaceted and often inscrutable character. Although he is as open in his presentation of himself as Kharms is mysterious, he is ultimately no easier to understand.
Conclusion

The mitki and Kharms are linked by a continuity that transcends the barrier of Kharms’s untimely death. As members of the so-called “Leningrad avant-garde” a generation apart, both found a similar allure in the prospect of creating lives outside of the Soviet norm. They each refused to participate in the dangerous and irrational systems of the mainstream society around them, responding instead by creating systems of their own that were harmless but even less grounded in rationality. Together with groups of like-minded comrades, both assembled beautiful artwork and performance-ready identities from various scraps of Russian and Western culture.

Examining the ties that run between the OBERIU and the mitki highlights some of the values that have remained consistent within the Leningrad underground over the years. A well-developed sense of satire, irreverent treatment of icons from the past and deliberate creation of an unusual life are all characteristics that have maintained their centrality. “Vspominaia Daniila Kharmsa” (“Remembering Daniil Kharms”) by Igor Smirnov-Okhtin and Dmitri Shagin (which I have translated into English and included as an appendix) shows beyond a shadow of a doubt that the mitki and their contemporaries were actively involved in creating a dialogue with Kharms’s legacy.

The similarities between Kharms and the mitki are so compelling that it is very tempting to subscribe to John Nicholson’s theory, and simply call the oberiuty early mitki and the mitki latter-day oberiuty. And yet, to do so would
be a disservice to both parties. Kharms’s carefully cultivated world features gratuitous, brutal violence, explicit sexuality and events of random chance with no concrete explanations. His personal style is debonair and deliberately mysterious. To lump him in with the mitki would be to soften the tantalizing volatility of his aesthetic.

The mitki, on the other hand, have a complex aesthetic of their own. Dressing in ragged, non-Western clothing and displaying tenderness and nonaggression are mitki characteristics that diverge from the Kharmsian pattern. These deviations from the OBERIU mold are more than quirks for the mitki – they are aspects of a fully developed lifestyle that is a product of a number of conscious artistic choices. The mitki are not just “[people who persevere] with the unlikely project of trying to be a human being in St Petersburg,” as Nicholson suggests (Nicholson 1994). In fact, the term mityok becomes almost meaningless when applied this broadly. By reducing the mityok and Kharms to iterations of the same type, Nicholson overlooks the specificity of the choices that went into creating each identity.

At the current moment, the mitki present a source of material largely untapped by Western scholars. A sociological or anthropological study might examine Shinkarev’s peculiar plan for a youth movement, and analyze how that plan shaped the actual mitki subculture that formed in the 1990s. Such a study might benefit from looking beyond Petersburg, at the groups of self-proclaimed mitki who live in other cities and even in other countries.
The relationship between the mitki and spirituality is another topic that deserves closer examination. As we have seen, Orthodox Christianity plays a role in their lives; when the “Mitki” visited Europe in the late 1980s, they made a point of visiting a number of Orthodox holy sites along their route. As followers of the Twelve Step program, many “Mitki” have also embraced Christian spirituality as a guide on the path to sobriety (House of Hope on the Hill n.d.). An interesting twist on mitki spirituality is the affection that group members including Vladimir Shinkarev and Mikhail Sapego and friends of the group including Konstantin Kuzminsky have displayed for the Japanese Zen form of Buddhism. The status of several of their teachers as ethnic Jews in the anti-Semitic setting of the Soviet Union is also a subject ripe for inquiry. Youth movements and spirituality are only two of the many possible themes that a future in-depth work on the mitki might address.

The would-be mitki scholar faces a difficult challenge. As Shinkarev asserts in his manual, and as conversations with arts-savvy Petersburgers confirm, the “real” mityok is a person who avoids fame and profit, preferring a comfortable obscurity to recognition. The circle of “Mitki” who are accustomed to being in the spotlight – Dmitri Shagin and his friends – are friendly, charismatic, vocal and accessible. Because of this, they have been over-represented both in media coverage and in scholarship about the group. To conclude my discussion of the mitki, I would like to encourage future documenters of the movement to look beyond its obvious figureheads. Although it was enlightening and, I believe, necessary for me to get the
opinions of those “Mitki” who can be seen on the Petersburg nightly news, the lingering feeling remains that the elusive “real” mityok is still out there somewhere, sitting alone in his study, tired as a dog and hungry.
By Igor Smirnov-Okhtin, ill. Dmitri Shagin

Translated by Elias Hetko

Inscription on book jacket: All versions of history and culture not corresponding with this book are LIES, FALSEHOOD AND DECEPTION OF THE PEOPLE.

Igor SMIRNOV-OKHTIN

Dmitri SHAGIN

Remembering Daniil Kharms

It's well known that Tchaikovsky loved Pushkin very much, and even wrote operas based on his poems – that's something he would never have done, had it not been for love! And Tchaikovsky himself was loved very much by Hitler. But Tchaikovsky didn’t love Hitler at all – he even found him to be unpleasant.¹ Hitler didn’t know this and thought that Tchaikovsky wasn’t paying him any attention because of Pushkin. And he decided to kill Pushkin. And killed him in a duel. But this did not win Tchaikovsky's love. And Tchaikovsky even wrote another opera based on Pushkin’s verses, and Stalin kicked Hitler out of the country because of the duel. Stalin also loved Pushkin, but was pleased that someone had killed him.

¹ This is the first of many examples of anachronism in the story. Tchaikovsky had been dead for almost six years when Hitler was born.
When Stalin kicked Hitler out of the country, Hitler went to Germany. The boss of Germany at the time was Karl Marx. Hitler and Marx were friends. Ever since childhood. Their parents were friends. And their parents’ parents. And Hitler and Marx looked alike in childhood – so much so, that their parents mixed them up. And possibly even switched them at some point. So that it’s uncertain whether Hitler was Karl Marx, and Marx – Hitler. Now there’s no way to establish who’s who.

When Hitler arrived in Germany he and Marx hugged and kissed, but then Marx says “What’s this about you killing the pride and joy of Russian poetry?! Stalin wrote me a letter.” Marx was just then getting ready to go to war with Persia, and was counting on Stalin’s help. He wanted to wage war against Persia because he had a great love for a Persian princess - a very beautiful girl, but for no particular reason she would not agree to be Marx’s wife. And was in general flighty. And when she found out that Marx planned to take her by force, she said “No way! I’d rather end up with Stalin.” And so she ended up with him. Stalin was very pleased with her, but later accidentally knocked her into the Volga. A reference to the story of Stepan Razin, the famed leader of a Don Cossack peasant uprising that occurred in the 17th Century. Legend has it that Razin threw his beautiful Persian bride into the Volga as an answer to speculation that he was becoming less warlike in the wake of his wedding.
In Stalin’s country, the boss of all writers was Daniil Kharms. Kharms himself didn’t write novels, but all writers - even those who did write novels - were under his command. That’s how it had been established. And if there was some poem or novel that Kharms didn’t like, Kharms would order the author to burn it. No one could disobey. And Kharms himself could write about any other author and defame him. Pushkin and Count Tolstoy really got the worst of it. And even though everyone respected Count Tolstoy because he loved children, there was no stopping Kharms. And he defamed him. And more than once, even.

Stalin also wrote poems, but didn’t show them to anyone - he was afraid of Kharms. In general, he feared that Kharms might defame him anyway, without any poems at all. Stalin considered calling Hitler back again: maybe Hitler would even challenge Kharms to a duel?

And the poets Yevtushenko and Voznesenky really wanted Kharms to defame them. But it didn’t work out their way. The poet Andrei Voznesensky even started to draw poems, hoping to get Kharms especially worked up. One day he drew an entire epic with colored pencils. “That’s it!” - he said on the phone to his friends - “Now Kharms is going to get me!” Whatever you say!

---

3 Ironic because of Kharms’s lowly place in the hierarchy of early Soviet writers. Writers under the aegis of the establishment were accorded many privileges, including job security, widespread publication and access to the exclusive dining room at the Writers’ Union. Kharms was only ever allowed to publish children’s compositions and two poems for adults during his short official career.
And also the poets Yevtushenko and Voznesensky told all the journalists and diplomats that Stalin was just about to shoot them. The journalists and diplomats became worried and called every morning, asking: were they still alive?

One day Stalin got a letter from Hitler that went like this: “I really miss you. Hitler.” - Stalin shrugged.

A week later - another letter, with exactly the same text...

It’s well known that Stalin was thoughtful. He began to think about the letters and thought for forty minutes or so, but then Kaganovich and Molotov came in and Stalin was distracted - he needed to feed his guests lunch.

It’s well known that Stalin was very generous. He gave everything away left and right. He gave especially freely to Pushkin, whom he loved so much: the Pushkin Theater, Pushkin Museum, a lot of streets - he even gave Pushkin a city and some mountains.

There’s a legend that Stalin was also very modest. And that is really so, if not entirely...Stalin still and all secretly dreamed that something would

---

4 Refers to the tendency of both Yevtushenko and Voznesensky to seek out publicity, especially in the Western media.

5 Lazar Kaganovich and Viacheslav Molotov were high-up politicians with positions in Stalin’s tight circle of trust. In real life they were far from the endearing sidekicks portrayed in this story – each was responsible for some of the worst horrors of the Stalin era.
be named for him: some village, or a tugboat⁶...

While Daniil Kharms was not a modest person. When a policeman would ask: “Who’re you, citizen?” - “I - am Daniil Kharms,” he would answer.

People feared Daniil Kharms not only because he could defame whoever he wanted to, but also because he could bite. Sometimes without any reason: he’d just grab on and bite. He especially loved to bite the back and the shoulder. Especially the right one.

When Kharms knocked out all of his own teeth, a lot of people were glad. But a home repairman/plumber forged a set of iron teeth for Kharms - they were so sharp that Kharms could not only bite you - he could actually bite something off.

One day Kharms ordered the poet Gogol to burn an epic poem that he’d only just finished. But the poet Gogol was very stubborn because he was a Ukrainian, and refused to burn it. So then Kharms bit off his nose. And wouldn't spit it out. Now Gogol had no choice but to burn his epic. Only then did Kharms spit out the nose, saying - pick it up!

The boss of the English country was Charles Darwin - a great scholar. He made a famous discovery. Darwin showed the world that the chicken came from the fish, the monkey from the chicken, and the human - from the

⁶ An instance of Bakhtinian carnivalization – the intimidating and proud Stalin from history is flipped into a meek and modest character. In the Soviet Union an extraordinary number of places and things were named after Stalin.
monkey. Everyone was shaken! Especially the Englishmen. They immediately made Darwin their boss.

Stalin and Darwin were friends. Their wives were friends also, and their children were friends. Their cabinet ministers and even their spies were friends. If an English spy and a spy of Stalin’s happened to run into each other - why, they’d hug and slap each other on the back!

One day Stalin said to Darwin: “That theory you thought up is nah so bad, Charles. Nah so bad!” And Darwin became embarrassed: well no, he said, although we know that humans come from monkeys, the missing link is nowhere to be found...

“I'll make one for yuh,” Stalin consoled.

Karl Marx was also a great scholar and envied Darwin a lot. He often proposed to Stalin that they should go to war against Darwin. But Stalin - it’s well known - didn’t like war. He liked to cook tasty lunches for Kaganovich and Molotov.

Stalin was also a great scholar, but he envied only Kharms, who was no kind of scholar at all.

---

7 In the original text, the Stalin character speaks with an exaggerated Georgian accent, often pronouncing the Russian “yeh” sound as “eh.”

8 Perhaps a reference to Yuz Aleshkovsky’s famous parody song, “Tovarishch Stalin,” the opening line of which translates as: “Comrade Stalin, you are a great scholar.”
It’s well known that Kaganovich was a Jew. And Molotov was a Jew. Stalin was also a Jew. And Hitler - a Jew. Karl Marx and Charles Darwin were Jews as well. But Daniil Kharms - he was an Englishman of Ossetian descent, and Pushkin - he came from gypsy stock. Kliment Efremovich Voroshilov and Count Tolstoy - now they, on the whole, were Russians. They worried about it their whole lives.

Count Tolstoy very much wanted to become a Jew. Toward this end he even left the church. And he would undoubtedly have become a Jew, if it hadn’t been for Sofia Andreevna - his beloved wife. She really objected! And what was she afraid of?...

Count Tolstoy very much wanted to become a Jew. He even got a long beard and a wide-brimmed hat, which he was never without. But his beard didn’t look Jewish at all, and the hat didn’t either...

The best admiral on the seas was Admiral Nelson. The victor at Trafalgar. Who he defeated there - the Spanish? The Chinese? - absolutely no one remembers. But that he was one-eyed - everyone remembers. Even schoolchildren. Even the very lazy ones.

The “Victor-at-Trafalgar-Nelson” served under Darwin. But Stalin had his own admiral - Admiral Nakhimov.

“You’re a good admiral,” said Stalin to Nakhimov. “But you’re a ‘good admiral’ with two eyes. And Nelson’s a ‘good admiral’ with one eye.”
“It will be corrected, Comrade Stalin!” Admiral Nakhimov drawled.

The boss of the French was Napoleon Bonaparte. Where he came from - no one knew. Not even he himself. But he was curious. Because of this he went around to different countries with his soldiers. He came to Stalin’s country. He brought a lot of soldiers and they were all beautifully dressed: diversely and stylishly. And so they wouldn’t show up empty-handed - they brought cannons. Napoleon also had a lot of marshals, and the marshals were dressed even more splendidly than the soldiers.

But Stalin had only one marshal - Klim Efremovich Voroshilov. A very good one, by the way. Although he wasn’t a Jew. But how he loved to shoot! He’d get up in the morning and, instead of having some kefir, he’d load a pistol and without fail he’d shoot someone.

And so, when Napoleon arrived Stalin wasn’t worried. He fully believed in Voroshilov. And Voroshilov didn’t even drink his kefir - he started to prepare for war. He was thorough in his preparations, so while he was still getting ready, Napoleon made it to Moscow.

As is well known, Stalin was a mild person. But when he found out that Napoleon was just outside of Moscow, Stalin made such an uproar at Voroshilov that the latter flew off to Borodino field like a bullet!

---

9 A yoghurt-like dairy drink popular in Russia.
Marshal Voroshilov was not just a good shot, but a great marshal also!

He was set apart from other marshals because when it came to marshalling matters he knew things that others couldn’t guess. For example, Klim Efremovich knew that before battle it’s absolutely necessary to have a meeting. And when he, like a bullet, arrived at Borodinskoe field, he didn’t even drink his kefir but called a meeting right away. He spoke flawlessly! Everyone was shaken. First he deployed an exposition - true, he was being careful: he’d only just flown in and wasn’t sure of everything. “What do we have before us?” asked Klim Efremovich. “Is it the French?”

“It’s the French,” sighed the soldiers, officers and generals.

“And what’s behind us?” Klim Efremovich wondered. “Is it Moscow, hm?”

“It’s Moscow, hm,” sighed the assembly.

Next Klim Efremovich said how they needed to proceed: “Each soldier needs to stab one of the enemy with his bayonet. And that’s all!” said Marshal Voroshilov. “Then the whole of the enemy will have been stabbed. So, that’s it! So, you officers and generals should just follow through with the execution of my order.” And Voroshilov wrote a letter to Stalin: “Led a meeting. Was inspiring. Victory will be yours, Comrade Stalin!”

“Yerra good guy, Marshal Voroshilov!” said Stalin.
The second letter from the marshal went like this: “They’re sabotaging my order: not every soldier is stabbing an enemy, and there are those who allow themselves to be stabbed. I don’t know how your victory will fare now, Comrade Stalin?”

When the battle at Borodino ended, Voroshilov called a meeting in the village of Fili. This was how it was supposed to be: one meeting before the battle, and a second afterward, for summing up the results.¹⁰

All the soldiers, officers and generals who hadn’t been stabbed by the enemy came to the meeting. They say that they could all fit into one hut.

The third letter from Marshal Voroshilov went like this: “The great battle outside Moscow turned out to be a great victory, Comrade Stalin! But for the total annihilation of the enemy, the war council at Fili decided to lure our opponent into Moscow.”

Stalin answered Voroshilov: “I’m gonna make a missing link for Darwin outta yuh, Klim.”

Stalin refused to evacuate Moscow. “I won’t,” he said. “Let Napoleon come. He can stay wit me.”

¹⁰ The meetings here are parodic versions of meetings that occur in Tolstoy’s War and Peace. In Tolstoy’s historically based work the meetings are called by Prince Mikhail Kutuzov during the 1812 war with Napoleon.
Napoleon and Stalin liked each other a lot. Napoleon taught Stalin how to play chess. “Why, monsieur, have you not brought me the keys to the city?” he kept asking Stalin.

“He won’t shut up about those keys!” cried Stalin, amazed.

One evening Napoleon and Stalin were playing chess as usual. Suddenly it became very light outside the window.

“What is this, monsieur?! “ exclaimed Napoleon.

“They’re burning Moscow,” said Stalin.

“Why?! “ asked Napoleon, shocked.

“It’s a custom,” Stalin shrugged.

Stalin often fed Napoleon lunch. He would make *kharcho*.\(^\text{11}\)

“That’s spicy!” complained Napoleon.

“You want snails - go to Paris,” Stalin retorted.

Every day Napoleon wrote to Paris, to send him some snails. Stalin would laugh into his mustache: Napoleon didn’t know that Beria was snatching up all of his letters.

\(^{11}\) “*Kharcho* is a redolent soup as thick as a light stew. Its name is almost generic, referring to beef, lamb, chicken, or even vegetable stocks.” Darra Goldstein, *The Georgian Feast* 64.
Napoleon said to Stalin that he would have gone away to Paris long ago, but he was afraid of getting lost in Russia.

“Didn’t yuh walk to Moscow - and not get lost?” objected Stalin.

“I walked behind your army, monsieur!” objected Napoleon.

“Don’t be afraida getting lost,” Stalin coaxed, ladling some of his *kharcho* for Napoleon, “yuh shouldn’t worry about the road back. We show our guests the way. We’ll lead yuh along the old Smolenskaya road.”

“Why along that one?”

“It’s a custom,” said Stalin.

They say that in Greece - there is everything. It’s not true. In Greece there’s nothing at all. Not even Greeks.

In Greece there are no Greeks, and there never have been. In Greece there were always just gods, heroes and oracles. And now they’re gone too...

Besides gods, heroes and oracles there were also Achaeans and Dorians in Greece. But there were never any kind of Greeks...

Alexander the Macedonian also thought that in Greece there’s everything, and because of this he conquered it.
When Alexander the Macedonian became disappointed in Greece, he heard tell that there is everything in India. And set out for India. - In vain. Because there was never anything in India either.

But there used to be everything - literally everything - at the market in Odessa. Even Greeks! But now there’s nothing there either. Well, except for the Greeks...

It’s well known that on the Appenine Peninsula live the Italians, and they call their country something very beautiful: Italy.

It’s well known that everyone laughs at the Italians, and just for laughs repeat what they say, and they also call the country Italy.

Italians look like Jews. The French also look like Jews, and so do the Greeks, who, as has been established, exist only at the Odessa market, if anywhere at all.

And in general everyone looks like Jews. Even Indians.

But Russians don’t look like Jews at all. Even when they grow out their beards and wear hats with wide brims. Like Count Tolstoy.

All Italians sing well, because they eat macaroni every day. The macaroni moves in one direction, and in the other direction - out comes Cavaradossi’s aria.
It’s well known that the timbre of the voice depends on the thickness of the macaroni. Italians that eat very thin macaroni sing in a tenor voice, and those that eat medium thick macaroni - sing baritone. But Italians avoid the really thick macaroni altogether.

It’s well known that only Russians eat the really thick macaroni - for example, the world famous bass Fyodor Chaliapin.

It’s well known that Russians don’t just eat thick macaroni, but everything else as well! Only, it’s not always possible. Even the thick macaroni isn’t always around.

In the country of Italy, where the Italians live, there’s no national boss. In Italy, bosses just don’t take root. Many of them don’t even survive. That’s just the way Italians are!

For a long time, Italians didn’t have radio of any kind. Because Italians loved to listen to their singers, but the radio - not at all. The Italians had singers in every city, in every village, in every family. In the evenings the singers would sing, and the Italians would listen. And the Italians didn’t need any bosses at all.

Radio appeared as a part of Italian life after all, at the same time soccer appeared. The Italians took a great liking to soccer. But not every village had its own soccer matches. Because of this Italians got radios, so they could listen to soccer.
It’s well known that America and Europe used to be one whole. Then America broke off.

It’s well known that Ronald Reagan and Charles Darwin lived together as children. They were Siamese twins.

When America broke off from Europe, Reagan was obliged to separate himself from Darwin. Reagan was the president of America, and Darwin - the boss of England.

Americans, as is well known, don’t know geography. To them, Holland might as well be Greenland. But they’re very resourceful...

When Reagan was running for president, they asked him: “Where is China?” It was a trick question, because Reagan, understandably, hadn’t heard anything about China. But he wasn’t fazed. “In my heart!” he said. And became the president.

For America, President Reagan invented the Constitution and dollars.

Also, Reagan thought up the idea of printing his photo on the dollars. On the one dollar bill - himself at one year old. On the five dollar bill - a photo of himself at five. On the hundred dollar note - his photograph at his hundred-year jubilee.

\[12\] Moscow samizdat poet Dmitri Prigov composed a cycle of poems centering on Reagan. Prigov’s poems question Russians’ fascination with Reagan in specific, and with the American presidency in general.
Not just the Americans loved president Reagan. They loved him throughout the whole world. Especially his photographs. Especially his photograph at one hundred years of age.

Americans look a lot like Russians. Although a portion of Americans look Chinese, a portion look Japanese, and even like Jews. But as a whole all Americans look like Russians.

But Russians don’t resemble anyone. No one at all. Not even Americans. Not even Jews...although they try.

Americans like it if their presidents appear in movies. And Reagan had occasion to appear. Although he didn’t like it.

Stalin, however, always wanted to play himself in a movie, but - and this is well known - he was afraid of Kharms. Consequently he’d make himself up as some actor and then play the part.

It's well known that Americans invented the automobile, and their president Reagan - dollars, the English invented boxing, the French - love, the Italians invented macaroni, the Germans - classical philosophy, the Chinese - gunpowder, and the Spanish - bull fighting. And all of these inventions are second-rate. Because anyone who feels like it can make use of them. But the Russians made a first-rate invention. Russians invented RUSSIAN CURSE WORDS. And this invention can be used only by the Russians themselves. How’s that for an invention!
And in Switzerland, in the city of Zurich, lived a well-known person, Ulyanov - a lawyer. Everybody called him “old man” and Vovka-carrot, but he always signed his name as Ulyanov. Everyone knew Ulyanov. Hitler didn't like him, Stalin didn't like him, Darwin didn't like him and Reagan didn't like him.

The peoples of the world liked Ulyanov, and so did his wife Nadya and his sister Manya.

For his part, Ulyanov liked to go skating.

He also liked to call everybody names.

He especially liked to call the revolutionary Trotsky names.

It's well known that the lawyer Ulyanov, who was loved by the peoples of the world, lived in Zurich. He dreamed to bring about, in Zurich, a Great Zurich Revolution.

“Swiss dreamer!” the English dreamer Wells remarked of Ulyanov, admiringly.

It's well known that Stalin didn't like Ulyanov, but really feared that Vovka-carrot would call him a name sometime. Stalin tried to appease him: he'd send money orders to Zurich.

13 Vovka-markovka, a rhyming name used in childish teasing, is comprised of a nickname for Vladimir and a diminutive of the Russian word for carrot. Vladimir Ulyanov is the real name of Soviet leader V.I. Lenin.
Stalin would get money for Ulyanov from the banks. He was the boss of the country - he would just show up at a bank and take money.

Stalin sent so much money that Ulyanov didn’t know what to do with it. “See, Nadya,” he would say to his wife, “again our Jew has sent us money.”

When Napoleon set out for Paris after all, Stalin got very upset. He’d become accustomed to Napoleon. And he understood that there’d be no one left to play chess with. Stalin poured Napoleon a thermos of kharcho for the journey and led him to the first road marker. Waved goodbye. Wiped away a tear.

For many years, the boss of China was the Chinese man Ivanov. The Chinese liked him very much.

It’s well known that all Chinese people are very poor. And all because the boss of the Chinese, Ivanov, abolished money in China.

The boss of the Chinese, Ivanov, was a very observant person. He knew the entire Talmud by heart, was Catholic, Protestant, Baptist, Adventist, Buddhist, Lamaist, Bahai, Munist, Daoist, Hare Krishna and Mohammedan. He was, of course, a Mason and a Mormon. He believed that the Earth is round, the seas are deep and mountains - steep.

---

14 Probably a reference to the Russian mystic Porfiry Ivanov. Ivanov’s pseudo-homeopathic teachings had earned him a cult following by his death in 1983.
It’s well known that China is a very big country. Because of this China never had a need for any sort of foreign policy - they didn’t have it and they didn’t want to know about it.

Even though China didn’t have any sort of foreign policy, they kept a minister of foreign affairs. For order’s sake. The minister of foreign affairs was a very good one - the negro Paul Robeson.\(^\text{15}\)

The Chinese minister negro Paul traveled the countries of the world, and in every country sang the Chinese song “My Homeland is Vast!\(^\text{16}\)”

Stalin really liked the song that the negro minister Paul sang. He asked him questions about the Chinese country for a long while.

Stalin really liked that in China there’s no foreign policy.

“What a life!” Stalin said, enraptured.

Stalin took pity on the Chinese when he found out how poor they were - entirely without money, and unable to even buy rice. And he gave the negro Paul a lot of money. The negro Paul smiled broadly. He was certain that this was his fee for performing the Chinese song “My Homeland is Vast!”

\(^{15}\) The real Paul Robeson visited the Soviet Union several times. Of his visits he said, “Here, I am not a Negro but a human being for the first time in my life...I walk in full human dignity,” Scott Allen Nollen *Paul Robeson: Film Pioneer* 53. In light of this sentiment it is particularly ironic that he is referred to as negro Paul.

\(^{16}\) Actually a Soviet patriotic song.
It’s well known that the boss of Spain was Don Quixote de la Mancha.

A ferocious man!

It’s well known that if something didn’t go his way, Don Quixote would challenge you to single combat, and that would be it! He’d kill you for sure.

For his whole life, Don Quixote loved one woman - Dulcinea del Toboso.

It would happen that he’d notice a beautiful woman and say to her husband: “Admit it - this lady is my resplendent Dulcinea!” And the finale would always be one and the same: in single combat he’d fatally stab the husband, and he’d take the woman for his own.

Yegor Timurovich Gaidar\(^{17}\) was the grandson of Karl Marx. He worked as a switchman on a railroad. He was a specialist in his trade. He flips the switch to the left and everything goes left, and then he flips it to the right. He was quite famous!

Yegor Timurovich Gaidar answered only to Karl Marx. What Marx commanded - he’d do. Sometimes they’d yell at him: “Not that way! There are no bridges there yet.” But he’d flip the switch all the same.

---

\(^{17}\) Yegor Gaidar was an economist and politician who served as Prime Minister of Russia for several months in 1992. He was widely blamed for causing an economic crisis with his “shock therapy” economic plan.
Yegor Timurovich always justified himself: “No use waiting while they build bridges!” Usually people would agree with him. Even the passengers. They’d grumble, of course, but then agree. Really! Who wants to wait in transit? It’s better to get moving somewhere.

All the steep valleys in Marx’s country were gradually being filled in - because everything went flying right into them. Yegor Timurovich Gaidar was happy about this: “Two more years,” he would say, “and we won’t need to build more bridges at all!”

“If we live that long!” sighed the passengers.

The number of trains in Marx’s country kept getting fewer and fewer. Because of this, they went flying off into valleys more and more rarely. Yegor Timurovich Gaidar was very happy about this: “It’s as I said: the situation is stabilizing itself!”

“Well, I never!” everyone said in surprise.

Daniil Kharms, the boss of all writers in Stalin’s country, didn’t write novels, or anything else for that matter - except poetry. Because he considered himself a poet. And when he wrote some stories after all - for fun - only children could understand them. And only the ones who weren’t too smart.

It’s well known that the writer Kharms, the boss of all writers in Stalin’s country, didn’t compose tales or novels. But to make up for it he composed
thoughts. In the whole world only two other people, besides Kharms, composed thoughts: Karl Marx and Charles Darwin - great scholars. But they didn’t compose very many thoughts: Karl Marx - two and Charles Darwin - three. Kharms, on the other hand - every day. He even thought up this motto for himself: no day without a thought! In the morning he’d lean out from his little window, look around the courtyard, scratch his head and compose a thought.

One day Kharms defamed the Count Tolstoy, writing that Tolstoy loves children very much... Having read this, the count’s beloved wife Sofia Andreevna unleashed a grand uproar at the count.

The beloved wife of Count Tolstoy, Sofia Andreevna, having read Kharms’ account that her husband loves children very much, first unleashed a grand uproar at the count, and then began to cry. She cried for a day, then a second, and a third... And throughout this time Count Tolstoy was before her constantly. While Sofia Andreevna cried, he patted her head.

Napoleon hadn’t even gotten back to his Paris yet when Stalin called together the “Yalta Conference.” These people came to the conference: President Reagan, the boss of Germany, Marx, and the English boss, Charles Darwin - the great scholar.

The “Yalta Conference” turned out very well. At first the guests didn’t understand why Stalin had called them together, and grumbled about it. But
when they got settled in to the Bakhchisaray Palace,\textsuperscript{18} on divans by the fountains, they started smiling.

The owner of Bakhchisaray Palace, and all of the fountains and divans inside, was a Crimean khan. A descendant of Genghis. The khan had a daughter - Marilyn Monroe. An unbelievably good looking woman. Karl Marx fell in love with her instantly!

At the “Yalta Conference” they considered what to do with Italy, which had no bosses. And what to do with Greece, in which there was not even a single Greek. And what to do with Napoleon, who came from who-knows-where.

They quickly agreed on the matter of Napoleon: an island was thought up for him.

On the subject of Italy Stalin said: “It falls ta me ta become the boss.”

And on the subject of Greece Stalin said: “All the Greeks ta fill up Greece with - are my people. So I should be the boss of Greece too.”

President Reagan was hearing about Italy and Greece for the first time, but he began to object. Darwin stupidly supported Reagan - he had forgotten that Stalin had promised him the missing link.

\textsuperscript{18} Bakhchisaray Palace was in fact not the site of the Yalta conference, but rather the setting of Aleksandr Pushkin’s famous poem “Bakhchisaraiskii Fontan,” in English Bakhchisaray Fountain.
Now Marx couldn’t have cared less about Greece or Italy - he was staring at the Tatar princess Marilyn Monroe - and he supported Reagan and Darwin automatically, but then turned obstinate and defended his position.

And so they didn’t come to an agreement on the first day.

And so in the evening it fell to Stalin to cook *kharcho* for the guests.

Stalin made a lot of *kharcho* - a huge cauldron full. “This oughta be enough fer a week,” he smiled cordially, “or even fer two.”

The guests started to eat the *kharcho*, took a look at the cauldron and on the whole agreed with Stalin.

With that the “Yalta Conference” ended.

The guests agreed that Stalin would become the boss not only of Italy and Greece, but of the Crimean khanate as well. No matter how the descendant of Genghis Khan objected - the guests agreed on it. “This girlie, Monroe, won’t marry yuh just for nothing, but if I, being the boss, order her - she’ll marry yuh,” Stalin coaxed Karl Marx.

At the conclusion of the “Yalta Conference” Stalin arranged a banquet. Some really great people came by! The revolutionary Trotsky, the lawyer Ulyanov and his wife Nadya... Yegor Timurovich Gaidar and Hitler arrived from Germany. From China - the minister of foreign affairs, negro Paul. More than anything, of course, people arrived from Russia: Tchaikovsky, Count Tolstoy and his wife, the poets Yevtushenko and Voznesensky, and, of
course, Marshal Voroshilov, Kaganovich and Molotov, and the boss of all writers Daniil Kharms.

And some admiral pulled in to shore on a boat...

“Greetings Admiral Nelson, victor at Trafalgar!” said President Reagan, sticking out his hand.

“Das not Nelson,” Stalin corrected “Also a good admiral, but das my admiral. His name is Nakhimov,” Stalin said, and adjusted Nakhimov’s eyepatch. “Das even nicer looking!” he praised Nakhimov.

The banquet turned out gloriously! Everything was very tasty: the steamed meat balls, the navy-style macaroni, the goulash with potato puree, the dried fruit compote and, of course, the kharcho. The wines were also of a refined sort. Everyone got trashed. Except for Stalin, of course. Count Tolstoy, his wife Sofia Andreevna, and Hitler got especially wasted. Hitler kept trying to caress Tchaikovsky - Tolstoy became indignant and whacked Hitler with a stick. But Hitler thought - whatever! So Tolstoy decided to whack him a second time, but missed and whacked Sophia Andreevna, his beloved wife, with the stick instead. But Sofia Andreevna got it into her mind that it had been Daniil Kharms who had whacked her in the head with a stick, and she rushed at Kharms to grab a hold of him, but then the lawyer Ulyanov stuck out his leg in her path and she went flying off onto a divan, and while the lawyer Ulyanov gleefully clapped his hands Sofia Andreevna fell asleep.

And then Hitler, who hadn’t succeeded in caressing Tchaikovsky, caressed Sofia Andreevna. Hitler caressed Sofia Andreevna, and also fell asleep on
the divan. And then the boss of Spain, Don Quixote de la Mancha, showed up, running very late. He saw the sleeping Sofia Andreevna and fell in love with her. And began to ask around to find out who her mister was, in order to stab him in single combat. And Count Tolstoy, who didn’t like to resist evil with force, pointed out the sleeping Hitler. So Don Quixote began to shake Hitler, but couldn’t wake him up. Then Don Quixote got drunk to numb his grief. Got drunk and fell asleep. On the divan. And at that time Hitler woke up. Hitler saw Don Quixote and fell in love with him. Even more so than with Tchaikovsky. And he started to shake Don Quixote. But couldn’t wake him up. And then Hitler got even drunker to numb his grief and - that was it. He went off somewhere. From that time on no one’s seen him.

And Stalin bragged to President Reagan about Marshal Voroshilov, Admiral Nakhimov, and his poets: Yevtushenko and Voznesensky. “Nah such bad poets!” said Stalin. “I keep forgetting to shoot them,” he chuckled tenderly.

But Karl Marx got angry at Stalin: “Trickster! Everything you wanted, you gained!”

“I don’t need nuthin,” retorted Stalin “An’ it’s not me, but the people who have gained.”

The “Yalta Conference” went their separate ways thusly...

Stalin went with Molotov and Kaganovich. They harnessed their horses and set out.

Voroshilov did his own thing. The next morning he drank his kefir, hit
the revolutionary Trotsky over the head with the *kefir* bottle, and left.

Admiral Nakhimov sunk his own boat, so that it wouldn’t fall into enemy hands, and set off on foot. Like a naval foot soldier.

Lev Tolstoy got jealous of his wife Sofia Andreevna and Hitler, because Hitler caressed her at the banquet. His passion boiled over! He packed up and without telling anyone walked off toward the steppe.

The lawyer Ulyanov did his exercises early in the morning and hurried off to Zurich to bring about the Great Zurich Revolution. Following him, his wife Nadya with a rucksack on her back - and in the rucksack, food from the banquet table - provisions for the revolution. Really, what if by some chance Vovka-carrot succeeds!

President Reagan and the English boss Charles Darwin left together.

When the Spanish boss Don Quixote de la Mancha woke up, he left in a hurry to catch up with Lev Tolstoy. But he caught up with Reagan and Darwin. In a hangover-induced stupor he mistook Darwin for Tolstoy, and stabbed him to death. And Reagan, insofar as none of this concerned him, kept going. But he didn’t reach his America - he joined up with some kind of band of gypsies, and there hasn’t been any news about him since.

The Chinese negro Paul did reach America, however. The minister of foreign affairs of China, Paul Robeson, liked America, and he asked America to grant him political asylum.

The poets Yevtushenko and Voznesenky galloped off to Koktebel, to

---

19 A resort town on the Black Sea coast, historically popular among Soviet writers and artists.
the artists’ colony. So they could be good and creative!

“Why don’t we also go off to Koktebel?” Sofia Andreevna asked of Daniil Kharms. Kharms was cranky because of his hangover, and bit Sofia Andreevna - And rightly so because Kharms could be creative anywhere he pleased, without any kind of Koktebel at all.

And Karl Marx decided to stay on at the Bakhchisaray Palace, by the side of the Tatar lady Monroe. He still hoped to fight his way into her heart.

And Yegor Timurovich Gaidar, learning of his boss’s intentions, left to join the opposition. He said “No way!” and left. He said “This is nonsense!” and left. He said “Our country awaits its boss!” and left. But he didn’t make it back to his country. He was bad at geography, and thought he should follow the sun. And so even now he’s walking. In a circle.

Although Stalin ordered the Crimean khanate’s princess to marry Marx, Marilyn Monroe refused. Her heart belonged to another: the day before she had fallen in love with Stalin.

Karl Marx signed up to work at Bakhchisaray Palace as a gardener. But he didn’t know flowers or trees, and couldn’t do the work.

They reassigned him as a plumber. To service the fountains. But he not only didn’t know hydraulics, he’d also never even heard of a simple valve, and couldn’t do the work.

Then they reassigned him as a gatekeeper. But one day he didn’t allow Princess Marilyn Monroe to leave the palace as she hurried off for a rendezvous with some student - and they took him off of gate duty.
Then he began to think and remembered that he was a great scholar, and sat down to write some kind of a book. From then on nothing more has been heard of him.

It’s well known, that by the decision of the “Yalta Conference” Napoleon was exiled to an island. But then they forgot: which island was it? And they haven’t remembered. Ever since.

One time Stalin cooked *kharcho*, but no one showed up to eat it. Not Voroshilov, and not Kaganovich. So Stalin ate up all the *kharcho* himself - he stuffed himself and died. And Beria, when he found out about it, also died. And Voroshilov, when he found out about that, drank up his *kefir* and also died. And Kaganovich died all on his own. And Daniil Kharms received the tenth class Stalin prize\(^{20}\) and got so self-important about it that they reassigned him as a simple litterateur.

Ah well, they were such good people, and how firmly they held their ground!\(^{21}\)

---

\(^{20}\) Stalin prizes of the first through third class were very high honors in the Soviet Union. Presumably, a tenth class Stalin prize would not have been something about which one could justifiably act self-important.

\(^{21}\) This final paragraph is a transformed version of the Kharms fragment “Events,” in which new characters are presented in each sentence, only to be immediately disposed of by death or other incapacitating circumstances. Kharms’s last line reads: “All good people but they don’t know how to hold their ground” (Translation Matvei Yankelevich).
By Daniil Kharms

Translated by Elias Hetko

The Filthy Personage

Senka whacked Fedka in the face and hid under the dresser.

Fedka pulled Senka out from under the dresser with a fire poker and tore off his right ear.

Senka wriggled out of Fedka’s grip and ran off to the neighbors with the torn-off ear in his hands.

But Fedka caught up with Senka and launched a sugar bowl at his head.

Senka fell and, it seems, died.

So Fedka put his things into a suitcase and left for Vladivostok.

In Vladivostok Fedka became a tailor; though in actuality, what he became wasn’t fully a tailor because he only sewed ladies’ underwear, primarily panties and brassieres. Ladies weren’t shy around Fedka - they would lift up their skirts right in front of him, and Fedka would take their measurements.

Fedka, you might say, got an eyeful.

1 The following note comes from the new Kharms collection from Vita Nova, Sluchai i Veschi: Next in the manuscript follow these crossed-out lines: “Particularly, a few young little brunettes would purposely expose to his view all of their most intimate charms. What’s more, having taken the lady’s measurements Fedka would brush these secret enticements with his fingers, and they always turned out to be moist. Then Fedka’s hand would smell of ladies.”
Fedka - was a filthy personage.
Fedka - was the murderer of Senka.
Fedka - was a carnalist.
Fedka - was a glutton, because every evening he would eat up twelve cutlets. Such a belly grew on Fedka that he made himself a corset and started wearing it.
Fedka - was a conscienceless person: he took money from children that he met on the street, he tripped old men and menaced old women - he would raise his arm above them, and when the frightened old woman scurried to the side, Fedka would act as if he had just been lifting his hand to scratch his head.

It ended when Nikolai showed up at Fedka's, whacked him in the face and hid under the bureau.
Fedka pulled Nikolai out from under the bureau with a fire poker and lacerated his mouth.
Nikolai, with his mouth lacerated, ran off to the neighbors, but Fedka caught up with him and hit him with a beer tankard. Nikolai fell and died. Then Fedka gathered his things and left Vladivostok.
Reference List


