

In All Seriousness:
Play, Knowledge, and Community in the Union of Real Art

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Abstract

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Taking its direction from seminal works in the field of play theory, this dissertation examines ludic elements in the textual practices and intellectual community of the Union of Real Art (Объединение реального искусства or OBeRIu). I use the concept of play to elucidate how the group used literature as an unconventional medium for the pursuit of special forms of knowledge and to explore the intimate genre of performance that shaped the association's collective identity as a group of writers and thinkers. The four chapters that comprise this dissertation each examine one facet of how play shaped the OBeRIu's shared literary practice.

In the first chapter, I contrast the performative strategies of the OBeRIu members (or the *oberiuty*) with those of the Russian Futurists, demonstrating that the OBeRIu approach to spectacle possesses an 'existential' dimension that is quite alien to that of Futurism. I argue that Futurist performance is best characterized by what Hans-Georg Gadamer has called "aesthetic differentiation," a hermeneutic tradition that foregrounds the autonomy of the artwork while ignoring its rootedness in broader spheres of cultural activity. In contrast, the members of the OBeRIu (the *oberiuty*), were engaged in what some theorists have called *deep play*: they showed little interest in the *épatage* tradition practiced by the Futurists and drew no meaningful distinction between art and life. I suggest that performative strategies of the *oberiuty* can be productively interpreted according to Gadamer's concept of "self-presentation," a notion that proves immensely useful for understanding not only the group's theater, but their written work as well.

In my second chapter, I show how the OBeRIu's playful approach to writing was underscored by their commitment to an *epistemic* understanding of literature: they believed that literary pursuits constitute a unique form of knowledge. I suggest that the texts produced by the *oberiuty* frustrate the boundary that supposedly distinguishes poetry and philosophy. I demonstrate how even a playfully 'absurd' text such as Daniil Kharm's "Blue Notebook No. 10" can be read as a work of philosophy—in this case as a kind of performative refutation of Kantian metaphysics. I suggest that the epistemic register of OBeRIu literature can be likened to what Roger Caillois has called games of *ilinx*—their texts induce a kind of cognitive vertigo that pushes readers towards forms of knowledge

that cannot be properly conceptualized. As a form of epistemic play, OBeRIu texts open onto the world even as they exist ‘beyond’ it, inviting readers to appreciate in poetry what Gadamer called “the joy of knowledge.”

In the third chapter of this dissertation I argue that the commitment of the *oberiuty* to an epistemic understanding of literary art places them squarely at odds with premises fundamental to the theories of Russian Formalism. Indeed, I demonstrate how the OBeRIu as a group deliberately problematize the Formalist concept of *literariness*. I demonstrate that the poetic episteme of the group took direction from Russian Orthodox theology, particularly the concept of the *eikon*. The epistemic nature of OBeRIu ‘nonsense’ precludes interpreting their texts as exercises in Shklovskian *estrangement*. Instead, I suggest that Gadamer’s notion of *recognition* is invaluable for understanding the work of the *oberiuty*. Their literary work *articulates* something and in doing so adds to our understanding of the world.

In the final chapter I consider the community of *chinari*, which constituted a kind of intimate ‘inner circle’ for the OBeRIu that was both more private and longer lived than the Union of Real Art itself. I suggest that the *chinari* circle can be understood as part of a discernible line of extra-institutional play communities in the history of Russian letters that began with the Arzamas Society of Obscure People. I argue that play was the *raison d’être* of the *chinari* community and largely defined the sense they had of themselves as an intellectual community. Considering closely Leonid Lipavsky’s *Conversations*, a more or less authentic record of the group’s discussions between 1933 and 1934, I suggest that the group used the speech genre of *bullshit* quite productively—it was both a fun way to explore ideas and, more importantly, a phenomenally effective way to foster their collective bond.

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Note on Transliteration and Translation

Throughout the body of this dissertation I use a slightly modified Library of Congress system (Shaw II) for all transliteration, except in certain cases where Anglicized spellings of proper names are traditionally accepted. Thus, I use “Lipavsky” rather than “Lipavskii” and “Mayakovsky” rather than “Maiakovskii.” For quoted text, I use the transliteration provided by the author or translator cited. In footnotes and bibliography I use the modified Library of Congress system, except when citing English-language publications.

I largely prefer to work from source material in the original Russian, but have occasionally used existing translations where expedient. All translations provided are my own unless citations indicate otherwise.

Acknowledgments

And Maksim just looks out the window and says:

- We won't be drinking today.
- What do you mean, Maksim? Nothing at all?
- Nothing at all, Fyodor.
- And tomorrow?

— Vladimir Shinkarev, *Maksim and Fyodor*

Even under ideal circumstances, the writing of a dissertation presents a formidable task. In my own case, certain personal struggles have made completion of this project especially challenging and I am acutely aware that I could not possibly have succeeded without love, support, and guidance from a great many sources. It would be impossible to properly express the gratitude I feel to the numerous communities of which I am privileged to be a part. I am deeply indebted to a host of individuals, but would like to thank the following:

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If a person is intelligent and boring he will not condescend to frivolity.
But if he is frivolous and intelligent — he won't allow himself to be boring.

— Venedikt Erofeev, *Moscow to the End of the Line* —

Prelude: Of Literature and Games

Eternity is a child at play, moving pieces in
a game. The kingdom belongs to the child.

— Heraclitus, *Fragment 52*

One could perhaps be forgiven a certain feeling of intellectual vertigo to find in the writings of a philosopher as old and as significant as Heraclitus such patently religious homage to something as seemingly inconsequential as the phenomenon of play. And yet, we find in the sparse and cryptic words of the 52nd fragment a paradox so fundamental to the tradition of Western thought as to be consistently overlooked. For even as philosophy is considered, perhaps, the highest—the most *serious*—of all vocations, it is simultaneously assumed to be the most useless. Indeed, in popular consciousness the image of the philosopher wanders quite freely between two extremes: from revered prophet, ready even to die in service to the truth that he has seen, to wayward layabout, lost completely to self-congratulatory and onanistic navel-gazing. Yet whether construed as beatific visionary or masturbatory day-dreamer, the philosopher necessarily seems to be defined by a certain detachment—or at least distance—from the concerns and obligations that strictly speaking define the sphere of practical activity. Indeed, despite its contemporary manifestation as a profession and form of serious intellectual labor, ‘scholarship’ in its originary form can be traced etymologically to the Greek σχολή (*scholé*), meaning *leisure*. Thinking and playing are perhaps more closely related than we are initially prepared to believe.

Taking at face value the possibility that philosophy is essentially a form of the ludic, it is perhaps unsurprising that so few philosophers have properly *thematized* the concept of play with any real degree of rigor: for what is closest and most obvious is often also the least accessible to scrutiny. If the concept has occasionally been touched upon by certain thinkers, this has been the

exception rather than the rule: in comparison to lofty notions like the true, the good, and the beautiful, play does not immediately call to mind any readily applicable philosophical theories. Our attitude towards such things as fantasies, games, and fun are overwhelmingly dismissive, the product seemingly of a worldview heavily overdetermined by a tendency to view phenomena solely in terms of their economic value. Play is primarily seen as a frivolous activity lacking in significance, one that we place firmly behind us when we leave the childish world of fantasy for the serious, adult realm of work and responsibility. And yet, despite appearances to the contrary, the concept of play is one with the surprisingly rich, though admittedly stifled intellectual history—one that challenges the common misconceptions that I have just presented. Plato concerns himself at least tangentially with the ludic in his treatment of education. Schiller takes up a similar theme in his *Letters on the Education of Man*. Nietzsche, in particular, chased the concept with an almost preternatural fervency: his “On the Three Metamorphoses,” included in the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, offers a tripartite vision of man’s development from obedient camel, to defiant lion, culminating with the lion’s transformation in the image of the playful child. And Nietzsche is especially significant for his clear attempt to make philosophy itself a playful enterprise in both form and tonality. Several of Freud’s essays deal explicitly with games and their role in the development of the human psyche. Derrida gives the concept of free-play a prominent place in his understanding of language and semiotics. Play is also a central concept in Gadamer’s treatment of art and hermeneutics in *Truth and Method*, a book that has had an especially strong influence on my own thinking in this dissertation. This list is, of course, perfunctory and incomplete. An exhaustive history of the concept of play in the Western intellectual canon is neither necessarily or desirable for the advancement of my purposes here—I wish only to give some meaningful suggestion that the ludic is not wholly exempt from

consideration or importance in our philosophical tradition. Its lack of standing in contemporary culture seems determined, if anything, by extra-philosophical cultural concerns. In their own way, each of the above thinkers challenges the currently predominant view that play is largely insignificant, suggesting that play is, in its own way, a deeply serious business. We can, and should, I argue, take our cue from an aphorism of Nietzsche's in *Beyond Good and Evil*: "A man's maturity—consists in having found again the seriousness one had as a child, at play."¹

Play is a difficult concept to define. This situation finds its likely explanation in the simple fact that the ludic is a phenomenon distinguished in large measure by its plurality. There exists a seemingly endless number of distinct *forms* of play; it proliferates in every conceivable thematic direction and even games of a single type appear amenable to an inexhaustible range of variation. Difficult as it may be to pin down, Dutch historian Johan Huizinga offers at least three defining characteristics of play in his book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. (1) Play is always 'free,' in the sense that it is always an activity taken up voluntarily on the part of the player; (2) play exists outside of the time, space, and practical concerns that circumscribe "ordinary" or "real" life; and (3) play both creates order and requires it for its perpetuation—games (even the most improvisational of games) are structured according to rules and any deviation from established parameters means that play has come to an end. The most formal definition offered by Huizinga, which brings together these three characteristics with some of their logical corollaries, provides a solid foundation on which to build an understanding of what play is and why it might be important: "Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life and being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Beyond Good and Evil," in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, Inc., 2000), 273.

material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within in its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress difference from the common world by disguise or other means.”² Key features of this definition will be of import for the trajectory of this paper, but by far the most significant element of Huizinga’s account of play in *Homo Ludens* is the relatively simple notion that play is always an *intentional* activity. Play is directed in the sense that something is always *in* play or *at* play. In all its forms it is an inherent expression of *concern* with something. All of this is basically just another way to say that play is meaningful—it is always in possession of an inherent significance and imposes its unique, internal logic on that which it involves. There is, I believe, a weak reading and a strong reading of the idea that play is meaningful. One could say that play is simply one phenomenon among many according to which significance enters into and structures the world. I think, however, that Huizinga’s thesis in *Homo Ludens*, that human cultural achievements are essentially institutionalized play forms, suggests a stronger reading is possible. If indeed “civilization arises and unfolds in and as play,”³ than the ludic itself would not only be a semiological phenomenon but, in a deeper sense, semiurgic—play may very well be the primary vehicle by which meaning enters into and comes to structure our world. Theodore Adorno, in his 1965 *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* puts forward the bold proposition that without play there is no truth. Adorno’s brief aside, offered without explanation or further exposition, finds compelling echo in Huizinga’s lengthy and detailed anthropological survey of play and its history: without play, no meaning.

² Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 13.

³ Ibid., “Foreword,” no pagination provided.

Such an originary relationship between play and meaning suggests that language—that endlessly variable font of significance—is itself essentially a ludic phenomenon. This is hardly new theoretical territory. The idea that linguistic meaning is generated from the continual interplay of signs in their ‘*différance*’ has been explored extensively in the structuralist and post-structuralist tradition and is developed with special poignancy in Jacque Derrida’s body of work (cf. *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, 1970). Wittgenstein, especially in his later *Philosophical Investigations*, suggests that language can be understood quite thoroughly as a collection of ‘games’ and that meaning cannot be distilled from any utterance without reference to rules that circumscribe or contextualize a given speech act. John Pollack, in his recent historical survey *The Pun Also Rises* credibly suggests that wordplay may be responsible for the development of phonetic writing systems from their earlier pictographic forms.

Huizinga, too, quite rigorously explores the deep relationship that exists between language and play—at least as it pertains to the development of the language arts. Specifically, he points to the related phenomena of poetry and mythology as two related spheres where the essentially ludic nature of language is given free reign: “As a form of competition proper, archaic poetry is barely distinguishable from the ancient riddle-contest. The one produces wisdom, the other words of beauty. Both are dominated by a system of play-rules which fix the range of ideas and symbols to be used, sacred or poetic as the case may be; both presuppose a circle of initiates who understand the language spoken. The validity of either depends solely on how far it conforms to the play-rules. Only he who can speak the art-language wins the title of poet.”⁴ This ‘art-language’ represents a significant departure from the norms governing mundane discourse, but it cannot be understood merely as the ornamentation of everyday speech—however tempting

⁴ Ibid., 133.

it may be to do so. Indeed, Huizinga suggests that if anything the instrumentality of day-to-day language games is parasitic on the myth-laden and image-producing power of the poetic, which is actually language's primary and essential modality. In Huizinga's words: "But whereas the language of ordinary life—in itself a working and workmanlike instrument—is continually wearing down the image-content of words and acquiring a superficial existence of its own (logical only in appearance), poetry continues to cultivate the figurative, i.e. image-bearing, qualities of language, with deliberate intent."⁵

While Huizinga limits his discussion to examples taken from antiquity, there is little reason to suppose that the modern development of 'literature' cannot also be understood as a play phenomenon. Keeping in mind the loose parameters offered by Huizinga as a working 'definition' of play, it would indeed seem we have *every* reason to believe this is the case. In what follows, I suggest—and expound upon—at least five principal ways in which literature shows itself to be a pursuit that is fundamentally ludic in essence. They are, in order of discussion: (1) that literature is free, voluntary activity; (2) it concerns things that are not 'real' in the everyday sense of the word; (3) it resists being easily categorized as either serious or frivolous; (4) it is a structured, orderly phenomenon with its own 'rules' for engagement; and (5) literature lends itself especially well to the creation of special communities that emphasize their difference from society at large through ritual, specialized language, and other means.

First, generally speaking, both in its creation and consumption, literature is free activity. While some consideration of their connection to present day professional fields will have to be wrestled with, by and large literary pursuits are undertaken voluntarily. For those who write it and read it, literature is not infrequently a form of recreation. Certainly, even for those who produce or consume literature in some sort of professional capacity, it remains a source of

⁵ Ibid.

enjoyment, even if it is not always in the strictest sense done purely ‘for pleasure.’ Presumably, a genuine sense of satisfaction derived from literary art is a prerequisite for the decision to work with it as a vocation.

Secondly, literature, much like mythology, concerns situations and experiences that are set apart from those that define the ‘everyday’ and the ‘real.’ Narrative forms such as the novel and the short story obviously concern themselves largely with fictions; poetry trades primarily in unusual images and symbolism, striving to capture and communicate a transcendent, almost ideal, realm of experience that interrupts the regularity of the mundane only rarely. Whether poetry or prose, literature is a thing of the imagination. This is not to say that literary works cannot reference or reflect features of the ‘real’ world—but that they are not bound to or limited by such features. Even when real-world events or experiences are depicted, in their literary presentation they always take on meanings independent of their ‘real’ significance. On the more abstract level of form, literature is set apart from the ordinary as well, since literary language differs substantially from ordinary linguistic registers, welcoming a level of novelty and ambiguity not typically present or tolerated in everyday speech.

Thirdly, if literature occupies itself principally with the creation of imaginary worlds and liminal experiences, it also resists attempts to regard it as an entirely frivolous enterprise. Huizinga’s insistence on the notion that play activities muddle the apparently well-defined border between the serious and the non-serious is perhaps the most compelling feature of his account of the ludic. It is especially significant for the fact that it allows him to understand and reclaim the originary power of myth with a success that precious few cultural critics have been able to match. For Huizinga avoids the major pitfalls that overwhelmingly prevail in much modern analysis of mythopoesis. The marked tendency to see in mythology (especially non-

Western, non-Judeo-Christian mythology) evidence of a ‘naive’ and ‘primitive’ mind leads invariably to the assumption that myths are simply fantasies that are taken literally by their creators. From a modern perspective, this postulate can lead in two directions. On the one hand, there is a wholesale dismissal of myth as a kind of superstition, the unsophisticated and ineffectual attempt of a pre-scientific mind to reach an understanding of the world and its underpinnings. On the other hand, there is sometimes an equally erroneous tendency towards the exotification of ‘ur’ mythology, a tendency to see in myth’s ‘primitivism’ something almost supernaturally holistic, perhaps even superior to our contemporary, disenchanting, and scientific worldview. In the first case, myth is simply not taken seriously, while the second grants it a kind of seriousness that it arguably does not possess even to the cultures that produced them.

The truth, as Huizinga rightly presents, is that the mythopoetic worldview is more interesting than we are initially inclined to believe. Believers in myth do indeed find themselves in a curiously ‘childlike’ frame of mind, but as anyone who has spent sufficient time around children will tell you, they are neither naive nor deluded in their pretensions. Children engaged in fantasy play have a surprisingly sophisticated intuition of their own behavior: they are perfectly aware that they are only ‘playing at’ something, and yet this awareness seems in no way to discourage them from taking up their fictitious roles with total immediacy and unflinching commitment. The worldview of the “savage” (for all his nuance Huizinga is not, unfortunately, immune from the use of such unfavorable normative terminology) is remarkably similar to the play attitude of the child, where ‘belief’ merges seamlessly with ‘make-believe’:
“In my view this desire to astonish by boundless exaggeration or confusion of proportions should never be taken absolutely seriously, no matter whether we find it in myths which are part of a system of belief or in pure literature or in the fantasies of children. In every case we are dealing

with the same play-habit of the mind. Involuntarily we always judge archaic man's belief in the myths he creates by our own standards of science, philosophy or religious conviction. A half-joking element verging on make-believe is inseparable from truth myth."⁶ The 'half-joking' nature of mythological thinking, if I may pull a particularly poignant example from my own wider reading, is felt quite palpably in the work of bad boy Spanish-American ethnographer and linguist Jaime de Angulo, who worked extensively with native populations along the West Coast, most notably with the Pit River tribes of Northern California. De Angulo was an accomplished anthropologist in his own right, but is known today primarily for his book *Indian Tales*, a work of creative fiction that pulls freely from the narrative traditions common to the Northern California tribes that he studied and with which he lived for nearly 40 years. In the appendix to the book, de Angulo finds it desirable to clarify for his readers certain features of Native American mythological outlook and transcribes a brief conversation he had with a native interlocutor named Wild Bill. The question at issue is whether or not the Pit River truly believe that Coyote created the world. Bill's answer is a resounding yes. Unequivocally. But Bill also identifies the pervasiveness of the creation story itself as the source of his belief: "Why not? ... Anyway ... that's what the old people always said ... only they don't always tell the same story. Here is one way I heard it..."⁷ As Bill recounts the basic outline of the creation myth, de Angulo questions him about certain logical inconsistencies present in the narrative. Wild Bill's rejoinder is particularly unintuitive to modern sensibilities: "I don't know... I wonder about that sometimes, myself. I have asked some of the old people and they say: That's what I have been wondering myself, but that's the way we have always heard it told. And then you hear the Paiutes tell it different! And our own people down the river, they also tell it a little bit different

⁶ Ibid., 143.

⁷ Jaime De Angulo, *Indian Tales* (New York: A. A. Wyn, Inc., 1953), 240.

from us. Doc, maybe the whole thing just never happened... and maybe it did happen but everybody tells it different. People often do that you know..."⁸ Here, we see precisely the kind of liminal, 'half-joking' attitude that is central to Huizinga's account of mythopoesis in *Homo Ludens*. Bill is keenly aware that the source of his belief is a particular narrative tradition, even as he is also keenly aware that the narrative in question is hardly infallible. On the one hand, for Bill the story is "just a story." And yet... insofar as the creation myth clearly informs his social, ethical, and cosmological moorings, he takes it seriously—it also *more* than "just" a story. "Living myth," Huizinga reminds us, "knows no distinction between play and seriousness."⁹

It should go without saying that the modern phenomenon of 'literature' differs in important ways from archaic forms of mythology. For one, to the extent that myths delineate cosmology and prescribe social norms for entire ethnic groups, mythology is all-encompassing and culturally binding in a way that literary movements arguably are not. No matter how perfectly a book may capture the zeitgeist of a particular period, or how significantly it may influence a generation of readers, literary texts typically do not proffer cosmologies or inspire desired behavior with the same force and efficacy as myth proper. And yet literary texts can undeniably be seen to muddle the distinction between the serious and the non-serious in a manner similar to more primal forms of narrative. To the extent that literature trades in fictions—characters, events, situations, experience, etc.—that do not *exist* it can be understood as non-serious, at least in so far as our occupation with such things has no obvious and immediate practical application. The essentially frivolous aspect of the literary has certainly been seized upon at various points in history by its more vocal detractors, particularly when it came to newer, less 'academic' forms such as the modern novel, which critics warned might serve as a

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Huizinga, 129.

distraction or escape from the serious concerns of ‘real’ life and could corrupt the minds of its readers with all manner of harmful fantasies and contrived nonsense.

Of course, paradoxically these same criticisms of literature as a form of entertainment only stand to the extent that literature is also something to be taken seriously. A narrative can hardly be considered dangerous unless it can affect those who engage with it, and to possess any significant degree of affect is to carry weight. The implicit seriousness of literary endeavors is presumably a prerequisite for its contemporary status as vocation (whether it be as creator or critic), but to say that literature is non-trivial goes deeper than simply noting the fact that it has become professionalized. As much as literature concerns itself with things that do not actually *exist* in the same way that the people, places and things that we encounter in daily life do, there remains the stubborn fact that a mind deeply engaged in the development of a narrative treats these fantasies in certain respects much as it would treat anything that it encounters in real life. Works of literary art *occupy* us. We get caught up in them. Anyone who is truly engaged with a piece of literary art experiences, on a basic level, concern with its unfolding. We *care*—sometimes quite deeply—about the characters we encounter, as well as the events and relationships that shape them. Even the more abstract medium of the poetic arguably works on us in a similar fashion: invested in the symbolism of its imagery, we feel intrinsically that there is something ‘at stake’ in how the thing comes to completion. From a certain perspective, it’s really quite remarkable that anything so quintessentially *imaginary* should be taken so earnestly. Narrative, as a form of play, is basically an altered state.

The fourth way in which a literature shows itself as play is that is literary works have ‘rules,’ loosely construed. A text is a thing with structure, composed according to particular procedures and suggesting particular strategies of engagement for its readers. The contention that

writing proceeds according to “rules” may seem odd—there are undoubtedly as many (if not more!) approaches to process as there are writers—but a strong inkling of this truth can be glimpsed in the consideration that for certain authors the act of creation is explicitly carried out as a kind of game. The Surrealists, to name one well-known example, regularly made use of rule-based and collaborative procedures such as Exquisite Corpse, Time Traveler’s Potlach, and automatic writing in order to unlock latent potentialities within language and stimulate creativity in their literary practices. Another fine example of a group that expressly pursued creative writing as a kind of game is the *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle* or OULIPO, which roughly translates to “Workshop of Potential Literature.” Describing themselves as “rats who construct the labyrinth from which they plan to escape,” the authors who comprise this extraordinarily exclusive and intergenerational group—the association extends invitations to join only very rarely, however inductees continue to enjoy membership posthumously *in aeternam*—are thoroughly committed to literary creation via seemingly impossible forms of constraint. *Oulipians* place themselves in a kind of agonistic struggle with the material of language itself: once the rules of composition are set they are followed tenaciously. The works of OULIPO authors take relatively ‘simple’ forms, such as palindromes, lipograms, and univocalisms, but can also be quite complicated, and many procedures are based on mathematical problems. The most well-known example of such constrained writing is George Perec’s novel *La Disparition*, a 300-page lipogram that does not contain a single instance of the letter E. The *oulipians* were themselves heavily influenced by fin-de-siècle poet and novelist Raymond Roussel, who based much of his writing on complicated games of punning and other forms of word-play.

It might be objected that not all writers explicitly use games as a significant element of their creative process. This, of course, is evident. It can be countered, however, that the surrealist

and *oulipian* examples provided above are only particularly tangible instances of what constitutes a generalized phenomenon. If the *oulipians*, for instance, subject themselves to particularly unusual and stringent forms of constraint, the methodology is not appreciably different from that which produces more recognizable poetic forms: everything from sonnets and villanelles, to limerick and *haiku* are composed in accordance with rigid restrictions on rhyme and meter that circumscribe the linguistic material available to the poet. In the “classical” tradition, poetic form also places significant limitations on suitable content: the ode dictates subject matter and themes that would be wholly inappropriate for elegy or lyric poetry, for example.

The phenomenon of *genre* is of particular relevance to considerations of the structured, ‘rule oriented’ nature of the literary: for while genres are certainly fluid and the rules that orient a particular literary form are seldom as clear-cut as those that define *oulipian* works, a genre is undoubtedly a structured thing, possessing a unique internal logic that only admits a certain level of deviance before it becomes something else entirely. This is not, in principle, different from “proper” games, which seem to admit an almost endless array of variation while remaining ultimately categorizable along certain ideal, family lineages. In his work *Man, Play and Games*, Roger Caillois, a French intellectual influenced by Huizinga’s cultural play research, proposes a taxonomy of games that I believe can be of some help in understanding what is being ‘played out’ in various literary forms. Caillois’s taxonomy breaks down into four basic categories: *agôn* (games of contest), *alea* (games of chance), *mimicry* (games of make-believe), and *ilinx* (games of disorientation). Within these four categories, play is further broken down along a continuum that stretches between *paidia*—games that are more ‘loosely’ structured, which proceed spontaneously and unpredictably through improvisation—and *ludus*—games that make use of

more rigid conventions and create interest through an impulse for competence and mastery.

Caillois's taxonomy has remarkable power when it comes to making sense of the forces at play in various recognizable game forms; everything from charades, to chess, to acrobatics can be understood according to these relatively simple categories. I am inclined to believe the explanatory potency of Caillois's taxonomy can be applied to various forms of literary work with great success. The work of the *oulipians*, for example, can be seen as a particularly intensive *ludic* form of *agôn*, since much of it depends on strict adherence to arbitrary convention and the 'game' proceeds in competition with language to circumvent the self-imposed literary constraint. The cut-up novels of William Burroughs, to pick another rather lucid example, can be understood as a *paidiaic* expression of the *aleatory*: Burroughs would cut up various pages of text and freely reassemble them at random in an exploratory fashion, seeking to unlock latent meanings hidden within otherwise relatively mundane material. These, again, are particularly unusual and playful forms of literary enterprise—more 'mundane' forms of narrative such as the novel and the short story are arguably primarily forms of what Caillois would call *mimicry*, the simulation of imaginary characters in imaginary situations, and are variably *ludic* or *paidiaic* depending on the nature of the work and the author's disposition. Caillois's taxonomy is meant to be loose—games (or texts) can participate to varying degrees in more than one play paradigm—it is hardly imperative, or even desirable, to attempt a systematic categorization of literary genres according to play forms. What I wish to suggest is that Caillois's conceptual framework is one that can fruitfully be applied to texts on a case-by-case basis. Insofar as this is possible, it is a powerful tool for divining the various modalities in which literature expresses itself as a play phenomenon. What is 'at play' in a given text is always a function of the kind of games a writer is playing with language—and with his readers.

From the perspective of the reader, a text can also be understood as a kind of game, for in reading we encounter an already pre-determined structure that suggests particular paradigms of engagement. To read is always to accept an invitation issued on the part of the author to engage in a game of meaning production, the rules of which are always palpable if not explicitly spelled out. Of course, some of the rules that govern the distillation of meaning from a literary work are painfully obvious and hardly worth mentioning. Most books, for example, are meant to be read from beginning to end; the act of ‘flipping ahead’ to see what happens is generally considered a sacrilege anathema to the way a book is supposed to be enjoyed. Those who do—and especially those who inflict their ill-gained knowledge on the unsuspecting—are what children generally refer to as ‘spoilsports.’

The rules that govern readerly engagement vary widely and readers are invited to participate in the game of meaning production to differing degrees depending on the text in question. Certain genres seem naturally to involve their readers more than others—one could potentially point to mystery and detective stories as literary forms where reader participation is an especially rich enterprise. Certain writers have also more explicitly embraced the essentially collaborative nature of the text *qua* game: Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar composed his novel *Hopscotch (Rayuela)* along the lines of a ‘choose your own adventure’ tale, presenting the reader with (at least) two distinct paths towards reading the novel to its completion. He stated that the novel was born of a desire to create a text in which the reader would act as his true “co-conspirator.” Of course, Cortázar only makes explicit in *Hopscotch* what is generally true for literary texts as a whole: the text can be fully realized only with the imaginative participation of the reader. Literature is an irreducibly intersubjective phenomenon, in order for the game to ‘come off’ as intended the reader must play along with enthusiasm.

The structured, ‘rule-based’ nature of literary engagement brings me to one final point regarding the peculiar relationship that exists between an author and his readers, a relationship that (at least typically) finds its sole point of contact in the medium of the text itself. What is ‘at play’ in a given work is always a meaning that, as an ideality, precedes the process of actually putting pen to paper, and perhaps transcends the contingency of the written work in its factual concreteness. The birth of every successful artwork is as much a process of discovery as it is creation. Certainly, artists are free to invent and fabricate as they see fit, but it often happens that in the thick of his labor the work itself makes a demand of him— it requires something that he cannot, in good faith, refuse. What the author intends in his work is something larger than himself and in which he is inextricably caught up. It is something that is always somehow ‘already’ there; he aims at it—and if he hits his mark it is through an infinitely variable process of contrivance, condition, and luck. If the writer’s play is one of actually *creating* the object that will convey the meaning towards which he strives, the reader’s play is that of interpretation. If the writer must painstakingly devise the game pieces that will allow the game to be played out to his satisfaction, the reader finds these same pieces already laid out before him. While he may not immediately know exactly how each piece functions, he plays a game that aims at the same meaning. Writing and reading must be understood as two sides of the same coin; they are complementary modalities through which something comes to presentation. What is ‘at play’ for both writer and reader is the very same meaning. When the game is played well by both parties, we say understanding has occurred.

The final way in which literature demonstrates its fundamentally ludic essence is that, like many other forms of play, it is particularly adept at creating cohesive social groups with a strong sense of identity. This is true for writers, who regularly associate, formally or informally,

with colleagues who share their basic aesthetic commitments through such things as literary salons and publications. Frequently such associations take on a rigorously ludic dimension. One notable example: The OULIPO began as a special subcommittee of the Parisian Collège de ‘Pataphysique [sic], a ribald burlesque of traditional academic culture based in the literary efforts of Symbolist poet Alfred Jarry. The Collège, which identifies itself as a “public inutility” and whose research committees include panels on such esoterica as “Halieutics and Ichthyballistics,” and “Hirsutism and Pogonotrophy,” has been around since 1948. Following a period of occultation that lasted from 1975 to 2000, it publicly maintains its activities today through the quarterly dissemination of its journal, the *Viridis Candella*, to members as well as by playing host for the occasional event. The Collège is headed *in aeternum* by its Inamovable Curator Dr. Faustroll and his assistant, the dog-faced baboon (*papio cynocephalus*) Bosse-de-Nage—both fictional literary creations of Jarry. The “first and most senior living entity” of the association is Vice-Curator Tanya Peixoto, who assumed the role in 2014 from predecessor Her Magnificence Lutembi, an African Crocodile. Members have the privilege of paying phynancial [sic] fees to the Collège, and in return are granted “the right to wear the Insignia of the Collège by day as well as by night, to participate in its Assizes and Private Manifestations, to make use of the Pataphysical Calendar, etc. They have the opportunity, depending on their merits (pataphysically speaking) or their state of seniority, to be received into the Hierarchy, to become members of the *Ordre de la Grande Gidouille* and to be honored by the Collège at their respective obsequies.”¹⁰ Ludically oriented groups similar to the Collège de ‘Pataphysique abound, particularly among the avant-garde tradition—the Symbolists, Futurists, Surrealists, and Dadaists all created cohesion of purpose and set themselves apart from mundane society through obscure

¹⁰ “What is the College of ‘Pataphysics?,” Collège de ‘Pataphysique, accessed January 4, 2021 http://college-de-pataphysique.fr/presentation_en.html.

and esoteric language, symbology, and sometimes ritualistic practice. Huizinga indeed reminds us that “wherever there is a catch word ending in *-ism* we are hot on the tracks of a play-community.”¹¹ Other notable examples, specifically in the Russian tradition, would be the 19th-century Arzamas and Green Lamp societies, Aleksey Remizov’s Order of Monkeys (Обезьяний орден), and the OBeRIu—who are, of course, the subject of the present study. What bears noting about these especially playful associations is, to a large degree, they are elaborate burlesques of more formal, academic societies. To the extent that these professional groups also utilize special symbology, ritual, and procedure to mark themselves and create a special sense of belonging among their members, they too can be conceived as play communities, though they clearly play in a more ‘serious’ key.

What is true for writers is equally true for readers: literary works can garner incredible amounts of enthusiasm. There is of course, the more intimate phenomenon of book clubs, but on a larger scale readerly exuberance can match even the kind of extreme devotion displayed by sports fanatics—albeit with a smaller incidence of riots. Started by science-fiction devotees in the 1930’s, conventions, or ‘cons’ as they are popularly known, have become something of a widespread phenomenon in recent years. Thousands of people (children and adults) attend these gatherings to celebrate not only comic books but also such popular literary series as *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Game of Thrones*. Catering to diehard fans, conventions are replete with elaborate costumery, finely crafted props, and enthusiastic role-play—they are textbook examples of the ludic community in action. This, of course, is ‘low culture’ fandom—to the extent that the distinction is even worth making—but there are obvious analogues to be found for the more highly cultured. Academic readers are also sometimes devoted members of a fan clubs or subcultures—we call these “specialties,” “fields,” or “schools of literary criticism,” depending

¹¹ Huizinga, 203.

on the breadth of material they cover. Scholars, too, attend conventions where they are free to socialize and ‘geek out’ about their literary passions—we call them academic conferences. While cosplay certainly isn’t the norm at these events, they are highly curated and require certain scripted, professional modes of comportment. In a word — to participate one must still be willing to play the part. Such play communities tend to generate fierce loyalties among their members and are exclusionary, at least in so far as they distinguish themselves from those outside the group through their adoption of and investment in shared symbols, texts and discourses. “The feeling of being ‘apart together’ in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game.”¹²

In the preceding considerations I have tried merely to *suggest* some potential ways in which literature and literary activities can be seen to participate in the ludic impulse. Certainly, these avenues can be explored in much greater depth—a many of them will be flushed in due course more coherently in the body of the present dissertation. What is certain, and bears repeating, is that the parameters of the ‘literary’ do seem to conform in certain compelling ways to the parameters of play which Huizinga identifies in *Homo Ludens*. Literature is free activity. Its sphere lies definitively outside of what is ‘ordinary’ and ‘serious,’ while at the same time providing deep and transformative experiences for its participants. Literary works are bounded by their own particular *chronotopes*; they are composed and consumed according to more or less fixed rules for the production and revelation of meaning. Lastly, literature engenders intersubjective associations that forge bonds between members by accentuating the group’s distinctness from society at large, often through the use of specialized costume, symbology, and ritual. In fact, literary parameters conform so closely to Huizinga’s ludic paradigm that there

¹² Huizinga, 12.

seems to be only two options: either Huizinga's analysis is sorely misguided, or literature is quintessentially a play phenomenon.

Now, there remains one area of tension between Huizinga's conception of play and our understanding of the literary where we seem to be at an impasse. This is Huizinga's stipulation that play activity be disconnected from material gain and profit. I have alluded to some of the difficulties that arise from this contradiction in the preceding considerations. For it is obvious that literary activity is not wholly divorced from the sphere of economics. It may not be altogether common, but people do support themselves by means of their literary endeavors: we live at a time when the roles of writer and critic have been thoroughly professionalized. This is perhaps less of a problem if we consider that other play forms have also been recast as profitable vocations, some of which are, at least for a small population, incredibly lucrative. Is Patrick Mahomes any less of a football *player* for fact that he currently holds a 12-year contract worth 503 million dollars? Huizinga seems to think so. He notes: "with the increasing systematization and regimentation of sport, something of the pure play-quality is inevitably lost. We see this very clearly in the official distinction between amateurs and professionals... The spirit of the professional is no longer the true play-spirit; it is lacking in spontaneity and carelessness."¹³

Yet Huizinga's position cannot consist wholly in dismissing an activity as non-ludic simply because it is a profession—there is indeed a great deal of tension in his closing chapter, particularly regarding the ludic impulse as it is expressed in contemporary culture. Huizinga's central thesis in *Homo Ludens* is that culture as a whole—law, war, mythology, religion, the arts, —develops *in* and *as* play. Cultural phenomena are quintessentially ludic and never really leave the play sphere. "When speaking of the play-element in culture we do not mean that among the various activities of civilized life an important place is reserved for play, nor do we mean that

¹³ Ibid., 197.

civilization has arisen out of play by some evolutionary process, in the sense that something which was originally play passed into something which was no longer play and could henceforth be called culture. The view we take in the following pages is that culture arises in the form of play, that is played from the very beginning.”¹⁴ And indeed, we could add “is played to the very end” and remain in keeping with Huizinga’s theoretical perspective, for in Huizinga’s estimation, while its rules and structures are subject to change, culture never wholly leaves the play sphere. What *does* happen over time is that the communities and practices originally rooted in the symbol surplus that characterize play activities tend, over time, towards institutionalization. The concrete forces responsible for this change are likely myriad and variable—though I suspect in this regard simple force of habit is not to be underestimated—but, in any case, it is the result of the shift that is important here, rather than its causes. For the crystallization of play-forms into institutions lends a deceptive air of exclusive seriousness to the trapping of culture. What begins as a game, something with a felt air of arbitrary significance, is obscured in such a way that practically and for the most part it is experienced directly as such only seldom if at all—in extreme cases they can appear intrinsic, immutable, and unassailable, especially to those most wholly invested in them. Yet it remains the case that this gloss of seriousness provided by institutions never wholly severs a given sphere of culture from its ludic roots. Qua professions, the role of the writer or literary critic can at times attain a pretension to extreme gravity. They are still, however, in essence—play. The prim seriousness of the Academy is only play in a deficient mode, and never wholly transcends its connection to the inherently ludic nature of all inquiry. Even in its most rarefied form the institution is simply a play community that has become only dimly aware of itself as such. Though it may not be immediately felt, institutionalized forms of play are always ripe for transformation through a rediscovery of the ludic spirit.

¹⁴ Ibid., 46.

Taking its direction from seminal works in the field of play theory, this dissertation examines ludic elements in the performance, textual practices, literary thought, and intellectual community of the Union of Real Art (Ob"edinenie real'nogo iskusstva or OBeRIu). I use the concept of play to elucidate how the group used literature as an unconventional medium for the pursuit of special forms of knowledge and to explore the intimate genre of performance that shaped the association's collective identity as a group of writers and thinkers. Each of the four chapters that comprise this dissertation examine one facet of how play shaped the OBeRIu's shared literary practice.

In the first chapter, I contrast the performative strategies of the *oberiuty* with those of the Russian Futurists, demonstrating that, despite superficial similarities between the two groups, the OBeRIu approach to spectacle possesses an 'existential' dimension that is quite alien to that of Futurism. I argue that the register of Futurist performance is characterized by what Hans-Georg Gadamer has called "aesthetic differentiation," and attitude towards art that radically foregrounds the autonomy of the artwork from other spheres of human activity and, in so doing, severs its connection from life and the world. This tendency among the Futurists is seen most clearly in its practice of the avant-garde tradition of *épatage*, in their evident commitment to the ideal of *l'art pour l'art*, and in their self-posturing as outsiders. In contrast, I argue that the *oberiuty* were engaged in what some theorists have called *deep play*: they showed little interest in cultivating scandal and seem to have drawn no truly meaningful distinction between art and life. I suggest that OBeRIu strategies of performance are best characterized by a playful modality that Gadamer calls "self-presentation," a concept that proves immensely useful for understanding not only the group's theater, but their written work as well.

In my second chapter, drawing on Gadamer's concept of "self-presentation," I show how the OBeRIu's playful approach to writing was defined by their adherence to a *cognitive* or *epistemic* understanding of literature: they believed that literary practice constitutes a unique form of, or at least route to, knowledge. In this sense, the texts of the *oberiuty* frustrate the boundary between the philosophical and the poetic. I show how even a playful 'nonsense' text like Daniil Kharms's "Blue Notebook No. 10" can be read through a philosophical lens—in this case as a performative refutation of certain tenets central to the metaphysics of Immanuel Kant. After some consideration of how philosophical concerns inform the work of Aleksandr Vvedensky, Nikolai Zabolotsky, and Leonid Lipavsky, I suggest that the epistemic register of OBeRIu literature can be likened to what Roger Caillois has called games of *ilinx*—their texts induce a kind of cognitive vertigo that beckon readers to forms of knowledge that resist conceptualization. As a form of epistemic play, OBeRIu texts open onto the world even as they exist outside of it, broadening horizons and inviting readers to participate in what Gadamer called "the joy of knowledge."

In the third chapter of this dissertation I argue that the epistemic approach to literature espoused by the *oberiuty* places them in tension with premises fundamental to the theories of Russian Formalism and demonstrate how the OBeRIu deliberately problematize the concept of *literariness*. I demonstrate how the poetic practices of the group were firmly rooted in the philosophical traditions of Russian Orthodoxy and took particular direction from concept of the *eikon* or holy image. I argue that the epistemic nature of OBeRIu 'nonsense' precludes reading their texts as exercises in Shklovskian *estrangement*. As an alternative, I suggest that Gadamer's notion of *recognition* is invaluable for understanding the work of the *oberiuty*: an OBeRIu text

does not only offer a more vivid sensuous perception of things, but “raises them into the truth,” in the sense that it *articulates* something and adds to our understanding of the world.

In the fourth and final chapter of this dissertation I give some consideration to the community of *chinari*, which included several prominent *oberiuty*. If the OBeRIu itself was a relatively short-lived ‘official’ group with a prominent public facet, the *chinari* constituted an intimate ‘inner circle’ that was both more private and more stable than the Union. I suggest that the *chinari* circle can be understood as part of a discernible lineage of extra-institutional play communities in the history of Russian letters, a tradition that arguably began with the Arzamas Society of Obscure People at the beginning of the 19th century. I argue that play was, in fact, the group’s *raison d’être* and was integral in defining their own sense of themselves and their work as an intellectual community. I give some consideration to Leonid Lipavsky’s *Conversations*, a more or less authentic record of the group’s discussions between 1933 and 1934, suggesting that the group used the domestic speech register of *bullshit* productively—both as a fun way to seriously explore ideas and generate inspiration but, crucially, also to foster their collective bond.

I. The Discontinuous Avant-Garde: OBeRIu Spectacle as Deep Play

I am a phenomenon quite out of the ordinary.
— Daniil Kharms

On the evening of January 24th, 1928 an unusual event took place at the Leningrad Press Club. A ‘dramaticized’ evening, entitled “Three Left Hours” (Три левых часа), was hosted by a group of young artists who called themselves the Union of Real Art or OBeRIu—a somewhat playful acronym of the group’s Russian moniker, Объединение реального искусства. If the performance’s title suggests certain political undertones, it also carries significant and undeniable connotations of oddity or perverseness: while the Russian word левый can indeed mean ‘leftist,’ colloquially it may also indicate an air of unsuitability, irrelevance, or strangeness.¹⁵ The event, which has developed a reputation as one of the more legendary evenings in the history of 20th-century Russian performance, was indeed a strange one. While accounts of the OBeRIu’s proceedings that night are somewhat conflicting, and no one can be sure *precisely* what it was like to attend the spectacle, enough information has been gleaned from reviews and memoirs for scholars to piece together a more or less plausible reconstruction of what transpired over the course of the evening.¹⁶

The first of the evening’s eponymous ‘hours’—in actuality, each of the spectacle’s three sections was well over 60 minutes long—featured presentations of poetry by Daniil Kharms, Aleksandr Vvedensky, Nikolai Zabolotsky, Konstantin Vaginov, and Igor Bakhterev. To call the events comprising this first act mere readings—even ‘dramatic’ readings— would be to do them

¹⁵ The Old East Slavic *лѣвъ*, similar to its English counterpart, can mean variably: ‘left,’ ‘weak,’ or ‘evil.’

¹⁶ What follows is my own attempt to provide an exposition of the spectacle’s proceedings. Among other scholars, I am particularly indebted to Sarah Pratt, Graham Roberts, as well as Anthony Anemone and Peter Scotto for their work in piecing together coherent narratives of the evening from the myriad first-person accounts that exist (and which I have also consulted).

a disservice: for each poet had agreed beforehand to include, as a decisive aspect of their recitation, some significant element of theater. The evening commenced with an introductory nonsense monologue improvised by Bakhterev, after which a large wardrobe emerged from the wings and appeared to propel itself across the stage. Seated atop this apparently autonomous armoire, which was decorated with obtuse slogans like “Art is a cupboard!” (Искусство—шкаф!) and “Poetry’s not cream of wheat!” (Поэзия — это не манная каша!), rode a strangely dressed man smoking a calabash pipe. This bizarrely festooned figure, “powdered, pale, wearing a long jacket adorned with a red triangle and his favorite little golden cap with pendants,”¹⁷ was Daniil Kharms. Kharms recited his phonetic poetry from atop the wardrobe, subsequently descending to the stage where he began to pace furiously, stopping now and then to blow artful smoke rings. Glancing at his watch, he then made an announcement that a ‘sailor’ (actually the poet Nikolai Kropachev) was reading verse on the corner of what is now Nevsky Prospect and Sadovaya Ulitsa. Bakhterev returned to the stage: abruptly concluding his performance by dramatically toppling over backwards, he was ceremoniously carried off the candle-lit stage by a group of men dressed as factory workers. Vaginov then read his poems, feigning obliviousness as the ballerina Militsa Popova danced circles around him. Vvedensky, doubling as official ‘Master of Ceremonies’ for the evening, recited verse while seated on a tricycle, cutting “improbable lines and figures”¹⁸ as he careened back and forth across the stage. Zabolotsky, fresh from an obligatory stint of military service and dressed in his worn-out soldier’s uniform and mud begrimed boots, closed the first hour of the evening with a reading of his poem “Movement” (Движение). He was inexplicably joined on stage by a quite ordinary wooden chest.

¹⁷ Igor Bakhterev, “Kogda my byli molodymi (Nevydumannyi rasskaz),” *Vospominaniia o N. Zabolotskom*, 89-90.

¹⁸ Daniil Kharms, “*I am a phenomenon quite out of the ordinary*”: *The Notebooks Diaries and Letters of Daniil Kharms*, trans. Anthony Anemone and Peter Scotto (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 173.

The poetic segment of the evening was followed in the second hour by the first and only live performance of Kharms's theatrical work *Elizaveta Bam*, a piece that many critics have considered an early precursor to the Theater of the Absurd, epitomized in such playwrights as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Tom Stoppard. A play in 19 parts, *Elizaveta Bam* follows an illogical course of events whereby the eponymous Elizaveta is apprehended in her home by two detectives for a murder that she has allegedly perpetrated. The action proceeds through a series of unlikely narrative segues and abrupt tonal shifts. Each of the drama's 19 parts was written to be performed in a different style or genre: Kharms's dramatic direction ranges from relatively expected and mundane to exceptional and opaque. Thus, his instructions specify that the 2nd act should be performed as a "realistic comedy" (жанр реалистический комедийный) while the 8th is defined as a "movement" or "displacement of heights" (перемещение высот). The drama reaches its climax when the name of Bam's alleged murder victim is revealed: she is accused of killing Petr Nikolaevich, one of the very detectives who is currently attempting to take her into custody. To add further absurdity, at this dramatic juncture the performance was interrupted by a *mise en abyme* entitled "The Battle of Two Bogatyrs" (Сражение Двух Богатырей)¹⁹ wherein Bam's father and Petr Nikolaevich engage in a sort of linguistic duel to decide her fate. The play's denouement is a recapitulation of its beginning, albeit here the two detectives enter dressed as firemen and successfully take Elizaveta into custody. A list of props found in Kharms's journals potentially provides a further glimpse into the strangeness *Elizaveta Bam* offered its audience that evening: items desired for the performance include a whistle, a samovar, wine glasses, swords, a crutch, an abacus, a quill, a log, and a saw.²⁰

¹⁹ This play within a play was listed in the bill as a separate and autonomous performance.

²⁰ Kharms, "I am a phenomenon quite out of the ordinary," 165-166.

“Three Left Hours” concluded with a screening of the now lost *Film No. 1— Meat Grinder* (Фильм Но. 1—Мясорубка) directed by Aleksandr Razumovich and Klimentii Mints. Razumovich, adorned solely in a bathrobe and knitted *kolpak* (a tall, peaked cap native to the Balkans, the Caucasus, and parts of Central Asia), introduced the film with a monologue concerning the direction of contemporary film. Seated in an armchair on the darkened stage, he was illumined only by the light of a small kerosene lamp. Comparatively little is known about *Meat Grinder* beyond the fact that it constituted a radical experiment in montage. According to Mints, the goal of the film was to create a sort of cinematic analogue to the mechanical process of a meat grinder, rending cinematic images into pieces so small that they became, for all intents and purposes, indistinguishable. Following the film’s opening scene, an excruciatingly long static frame shot of a freight train carrying soldiers to the front, the war images appropriated to compose the film grew shorter and shorter until they became “hamburger.” Notably, since the jazz band hired for the occasion declined an invitation to accompany the otherwise silent film, a musical score was provided by Bakhterev, who improvised something on piano, kettle-drum, and contrabass.

The screening of *Meat Grinder* was followed by a short jazz interlude with dancing. “Three Left Hours” concluded with a lively public discussion, moderated by Vvedensky, that went on for some five hours. Despite scathing criticism in the press the following morning, memoir accounts generally suggest that evening was a resounding success. It must have been: the audience, which had been actively expressing at turns their delight or disgust since the performance began around 8:30 in the evening, left the Press House only when public transportation was running again at 6:00 the next morning.

The above reconstruction of “Three Left Hours” suggests that few Russian literary groups more readily exemplify a commitment to play as artistic practice than the OBeRIu: the evening’s performances include elements of nearly every ludic form recognized by contemporary play theorists. Devoted as it was primarily to poetry—itsself a form of linguistic play—the first act of the evening also seamlessly incorporated body and locomotor play, exploratory and object play, as well as elements of fantasy and costume play. The staging of *Elizaveta Bam* that followed is an obvious example of dramatic play. Moreover, as G. H. J. Roberts has rightly noted, the play itself is primarily constructed of language games and also “abounds with different forms of play, including the children's game of 'tag', dancing and circus performances.”²¹ The showing of *Meat Grinder* and subsequent public forum were also replete with elements of play, involving spontaneous improvisation as well as social and communicative play in the form of monologue, debate, and a certain degree of heckling. Of course, no play type is fully exclusive of any other, and one gets the impression from contemporaries’ recollections that these play forms freely blended with one another over the course of “Three Left Hours,” giving the entire spectacle an intense and fantastical atmosphere that positively bristled with ludic energy. On the whole, the audience appears to have been more than happy to play along, readily engaging with and participating in the action as it unfolded on the stage before them. This element of ‘spectator play’ most certainly helped to give the entire evening an air of the festival—that special period of time definitively removed and protected from the functional lineaments of the mundane and the everyday.

Assuming the above portrait of the event is accurate in spirit, “Three Left Hours” could perhaps accurately be characterized as an occurrence of what some thinkers have referred to as

²¹ G. H. J. Roberts, “Of Words and Worlds: Language Games in ‘Elizaveta Bam,’” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 72, no. 1 (January 1994): 48.

deep play. An admittedly slippery concept, deep play typically incorporates several different play forms simultaneously and can be characterized as an especially intense ludic experience wherein the player is pushed towards an encounter with the sacred or transcendent. Deep play has close ties to festival and ritual and, like these phenomena, it guides its participants towards altered states of consciousness such as rapture and ecstasy, profound insights, and new heights of inspiration. Expounding on the concept of deep play, poet Diane Ackerman writes: “Deep play is the ecstatic form of play. In its thrall, all the elements are visible, but they’re taken to intense and transcendent heights. Thus, deep play should really be classified by mood, not activity. It testifies to *how* something happens, not *what* happens.”²²

“Three Left Hours” probably owed its essence as deep play to the pleonastic confluence of its play elements that defined the unique ‘how’ of its status as performance. I will use the term *self-presentation* (or, alternately, just *presentation*) developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer in his opus *Truth and Method* to denote the profoundly ludic type of performativity exemplified in events like the OBeRIu’s “Three Left Hours.” In Gadamer’s terms, self-presentation can be broadly understood as the autonomous, organic process by which something comes to presence and attains being—wholly and authentically as what it *is*. Thus, the concept has a great deal in common with Heidegger’s powerful, if somewhat cryptic, treatment of the pre-Socratic notion of φύσις (*phusis*)²³ as “the prevailing of what prevails.” In this chapter I will explore more deeply the substantial explanatory import and potential of Gadamer’s concept for understanding OBeRIu performance.²⁴ Even when they weren’t under the spotlight their peculiar and aberrant

²² Diane Ackerman, *Deep Play* (New York: Random House, 1999), 12.

²³ Φύσις can be translated roughly as ‘nature.’ It is etymologically connected to the Greek verb φύειν (*phuein*), meaning to ‘grow’ or ‘appear.’

²⁴ In subsequent chapters I will argue that self-presentation has exceptional expository facility for understanding OBeRIu textual practice as well.

habitus expresses a profound commitment to performance qua self-presentation. As a whole, the group's body of performative work invites us to appreciate the enormous hermeneutic capacity of spectacle when it is realized and consummated in a state of deep play.

Since English language scholarship concerning the OBeRIu first began to appear in the 1970's, the group has generally been styled as band of avant-gardists—successors to, and a natural continuation of the radical textual and artistic practices of the Futurists, who had tirelessly challenged the boundaries of literary convention in the preceding decades. The proposed lineage is not without some merit: the group's ties with the preceding avant-garde generation are palpable. The poetry of Velimir Khlebnikov was of particular importance to Kharms, who pays him frequent homage in his notebooks, and it undoubtedly exerted a strong influence on Zabolotsky as well. Kharms and Vvedensky spent a significant portion of their early careers working with the Futurist Aleksandr Tufanov, who was leading experimental sound poetry workshops at the headquarters of the newly founded State Institute of Aesthetic Culture (GInKhuk, from Государственный институт художественной культуры) on Isaakievskaiia ploshchad'. And the OBeRIu's direct connection to the previous generation of avant-gardists did not end here. At GInKhuK Kharms, Vvedensky, and Bakhterev (among others) managed to secure audience with renowned Suprematist painter Kazimir Malevich, who reportedly assented to meet the fledgling upstarts with the following tentative recognition of avant-garde consanguinity: "I am an old trouble-maker, and you are young ones. Let's see what happens."²⁵ On the occasion, Kharms received a copy of Malevich's book *God is Not Cast Down* (*Бог не скинут*), personally inscribed with an exhortation from the artist himself to "go and stop

²⁵ "Я старый безобразник, а вы молодые. Посмотрим, что получится."

progress.”²⁶ Upon Malevich’s death in 1935 Kharms wrote a poem dedicated to the painter that was read at his wake and perhaps even placed by Kharms in his open casket. Malevich was also not the only contemporaneous avant-garde painter with whom members of the OBeRIu had contact: Zabolotsky was, for a time, a student of Pavel Filonov and work produced in his studio was featured prominently as backdrop in “Three Left Hours.”²⁷ All of this is to say that the *oberiuty* themselves undoubtedly recognized a degree of artistic debt to the previous generation of avant-gardists. The Futurists were not only a source of inspiration for the OBeRIu, but in more than one instance served, in some capacity, directly as their teachers and mentors.

Like that of the *oberiuty*, the work of Futurists included a strong performative element and their penchant for spectacle can hardly be overstated. Central to the Futurist aesthetic program was the notion that art should be unfettered from the spatiotemporal constraints of traditional aesthetic institutions. To this end, they frequently arranged for their unique brand of situational theater to take place in decidedly informal public spaces such as restaurants, pubs, cabarets, lecture halls, and even sidewalks. Incongruous behavior was typical of such performances, which generally included unusual dress and face paint. Bombastic proclamations and dramatic, sometimes improvised poems were delivered with a flamboyance that could at times approach aggression. Hijinks, buffoonery, hooliganism, and an atmosphere of general rowdiness set the tone. While Futurist performance art certainly garnered interest among the public, it was met just as frequently with bewilderment and hostility. Scorn, too, was not uncommon, and on more scandalous evenings Futurist cabaret was marked a public disturbance and disbanded by the

²⁶ “Идите и остановите прогресс.”

²⁷ I have not been able to determine definitively if any of the work in question was produced by Zabolotsky himself or was provided by other students of Filonov.

police; even small-scale, relatively non-disruptive street performances sometimes faced interference from law enforcement.

That their antics sometimes garnered public outcry was not a consequence wholly unintended by the Futurists. While the Russians met their Italian counterpart Filippo Marinetti with fierce declarations of independence on the occasion of his visit to the Soviet Union in 1914, there is little doubt that they were deeply influenced by the European avant-garde of the late 19th and very early 20th century. A prominent component of this tradition was the practice known in France as *épater la bourgeoisie*: since Baudelaire, avant-gardists in Europe had sought to deliberately shock or outright offend their ‘refined’ audiences through grotesque displays of decadence and hyperbolic commitment to artistic expression that flew in the face of cultural norms and common sense. It was in this spirit, to provide some preeminent later examples, that Antonin Artaud screamed his poetry at inhuman volumes during readings, Salvador Dali walked his pet anteater down the streets of Paris, and Marcel Duchamp submitted a urinal he purchased from a local Manhattan ironworks facility in a prominent New York City art exhibition, calling it a sculpture. For practitioners of *épatage*, scandal was a mark of authenticity: the more one could violate the sophisticated sensibilities of an audience, either through an artwork itself or through untoward personal behavior, the better. Sometimes artists would even go to certain lengths to make sure their art created a scandal: some contend that at the premier of *Ubu Roi* in 1896, playwright Alfred Jarry recruited drinking buddies from a local establishment to boo the play in the unlikely event that it was well-received. Marinetti, a disciple of Jarry, was himself known to have joined in when hostile crowds jeered at performances of his work—the Italian Futurists, in particular, loved to be heckled.

And so, undoubtedly, did their Russian counterparts. That the group was consciously engaged in the avant-garde tradition of *épatage* should be clear enough from the title of their principal manifesto, published in 1912—“A Slap in the Face of Public Taste” (Пощечина общественному вкусу). The text of the document itself definitively confirms their commitment to the aesthetic program on which the avant-garde practice was based. They state unequivocally that the new art of Russian Futurism is to be predicated on the wholesale rejection of traditional values: their disavowal of “the filthy stigma” of “common sense” and “good taste” was resolute and total.²⁸ To this end, nearly every element of Futurist performance—their unconventional choice of venue, their eccentric dress and painted faces, the forks they wore in their lapels, their coarse behavior and flippant pronouncements—were calculated to be as shocking and disruptive as possible.²⁹ For the Futurists, eliciting a scandal was a definitive mark of aesthetic authenticity and the ‘success’ of a performance hinged greatly on the inability of their audiences to understand or to approve of it. They undeniably wished to leave their spectators confused, bewildered, and offended. This appreciation of and desire for negative attention is captured quite succinctly in an anecdote regarding a reading the young Futurist poets organized in Kiev while on tour from December of 1913 to March of the following year. Local authorities, who had evidently caught wind of the Futurists’ reputation, allowed the performance to proceed only on condition that it was overseen by no less than the governor-general, the chief of police, eight police commissars, sixteen assistant commissars, twenty-five police supervisors, and sixty constables, with an additional 50 mounted police officers stationed outside the theater. Vladimir

²⁸ David Burliuk, Aleksandr Kruchenykh, Vladimir Maiakovskii and Velimir Khlebnikov, “Poshchечina obshchestvennomu vkusu,” in *Poshchечina obshchestvennomu vkusu* (Moskva: 1912), accessed January 15, 2021, <https://ruslit.traumlibrary.net/book/futuristy-pov/futuristy-pov.html>.

²⁹ This Futurist penchant for strange dress and carnival spectacle appears to have been parodied by Bulgakov in the demonic cohort that descends chaotically upon Moscow in *The Master and Margarita*: in one particular scene Woland’s messenger Azazello is seen sporting a gnawed chicken bone in his breast pocket.

Mayakovsky was ecstatic: “What poets apart from ourselves have been honored with such a state of war? ... Ten policemen for every poem read. That’s what I call poetry!”³⁰

At a glance, it appears that one could conceivably understand the unusual performative strategies of the OBeRIu as a continuation of Futurist *épatage*. The press certainly seems to have favored this interpretation. Less than twenty-four hours after “Three Left Hours” had concluded, the Leningrad *Red Gazette* (Красная газета) ran a review of the spectacle entitled “Ytuiterebo” (Ытуйеребо)—a roughly phonetic emordnilap of *oberiuty* and a clear attempt on the part of the reviewer to recall the Futurist penchant for nonsensical sound poetry. In her assessment, critic Lydia Lesnaya was less than positive, calling the performance “something not fit to print,” “misbegotten,” and “a dismal attempt at joyless sensationalism.”³¹ More to the point, however, the article clearly attempts to identify the *oberiuty* as the heirs of Futurism and the latest group to make the cultivation of scandal a defining principle of their performative practice. “Three Left Hours,” writes Lesnaya, “called to mind the striped blouses of the Futurists and the somersaults of FEKS.”³² She likens Vvedensky’s experimental free verse to the *zaum*’ phonetic poetry of Velimir Khlebnikov and Alexei Kruchenykh, calling it “gobbledygook,” and derides the linguistic novelty of *Elizaveta Bam* as “confusion, unvarnished to the point of cynicism.”³³ In point of fact, Lesnaya explicitly makes reference to *épatage* practice among the Russian avant-garde and from the opening lines of her review presents the OBeRIu as a group of obscurant

³⁰ Bengt Jangfeldt, *Mayakovsky: A Biography*, trans. Harry D. Watson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 18.

³¹ Lydia Lesnaya, “Ytuiterebo”, in *I am a Phenomenon Quite Out of the Ordinary*, 175.

³² Ibid. FEKS (Фабрика эксцентрического актёра, Factory of the Eccentric Actor) was an experimental theatrical group formally established in 1922. Their manifesto shared Futurism’s rejection of the past and of ‘high’ bourgeois culture.

³³ Ibid.

sensationalists who seek only to offend and confuse. “Incomprehensible? You bet! That’s exactly the reason for doing it.”³⁴

In spite of superficial similarities, however, I believe there is good reason to distance the performative strategies of the OBeRIu from those of the preceding generation of avant-gardists. While the Futurists engaged in an aesthetic manner of performance that I would call thoroughly *theatrical*, the performative modality of the *oberiuty* is best considered as a form of *deep play*. The OBeRIu approach to spectacle cannot be understood as mere theatrics: it strikes, rather, a more profound, existential tone that resonates convincingly with Gadamer’s aforementioned concept of self-presentation. In order to properly characterize the significance of the gulf separating these two divergent performative modalities, it will be indispensable first to outline a constitutive distinction between the wide array of practices and experiences that define the *phenomenon of art* in its most robust sense, from the narrower field of *aesthetic* that has come to dominate our contemporary understanding of the artwork. Closely following Gadamer, we will see that *aestheticism*, which finds its originary theoretical purchase in the primacy granted to human subjectivity by Enlightenment thinking, has had serious consequences for how we characterize the essential nature of the artwork and its relationship to the world. Aestheticism, in its purest and most rarefied form, is realized in the modernist dictum of *l’art pour l’art*, a sensibility that overwhelmingly characterizes the 20th century European avant-garde. Indeed, this guiding philosophy and rallying cry undoubtedly shaped, to no small degree, the lineaments that defined the theatricality of the Futurists as well.

In the opening chapter of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer describes a peculiar trend in post-Enlightenment hermeneutics towards what he calls *aesthetic differentiation*. Speaking broadly, and at the risk of an initial oversimplification, aesthetic differentiation identifies the attempt

³⁴ Ibid.

made by modern philosophers of art to isolate and define an abstract field of aesthetic ‘experience,’ which they take as the object of study proper to aesthetics rightly conceived. Such differentiation is a procedure that minimizes the import of the concrete artwork in favor of an abstraction. Aesthetic consciousness is aimed at an idealized ‘pure’ work of art that, divested of all real content and divorced from relevant context, remains strictly theoretical:

Aesthetic experience (Erlebnis) is directed towards what is supposed to be the work proper—what it ignores are the extra-aesthetic elements that cling to it, such as purpose, function, the significance of its content... It practically defines aesthetic consciousness to say that it differentiates what is aesthetically intended from everything that is outside the aesthetic sphere. It abstracts from all the conditions of a work’s accessibility. This is a specifically aesthetic kind of differentiation. It distinguishes the aesthetic quality of a work from all the elements of content that induce us to take up a moral or religious stance towards it, and presents it solely by itself in its aesthetic being.³⁵

To put it another way, we could say that with the birth of ‘aesthetics’ as a field of inquiry philosophers became almost wholly concerned with the metaphysical phenomenon of ‘the beautiful.’ And since beauty is an abstract universal in which all artworks are understood to participate, one outcome of this shift in theoretical priority was a basic disinterest in the specificity of concrete artistic productions.

Aesthetic differentiation was not always the *raison d’être* for philosophy of art. Prior to the proliferation of Enlightenment ideals and the associated rise of Romanticism, scholars who occupied themselves with the arts were keenly aware of the crucial role that non-aesthetic elements play in creating the significance of a work. Such elements were considered integral to the value and meaning of an artwork; they were, in fact, seen as essential and irreducible aspects of its very being an artwork to begin with. Gadamer’s central claim here is that pre-Enlightenment hermeneutics were firmly rooted in the basic validity of the *sensus communis*, the

³⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Mar (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004.), 78.

“sense that is acquired by living in the community and is determined by its structures and aims.”³⁶ In antiquity, the notion of ‘good taste’ was understood as a form of practical *knowledge* shared by the members of any given collective: the apparently tired adage “de gustibus non disputandum est” is a truism not, as we are accustomed to thinking, because judgments of taste are matters of subjective and arbitrary preference, but because they are self-evident reflections of the norms that ideally bind and govern human community. One does not dispute them—not because they are groundless, but because they are obvious. Artworks, which are themselves products of taste even as they are consumed and judged according to it, are thus understood to be firmly rooted in the broader cultural context from which they have arisen; they belong intrinsically to a particular tradition and expressly communicate those values and ideals—moral, political, religious—foregrounded by the tradition to which they belong. The artwork, then, is a legitimate contribution to a communal body of knowledge about the world and our place as human beings within it. It is *by virtue* of this allegedly extra-aesthetic content, not apart from it, that they are judged to be beautiful. An artwork’s aesthetic value is a direct reflection of what it articulates about experiences and practices that—and this is critical—are *shared* by a community.

According to Gadamer’s account, with the development of what might be called ‘aesthetic theory’ in contrast to ‘philosophy of art,’ the understanding of a work’s rootedness in a world of shared values and practices was gradually obscured. Kant, in particular, reinterprets the *sensus communis* as a subjective principle. While he has strong motivations for this theoretical move, as a consequence he is forced to deny taste its epistemic potency—in such judgments I express at most my reflective feelings of pleasure or displeasure towards an object, but I do not thereby lay claim to any knowledge of the object itself. Crucial here also is Kant’s introduction of the concept of genius into the aesthetic sphere. Kant himself ultimately grants genius a relatively

³⁶ Ibid., 21.

limited position of import in his own aesthetic theory: while it is necessary in order to promote the “free play” of mental faculties that creates aesthetic interest, it is informed by and always subservient to the sensibilities of taste. In the Romantic philosophy that followed Kant, however, the concept of genius became decisive—so decisive in fact that the Romantics consider the unfettered work of genius to be the quintessential artwork *par excellence*—there is simply no room in the sweeping flux of Sturm und Drang for the sensitivity and temper that matters of taste require. What the artwork—and indeed the whole gamut of experiences that fall under the newly contrived heading of ‘aesthetic consciousness’—gains from this theoretical shift is an almost unassailable position of autonomy. To put it simply, we could say that on the Romantic model the genius draws moments from his wealth of individual experience and transforms them into artworks. Aesthetic significance is felt to arise spontaneously from the art object’s status as a wholly unique expression of exceptional subjectivity. From this perspective, art no longer finds its locus of import in a world of shared values and common practices—the work transcends them. “For this is what is characteristic of the work of art, the creation of genius: that its meaning lies in the phenomenon itself and is not arbitrarily read into it.”³⁷ Goethe captured this attitude quite pointedly in his assertion that every work of art harbors within itself its own aesthetic theory and thereby dictates, in autonomy, the individual standards by which it should be judged.

Qua the creation of genius, the work erupts directly from the lived personal experience of the artist. Because genius is, by definition, exceptional, its work bears no intrinsic connection to the world of which it is a product. This sounds, perhaps, quite acceptable—even obvious—to our contemporary sensibilities. But recall that prior to Kant, deference to commonality was felt to be intrinsic to artistic creation: “Taste still obeys a criterion of content. What is considered valid in a society, its ruling taste, receives its stamp from the commonalities of social life. Such a society

³⁷ Ibid., 70.

chooses and knows what belongs to it and what does not. Even its artistic interests are not arbitrary or in principle universal, but what artists create and what the society values belong together in the unity of a style of life and an ideal of taste.”³⁸ With the rise of the Romantic aesthetic model, however, the artwork will no longer tolerate being subjected to any generally accepted criteria for content. It becomes dissociated from its world: “What we call a work of art and experience (*erleben*) aesthetically depends on a process of abstraction. By disregarding everything in which a work is rooted (its original context of life, and the religious or secular function that gave it significance), it becomes visible as the ‘pure work of art.’³⁹ Stripped of all concrete worldly connections, the artwork becomes merely the occasion for the contemplation of an abstracted and ideal ‘quality.’ It no longer *communicates* anything, can offer us no *knowledge* of a shared world, but is merely the occasion for a peculiarly autonomous kind of experience—that mysterious, aloof apprehension that is ‘proper’ to all purely aesthetic valuation.

According to Gadamer’s historical narrative, ‘aestheticisms’ of this sort have cropped up in various forms since Kant cleared a path for them in the *Critique of Judgement*. Indeed, aesthetic differentiation has come to dominate the basic way in which philosophy of art is practiced in the contemporary world and its basic tenets—that art is the domain of genius, that matters of taste are subjective, that ‘pure’ works of art are unique, autonomous, functionally purposeless, and in themselves do not substantially contribute to our understanding of the world—are common currency in popular conceptions of the aesthetic. Gadamer, of course, traces this tendency away from a more robust understanding of the artwork primarily as it developed in the *philosophy* of art, but this does not mean that it has been without consequence for how artists in the modern world have understood themselves and their own creative activity. While Gadamer quite rightly

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

notes that in his concern for the practical modalities of creation “the self-knowledge of the artist remains far more down to earth,” he does acknowledge that creators typically “use these same [aesthetic] categories in regard to themselves, and thus the genius cult of the eighteenth century was certainly nourished by artists too.”⁴⁰ I would venture to suggest that this aesthetic ‘cult of genius’ exercised a particularly tenacious influence on the European avant-garde of the 19th and 20th century, whose commitment to and fervor for the notion of ‘*l’art pour l’art*’ clearly falls in line with the logic of aesthetic differentiation. This current of aestheticism runs also through the work of the Russian Futurists.

The portrait of the artist that emerges as a result of aesthetic modernism is that of free-spirited bohemian. “He seems distinguished,” writes Gadamer, “by the complete independence of his creativity and thus acquires the characteristic social features of an outsider whose style of life cannot be measured by the standards of public morality.”⁴¹ While an exhaustive consideration of Futurist aesthetic sensibilities is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is not difficult to detect something of Gadamer’s characterization in their performative strategies and self-conceptualization. There is, indeed, something in their outspoken bravado that strikes a thoroughly Romantic tone. Even a cursory glance at their principal manifesto, *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*, reveals their commitment to the outlook and principles that historically emerged as a consequence of aesthetic differentiation. In one sweeping gesture they proclaim: (1) their complete dismissal of tradition—“throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc., overboard from the ship of Modernity”—and their contempt for common sense and good taste; (2) the autonomy of the artwork in the form of the “New Coming Beauty of the Self-sufficient (self-woven) Word”; and (3) their status as visionary outsiders destined to contend with the “boos and outrage” of

⁴⁰ Ibid., 85.

⁴¹ Ibid., 80.

their plebeian audience. The Russian Futurists presented themselves precisely as a force of creative genius in the modern world, destined to usher in a new era of aesthetic vision—one wholly disconnected from the shared artistic, religious, and social moorings that preceded them. Their disdain for the sensibilities of the masses was a consequence of their conviction that art must become a wholly autonomous field of experience, unburdened by obligation to obsolete and confining social and cultural institutions. The Futurists saw their art as an expression of wholly personal and individual genius—their bond as a collective was predicated on precisely this collective sense of egoism: *we Futurists*, as exceptional individuals, do not expect the masses to understand the import of our work.⁴²

This Futurist pretension to ‘pure’ aesthetics is underwritten by the claim to genius that is manifestly tangible in the lineaments that define their performative strategies. While further explication will be necessary to tease out exactly how Futurist theatrics differ from the deep play characteristic of the OBeRIu, I would like first to draw attention to the fact that Futurist spectacles were inherently public affairs—even conspicuously so. Recall that the majority of Futurist performances (and certainly the most iconic ones) took place outside of the institutions that traditionally granted the space and time necessary for staging of such productions: their choice of venue was seldom conventional theaters but typically bars, pubs, restaurants, cabarets, and street corners—even *Victory Over the Sun* (Победа над солнцем), the Futurist operatic triumph, premiered at an amusement park. That these performances took place in decidedly public environments served, I suggest, basically a singular function for the Futurists. It should be taken into consideration that the internal logic of avant-garde *épatage* only works in front of an

⁴² I have chosen *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* principally for the clarity and brevity with which it states its position, and also due to its probable status as the most important avant-garde manifesto of its time and place -- it is certainly, in any case, the most well-known. One could, of course, point to numerous others. In his *Manifesto of Suprematism*, for instance, Malevich roundly declares that painting should be excised of content in order to open space for ‘pure feeling’ in art. Also like *A Slap in the Face*, Malevich’s manifesto is rife with language that suggests his pretensions of genius.

audience, and a specific *kind* of audience at that. If behavior is going to shock there has to be someone present who is shockable—what better place to find them than the bustle of the proverbial marketplace? The fact is that Futurists required spectators for their performative ballyhoo even as they placed themselves in direct opposition to them. The rejection of the Futurists by the masses was, paradoxically, necessary for their own self-mythology: it served precisely to bolster assuredness in the genius of their aesthetic vision and vindicate their radically new and individual approach to art. For this reason their antics were always loud and always visible, pure theater that boldly announced itself as such. What I mean to draw attention to with these remarks is that, to the extent that the Futurists were seeking a specific kind of response with their *épatage* behavior, their theatrical performances arose from a particular kind of affect. Like a rebellious teenager who ‘acts out’ in order to ‘get a rise’ out of a parent or authority figure, the Futurists carefully curated specific elements of their spectacles for the sake of eliciting a certain response. What is at issue here is not the authenticity or significance of Futurist performativity—though I will have more to say momentarily concerning what, specifically, such performativity really performs—but simply the observation that to a large extent the Futurist character was ‘put on’ in the interest of cultivating their image as outsiders and geniuses. Indeed, there is a striking difference between how they presented themselves publicly and the manner in which they carried themselves in private. In some cases, their public personae were strikingly at odds with the character they presented in their personal lives.

Vladimir Mayakovsky is probably the most conspicuous example of a Futurist who demonstrated a wide discrepancy between his public and private character. Mayakovsky, who regularly took to the stage in a garish yellow blouse he fashioned himself, was by his own admission a “regular scandal maker” and quickly gained notoriety early in his career for an

uncanny ability to incite his spectators: in one instance he proved capable of enraging his audience even by reading, of all things, verses from Pushkin. In his public appearances and published poems, Mayakovsky adopted a larger-than-life persona somewhat reminiscent of that created by Walt Whitman, a poet who Mayakovsky greatly admired.⁴³ A heavy-handed sense of egotism was a manifest aspect of his poetic voice, and Mayakovsky did not shy away from painting himself as misunderstood genius, glorified icon, or even—with startling regularity—as crucified savior. Unrequited love is a theme common to his poetry, assuming a rare intensity in verse dedicated to (and about) his long-time obsession Lilya Brik, who, though evidently fond of the poet, declined the opportunity to leave her husband for him. In poems such as *The Backbone Flute* (Флейта-позвончик), *About This* (Про это), and *Lilichka! In Place of a Letter* (Лиличка! Вместо письма), Mayakovsky portrays the lows of his ultimately unrequited love affair in terms that are almost epic in their sense of tragedy. If he honestly portrays his relationship with Brik as an authentic source of grief and personal torment, he does so with an egotistical flourish, deliberately casting himself in the role of the tormented poet and obstinate martyr. Private correspondence and memoirs, however, paint a picture of a Mayakovsky who was significantly less confident and less self-aggrandizing than the persona he created for his poems. By all accounts, when he wasn't in front of an audience, he was an individual plagued by insecurities, prone to flying into rages and tearing up copies of his poems when they weren't well received by women he was attempting to court. While historical opinion of Lilya is somewhat varied—some consider her genuine and caring, others as disingenuous and manipulative—what is certain is that she seems to have exerted a tempering effect on the poet's avant-garde posturing: it was at her behest that Mayakovsky finally deigned to cut his hair, dress more conservatively, and to see a

⁴³ Compare Whitman's "I am large, I contain multitudes" to Mayakovsky's "And I feel — / 'I' / is too small for me" (И чувствую — / 'я' / для меня мало").

dentist regarding his notoriously abysmal oral hygiene. Biographer Bengt Jangfeldt writes in support of the perspective that there were, in effect, two different Mayakovskys. There is the persona that he put on for public consumption as well another, perhaps more sincere, aspect of his character that he reserved only for his most intimate relationships: “Mayakovsky's split personality also manifested itself in his relationships with women. His provocative and shameless manner concealed a lack of confidence, shyness, and a feeling of not being appreciated or understood.”⁴⁴ Jangfeldt also suggests that the poet’s trademark insolence and cynicism were part of his public mask: in private his demeanor could be quite gentle and tender. At issue here, of course, is not which Mayakovsky should be regarded as the “authentic” one—a question that would be as meaningless and it is unanswerable. I wish only to demonstrate that the public Mayakovsky was a distinct manifestation, in some sense separate from the private one. At readings and other events he adopted a theatrical persona that could be described as a distorted reflection of his more intimate self. The voice he adopted as a poet served as a kind of funhouse mirror: it was a deliberate attempt to *aestheticize* those aspects of his personal life from which he drew inspiration.

While Mayakovsky was perhaps among the most brash and ostentatious of the Futurists, the portrait suggested above does, I think, a fair job of capturing the basic outlines of Futurist performance strategies— marked by a form of theatricality that was itself fueled by the logic of aesthetic differentiation and the mythos of the poet as genius and outsider. While OBeRIu spectacle appears *prima facie* to be a continuation of these avant-garde trends, there is reason to believe that this later group was actually engaged in a qualitatively different kind of performance that cannot be adequately understood as an expression of pure aestheticism. Firstly, it should be noted that certain anecdotes strongly suggest the *oberiuty* did not see themselves precisely as

⁴⁴ Jangfeldt, 19.

‘outsiders’ and it is questionable whether or not they had a vested interest in the cultivation of scandal. “Three Left Hours” was not without its contingent of hecklers, but the inordinately lengthy performance largely went off without a hitch: I have already noted that most of the audience declined to leave until the performance and subsequent debate had finished the following morning. Furthermore, in the introduction to his collection of Kharms translations, *Today I Wrote Nothing*, Matvei Yankelevich recounts an anecdote that suggests the poet had little patience for the kind of audience outrage that the Futurists actively cultivated: on the occasion of a reading sponsored by the local Writer’s Union, Kharms told a crowd of ornery spectators, before leaving the stage, that he did not perform in stables and brothels.⁴⁵ A more demonstrative glimmer of a significant divergence from the previous generation of avant-gardists can be seen in the OBeRIu approach to the performance of self. The Futurists preserved a modicum of aesthetic distance between their public personae and private character. The *oberiuty* arguably made no such distinction—either in theory or in practice. Their sense of spectacle was just as frequently intimate and reserved as it was open and public. For consideration of this theme I turn first to the most well-known (and probably the strangest) *oberiut*, Daniil Kharms.

Kharms was, by all accounts, a remarkably odd figure. Indeed, he is quite possibly remembered more for his outlandish behavior than for anything he ever wrote. The degree to which Kharms practiced his extreme form of eccentricity is best captured in a quote from his second wife, Marina Malich⁴⁶, who describes the writer succinctly in her memoirs: “Danya was

⁴⁵ Matvei Yankelevich, introduction to *Today I Wrote Nothing: The Selected Writings of Daniil Kharms*, trans. Matvei Yankelevich (New York: Ardis Publishers, 2009), 24.

⁴⁶ Malich re-married twice following Kharms’s death. Her memoirs, concerning life with Kharms from 1934-1942, were published under the name Maria Durnovo, which she took from her third husband.

strange. It would probably be hard to be any stranger.”⁴⁷ Some of these eccentricities do, on their face at least, resemble the type of spontaneous street theater that was cultivated by the Futurists. Kharms was known, for instance, to wander Nevsky Prospect in the middle of the day wearing only a bathrobe and carrying a butterfly net. He was also fond of another peculiar street ritual: laying himself prone in the middle of a busy sidewalk, he would lie there motionless and unresponsive: when a suitably large crowd of concerned onlookers had gathered, he would simply get up, brush himself off, and continue on his way as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Kharms engaged in other tomfoolery as well, including bringing his own ornate silver dinnerware to proletarian pubs and, according to at least one account, took to sporting a large fake mustache to the theater for a time because he claimed it was improper to attend a performance with a naked upper lip. Among his more elaborate pranks: Kharms ‘invented’ an imaginary brother for himself. Donning a bowler hat, monocle, and grotesquely aristocratic air, Kharms (who never received a formal secondary education) would wander the campus of Leningrad State University as his fabricated sibling, a Privatdozent⁴⁸ whom he dubbed Ivan Ivanovich. On the subject of dress, Kharms also apparently followed the Futurists in their proclivity for unusual and flamboyant attire—albeit in a different key—styling himself in the fashion of an English dandy, replete with deerstalker cap and calabash pipe—an homage to Sherlock Holmes, for whom he maintained an undying affection through his adult life.

Despite a superficial similarity to the theatrics that were such a prominent aspect of the Futurist aesthetic program, Kharms’s hijinks actually suggest an entirely different approach to

⁴⁷ Vladimir Glotser, *Mariia Durnovo: Moi muzh Daniil Kharms* (Moskva: B.S.G.-Press, 2000), accessed January 15, 2021, <http://www.dharms.ru/library/marina-durnovo-moy-muzh-daniil-harms.html>.

⁴⁸ Privatdozent is a title conferred by some European (particularly German) institutions of higher learning to individuals who are deemed fit to teach and examine university students, by virtue of demonstrated excellence in teaching and research in a particular field. They are not professors, but more akin to lecturers or adjunct faculty. Exactly how far Kharms took this prank—whether he simply assumed a presence on campus or whether he actually attempted to hold classes—is, to my knowledge, unknown.

performance. Futurist street theater announced itself boldly as such. Their painted faces, provocative dress, and confrontational behavior belie an intention to disrupt the monotony of the everyday—they were clear and definitive eruptions of art into the mundane course of events. While some of Kharms’s behavior clearly approaches theater, closer scrutiny reveals that it is difficult to ascertain where Kharms’s public persona ends and his private performance of self begins. One could say of Kharms what Alistair Brotchie said of the French poet and playwright Alfred Jarry, who is also remembered for his particularly eccentric *habitus*:

There were occasions when Jarry was essentially playing the fool—and such incidents may be as entertaining as their author intended—but he also adhered to other nonconformities, more deeply ingrained, which he practiced with an absolute and stubborn consistency, and the consequences of these convictions were undoubtedly more significant. The distinction is far from clear-cut, and because Jarry frequently overstepped the mark, the one tended to blend imperceptibly into the other, at which point the joke might assume a more disquieting cast. Absurdity and tragedy were as closely entwined in his life as in his work.”⁴⁹

Take, for instance, Kharms’s penchant for lying in the middle of the sidewalk. It is far from clear to me that such behavior constitutes a form of street theater—it certainly does not approach the level of ostentatiousness that is the sure mark of the *épatage*. There is nothing particularly fantastic about it. Such behavior simply does not *announce* itself as ‘aesthetic’ in the same fashion as the street theater of the Futurists. Furthermore, Kharms’s unusual choice in attire differed from that of his avant-garde predecessors in that *it was not a costume*. The Futurists dressed eccentrically in order to mark the occasion of their public readings and theatrical happenings. It was an element of *épatage*—and doubtless, Mayakovsky did not wear his trademark yellow blouse when he was out running errands. On the contrary, Kharms dressed the way he did as a matter of course. Certainly, it garnered him attention. But he did not do it simply—or primarily—to draw the public eye. With the possible exception of the aforementioned bathrobe,

⁴⁹ Alistair Brotchie, *Alfred Jarry: A Pataphysical Life* (Boston: The MIT Press, 2015), ix.

he wore the clothes he wore largely and before all else simply because it was how he *liked* to dress.

This simple matter of preference can be seen to bear on a number of Kharms's peculiarities, peculiarities that were among his most idiosyncratic and that he cultivated with an unflinching tenacity. What is most unusual about these stated eccentricities is perhaps not so much their strangeness as how decidedly non-theatrical his practice of them was. These quirks were evidently performed either for the benefit of intimate acquaintances or entirely for his own amusement. Malich comments on this tendency of Kharms's in her memoirs, noting that he "did whatever he wanted to do and anything that brought him pleasure."⁵⁰ She also suggests that even at the heights of his ostentatiousness Kharms seemed almost indifferent to the shock value of his behavior. He was, for example, particularly fond of domestic nudity, a proclivity in which he indulged to such a degree that it occasionally strained relations with his spouse. This was apparently the norm rather than the exception—something he did "quite often" and in spite of the fact that he was easily visible from the street. According to Malich, he would "... approach the window without anything at all, completely naked, and stand like that in front of the window in the nude."⁵¹ On at least one occasion it resulted in formal complaints from neighbors. A diary entry found in Kharms's notebooks from 1938 details the specifics of the incident and confirms Malich's observation that Kharm's behavior was not intended as provocative—he seems oblivious to the notion that anyone might find this behavior objectionable. Having upset someone in a neighboring building, Kharms writes that he was "burst in on" by his building's custodian, "someone else," and an accompanying policeman. Confronted with accusations that he had been perturbing residents in the building opposite for a period of no less than 3 years,

⁵⁰ Glotser, Durnovo.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Kharm's begrudgingly put up curtains.⁵² In another entry several months later, evidently still sore over these developments, he asks rhetorically: "What is more pleasing to the eye: an old woman in just her slip or a completely naked young man? And which is less likely to be allowed to appear in public that way?"⁵³ While in regard to this particular eccentricity Kharm's is clearly breaking with social norms, it seems obvious to me that he is not doing so with an eye towards cultivating scandal—if anything he comes off as frustrated and annoyed that anyone should have noticed or cared about his behavior. In this respect Kharm's vaguely exhibitionist tendencies cannot be understood as a form of theater or as an artistic statement, it was simply one aspect of his preferred habitus.

Domestic nudity was hardly the most peculiar of his private idiosyncrasies. Several of his acquaintances report the existence of an unusual object that Kharm's kept in his room on Ulitsa Maiakovskogo. Sometimes interpreted by scholars as a kind of found object sculpture, the piece was cobbled together from random pieces of trash—boards, bicycle wheels, scraps of metal, empty cigarette cartons, tin cans, springs, and other bits of random detritus all went into the composition of this radically heterogeneous assemblage. As might be expected, the object was hardly inconspicuous. Benedikt Livshits, a member of the Futurist group Hylea and an acquaintance of Kharm's, refers to this construction in his memoirs as a *gromadina*, an "enormity." But what is most striking in Livshits's account of the object is less its existence than the rationale behind its construction. When asked about the composite, Kharm's identified it as his "machine." The oddity of the designation is evident from the conversation Livshits reports having with the poet about the object:

— What is it?!

⁵² Kharm's, "I am a Phenomenon Quite Out of the Ordinary," 498.

⁵³ Ibid.

- A machine.
- What kind of machine?
- No kind. Just a machine.
- I see... where did you get it?
- I made it myself!
- Well, what does it do?
- It does nothing.
- What do you mean, nothing?
- Just that, nothing.
- What's it for?
- I just wanted to have a machine at home.⁵⁴

In the interest of scholarly transparency, it should be noted that the existence of Kharms's purported 'machine' may only be legend. Kharms's friend Yakov Druskin questions the veracity of Livshits's report: neither he himself, nor Leonid Lipavsky (another very close associate of Kharms) ever encountered such an object in the course of their regular visits to Kharms's apartment between 1925 and 1941. This, of course, does not rule out the possibility that Kharms did in fact construct it. There exists at least one other account of the machine, this one provided by actress Klavdiia Vasil'evna Pugacheva: "He was always inviting me over to his place so I could see some kind of infernal machine. But when I asked: 'why do you keep this machine in your home?' he said: 'I use it to find out about people. If someone comes and asks: «What's the deal with this machine?» then I know that they're *one kind* of person. If they don't ask then I know that it's *another kind* of person.' Of course, he explained to me what he meant, but I don't really remember what he said. He told me that there were problems at home due to the machine, because people thought it might be an explosive."⁵⁵ Pugacheva admits that she never took Kharms up on his invitation to visit and never actually saw the object in question. Her testimony, nevertheless, does lend an air of credibility to Livshits's first-hand report. In fact, despite apparent

⁵⁴ Benedikt Livshits, "Mozhet byt' prigoditsia," in *Voprosy literatury* (Leningrad: Leningradskii gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii institut, 1969), 241-244.

⁵⁵ Klavdiia Pugacheva, "Ya ponimala desiatym chuvstvom, chto emu nravlyus'," accessed January 15, 2021, <http://www.d-harms.ru/library/vot-kakoy-harms-vzglyad-sovremennikov5.html>.

discrepancies between the accounts of these two memoirists—Pugacheva’s Kharms ascribes the machine some kind of mysterious function while Livshits’s directly flaunts its uselessness—closer inspection reveals that they potentially complement one another, perhaps even quite seamlessly. Kharms’s reply to Pugacheva that the machine helped him “distinguish between two types of people” may not have been without a sly wink. Allegedly, the machine distinguishes between individuals of *one type* and individuals of *another type*. The playful irony here may be that in the absence of further specification the two categories are semantically interchangeable and—functionally speaking—absolutely useless.⁵⁶ If one wanted to speculate here, one could perhaps surmise that *one kind* and *another kind* simply meant *the kind of people who ask about my machine* and *the kind of people who don’t*.

But whether or not tales of Kharms’s machine are apocryphal is beside the point. What is more significant is that such legends could have gotten off the ground in the first place. To those who knew the writer well, it was evidently believable that he could have constructed such an object and kept it in his otherwise largely unfurnished room. Even Druskin only states that he himself never saw Kharms’s machine—he does not discount the construction of such a thing as out of the poet’s character. Indeed, the idea that Kharms’s personal quirks had bearing on questions of domestic decor can hardly be questioned. Druskin states that his friend “had a distinct sense of taste when it came to daily life, distinct and precise views concerning how a room should be, how to furnish it, with what kinds of things, as well as where and how they should be arranged.”⁵⁷ Kharms outlines some of these unusual decorating principles in a short piece he entitled *A Treatise More or Less According to Emerson* (Трактат более или менее по

⁵⁶ While Pugacheva assures us that Kharms elaborated further on these concepts, in light of her stated forgetfulness I remain unconvinced that he did. In any case, his explanation could not have provided much in the way of elucidation.

⁵⁷ Iakov Druskin, *Chinari*, accessed January 4, 2021, <http://fege.narod.ru/librarium/druskin.htm>.

конспекту Эмерсона). The idea that Kharms develops in the course of this short work—that useless objects possess an inherent ‘perfection’ that useful objects lack—lends an air of plausibility to the notion that he may very well have constructed the purposeless machine that Livshits and Pugacheva describe. In any case, Kharms’s peculiar taste in this area of private life is certainly evidence that his performance of self was more complicated than the straightforward projection of a public ‘aestheticized’ persona. His peculiarities were firmly entrenched and defined him even in the relative seclusion of domestic life.

There is one final idiosyncrasy of Kharms’s that bears mentioning at this juncture: according to a variety of sources, Kharms possessed an unusual tic. Those who knew him described it as something akin to a cough, or a middle ground between a snort and a hiccup. Malich provides a description of this abnormality in her memoirs: “He somehow raised both hands very fast—to be more precise, he folded his index fingers into a triangle—to his nose, making a noise as if he was clearing his throat, and at the same time he leaned over slightly and quickly stamped his right leg.”⁵⁸ Acquaintances report that this full-body spasm had the power to severely unnerve those who witnessed it. Art critic Vsevolod Petrov recorded his initial acquaintance with this bizarre gesture: “It seemed to me that he didn’t so much hiccup or grunt as he inhaled through the nose in a peculiar way: nikh nikh. I was a bit alarmed.”⁵⁹ Strange as the tic itself may have been, what is even stranger is the fact that Kharms very carefully and deliberately dedicated himself to its cultivation. While tics can sometimes be delayed for an indeterminate amount of time, they are typically understood to be an involuntary (or at least only semi-voluntary) coordination of muscular movements. They are, by definition, *compulsory*

⁵⁸ Glotser, Durnovo.

⁵⁹ As quoted in Aleksandr Kobrinskii, *Daniil Kharms*, accessed February 23, 2021, <http://www.d-harms.ru/library/kobrinskiy-daniil-harms9.html>.

behaviors that must eventually be expressed in spite of any conscious attempts to forestall them. There is, thus, something inherently paradoxical about the idea of deliberately cultivating a tic. Yet Kharms was apparently successful: he practiced the behavior with enough diligence that it appears at some point to have become genuinely involuntary. Kharms's frequent 'hiccupping' is mentioned in the official NKVD report compiled upon his arrest in 1941 and as well as in documents that supported his internment in the psychiatric ward of Leningrad's Kresty prison. Evidently, the tic truly did become a tic—something Kharms was eventually compelled to express even in situations where it would have been expedient for him to appear as normal as possible. The tic was likely one of the deeply ingrained peculiarities that prompted Malich to elaborate on his incomparable strangeness: "I think he delved too deeply into the role he created for himself."⁶⁰

Malich's comment lays bare the notion that Kharms's performance of self was deeply existential rather than simply an entertaining amalgam of theatrics. His eccentricities were not 'put on' for the sake of the show and then discarded when the curtain came down. Kharms simply did not seem particularly interested in presenting himself as anyone other than who he was. He did not so much cultivate an alternative, 'aesthetic' persona—did not *play a role*—so much as he continuously and spontaneously *played at being himself*. As his friend, painter and illustrator Alisa Poret, aptly put it he "could not have imagined his own existence any differently. His eccentricity was peculiar to him and necessary."⁶¹ This is a good time to recall that while Kharms was not the writer's given name, neither was it a pseudonym in the traditional sense: the invented moniker was so much a part of Kharms's sense of self that he scratched out the given surname printed in his passport (Yuvachev) and wrote 'Kharms' in its place. If anything, for

⁶⁰ Glotser, Durnovo.

⁶¹ Alisa Poret, quoted from <http://www.d-harms.ru/misli.html>.

Kharm's cognomen was probably closer in nature to the concept of the 'true name' encountered in certain esoteric religious and occult traditions than it was to a pseudonym.

Kharm's was probably the most overtly peculiar of the *oberiuty*, but he was not the only member of the group to engage in the playful and deeply existential performance of self outlined above. Both Vvedensky and Zabolotsky practiced a similar kind of self-presentation that, although more subtle than Kharm's, also meandered freely across the line between public and private. Of the two, Vvedensky—the self-professed monarchist—was probably the more extreme. Described by acquaintances as “absolutely undomesticated” (абсолютно безбытний), Vvedensky seemed to live entirely in the present moment. He claimed to have spent little time in his apartment, which was allegedly devoid of any furniture, ate exclusively in local cafeterias, wrote his poems on the tram, and shared the bed of whatever woman was his flavor of the week. Even his poems were ventures that only held his interest momentarily: Druskin claims that the reason so few of them survived was because he was perpetually losing them or giving them away. Vvedensky was also a fervent gambler and a notorious womanizer—popular legend has it that he once had sex with a woman (in some reports, several women) in the tower that caps the Singer building in Saint Petersburg—then the headquarters for the State Publishing House. The exploit is made all the more risqué when one recalls that the tower in question is constructed entirely of glass and overlooks one of the busiest intersections in Petersburg, right at the point where Nevsky Prospect crosses over the Griboedov Canal. One suspects that the dome's substantial elevation would have made the affair difficult to watch from the street, but its excellent vantage of the broad city street might very well have provided its participants a sexual thrill akin to 'voyeurism in reverse,' and perhaps Vvedensky did it less for the sake of scandal than for the perverse pleasure of breaking a sexual taboo while being able to watch the unsuspecting citizenry

below. Vvedensky is also known to have been a regular user of diethyl ether, a general anesthetic that causes intoxication and audio-visual hallucinations when huffed or ingested at high doses. Vvedensky's ether use is chronicled in Kharms's journal entries, which suggest that the poet employed the intoxicant in a manner similar to the French para-surrealist René Daumal, who experimented heavily and systematically with huffing carbon tetrachloride as an adolescent. Daumal utilized the volatile chemical, which causes dissociative effects when inhaled, in his attempts to bring himself as close to the threshold of death as possible, seeking to catch a glimpse of the world beyond without actually crossing into it. Similarly, Vvedensky and Kharms appear to have used ether not so much for recreation, but in order to experience, as Kharms put it, "mysteries of a higher order." Kharms evidently outgrew his sporadic ether use in short order, but Vvedensky continued his experiments with the drug well into the 1930's, risking physical dependency in the interest of creative and spiritual inspiration. While Vvedensky may very well have been more subtle than Kharms in his performance of selfhood, he approached the project with a tenacity no less extreme than his collaborator. While Druskin considered Vvedensky a writer whose work was not immediately connected with his personal life, he also maintained that with respect to Vvedensky, no less than Kharms, art and life were inseparably related: "For Vvedensky, art and life are two parallel lines. They also cross, but they cross at eternity."⁶²

The third major participant in the OBeRIu collective, Nikolai Zabolotsky, may have lacked the overt penchant for eccentricity shared by Kharms and Vvedensky, but close examination shows that he too could be adequately characterized as an oddity. He was evidently an enigma even to those with whom he was intimate: his lover Natalia Roskina, with whom Zabolotsky had a brief affair in the late 1950's at a time when his wife was living with writer Vasilii Grossman, described him posthumously as "an exceptionally contradictory person, not at all like anyone

⁶² Druskin, *Chinari*.

else, and sometimes not even like himself.”⁶³ Among the other *oberiuty*, Zabolotsky was something of an outsider—unlike Kharms and Vvedensky, who were natives of Saint Petersburg, Zabolotsky hailed from the Russian provinces and was already nearing adulthood when he moved to the city to pursue a literary career. Unease about his ‘backwater’ heritage led him to change the spelling of his last name from Заболотский to Заболотий in order to slightly obfuscate its etymological association with the Russian word for ‘swamp,’ *болото*. Like Kharms’s decision to adopt a writerly ‘pseudonym,’ Zabolotsky’s admittedly more conservative name change is reflective of a similar attempt to play with matters of personal and poetic identity. By all appearances, he was a man of modest and even conservative temperament, described by friends as ‘clean,’ ‘unobtrusive,’ and ‘fastidious.’ Regularly compared in mien to a doctor, bookkeeper, or run-of-the-mill book clerk, he appeared “the absolute antithesis of the inspired Bohemian.”⁶⁴ Yet, to paraphrase Lydia Ginzburg, Zabolotsky was also “a force of genuine poetic insanity,”⁶⁵ and the reviews that followed the publication of *Columns* (*Столбы*), his first collection of poems, are a testament to the unique quality of his poetic self-image, which was frequently compared to the archetype of the holy fool. Indeed, the critics were not off the mark: Zabolotsky genuinely felt that for him poetry was a calling of a higher order and one that necessarily obliged him to live according to certain ethical and moral principles:

Whatever happened to him, around him, with his participation or independently of him—was always and invariably, connected with his consciousness of the fact that he was a poet... This was the trait by which he ethically and morally tested everything he thought about and everything he did... He was honest because he was a poet. He didn’t lie because he was a poet. He didn’t betray his friends because he was a poet. All the norms of his existence, his behavior, and his

⁶³ In Sarah Pratt, *Zabolotsky: Enigma and Cultural Paradigm* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 1.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶⁵ Lidia Ginzburg, *Chelovek za pis'mennym stolom* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1989), 81.

relations with people were determined by the fact that, being a poet, he could not at the same time be a deceiver, a traitor, a flatterer, or a careerist.⁶⁶

While Zabolotsky did not himself manifest an overly eccentric or obviously theatrical habitus, he nevertheless ‘performed himself’ according to a set of rules he thought befitting of his vocation. Here, as with Kharms and Vvedensky, is felt an indissoluble connection between art and life; Zabolotsky’s status as a poet dictated for him a certain mode of living, and to be a poet meant not simply to write poetry but to perform as one consistently, though all facets of one’s life. This commitment to self-performance is captured beautifully in an anecdote related at the beginning of *Nikolai Zabolotsky: Enigma and Cultural Paradigm* by Sara Pratt. Deep in conversation one evening with Kharms, Vvedensky, and others, a question was posed: who do you want to be like today? Kharms stated that he wanted to be like Goethe. Vvedensky suggested that he would be a ‘NEP lowlife’ so he could while away the hours chatting up taxi drivers and prostitutes. Zabolotsky simply answered: “I want to be like myself.” The poet evidently would have been in agreement with his Armenian-American contemporary, William Saroyan, who once observed: “Living is an art, it’s not bookkeeping. It takes an awful lot of rehearsal for a man to be himself.”⁶⁷

Despite their evidently disparate characters (to say nothing of their writing styles), the three principle OBeRIu poets were united by a particularly robust understanding of what it meant to be an artist or poet, as well a ubiquitous approach to the performance of their identity as such that knew no distinction between the public and the private or between the aesthetic and the existential. They drew absolutely no coherent distinction between the meaning of their lives and their art. In contrast to the previous avant-garde generation whose emphasis on publicity and

⁶⁶ Veniamin Kaverin, “Schast’e talanta,” in *Vospominaniia o Zabolotskom*, 180-181.

⁶⁷ William Saroyan, *The Time of Your Life* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 55.

épatage made their performances primarily *aesthetic* and *theatrical* in nature, the OBeRlu practiced an arguably deeper type of performance, one “featur[ing] an equal share of spectacle and intimacy,”⁶⁸ that can rightfully be considering *self-presentation* in its richest sense. Recall that presentation, in Gadamer’s account, delineates a spontaneous and autonomous process whereby something bring itself to presence or comes into being. For Gadamer, self-presentation is epitomized in the phenomenon that we call play.

It should be noted that the concept of play was, in fact, integral to the Romantic (or at least proto-Romantic) accounts of the aesthetic in Kant, Schiller, and others. Kant, specifically, thought that aesthetic consciousness cleared a ludic space for the work of the imagination. Indeed, on his account, aesthetic appreciation consists precisely in this spontaneous “free play” of our mental faculties. This play, however, is qualitatively of a different sort than that described by Gadamer in *Truth and Method*, and Gadamer’s initial task in his account of the ontology of the work of art is to recover this concept from the connotations it possessed in earlier philosophical narratives. For Kant, Schiller, and others, play was understood to be a subjective state; in Kant, specifically, it takes shape as a kind of ‘interior’ mental activity, enjoyed by the imagination when it is no longer bound by the logic of concepts. To properly apprehend play as the mode of being of the work of art, Gadamer must first reappropriate the concept of play in order to show that it cannot be understood simply as a mode of subjective experience. As Gadamer explains:

For my starting point I select an idea that has played a major role in aesthetics: the concept of *play*. I wish to free this concept of the subjective meaning it has in Kant and Schiller and that dominates the whole of modern aesthetics and philosophy of man. When we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work, nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself. In analyzing aesthetic consciousness

⁶⁸ Branislav Jakovljevic, *Daniil Kharms: Writing and Event* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 17.

we recognized that conceiving aesthetic consciousness as something that confronts an object does not do justice to the real situation. This is why the concept of play is important in my exposition.⁶⁹

It is crucial to understand that according to Gadamer, play is not simply one particular mode of activity among others that is taken up and performed by an autonomous and individual consciousness: it is neither an ‘orientation,’ nor is it an ‘act,’ nor even a ‘state of mind.’ Most of us will readily admit that what distinguishes play from other kinds of behavior is the fact that it is ‘not serious.’ It takes place in what Johan Huizinga called a *magic circle*, a ‘playground’ divorced from the means-end relationships that largely define our everyday, practical way of being in the world. With further reflection, however, we see that the situation is actually more complicated than this. For the player exists in a peculiar state: the practical demands of life are indeed suspended, but this only clears our horizon for the seriousness that the demands of the *game itself* require. From outside, there is nothing serious about play, and yet from the perspective of the player everything appears curiously inverted: “seriousness in playing is necessary to make the play wholly play.”⁷⁰ This is readily enough seen if we consider the phenomenon of the ‘spoilsport,’ reviled in some ways even more than the cheater, since the cheater at least respects the game enough to take it seriously. The player who is truly engaged in play operates in a curious liminal state, for “he knows what play is, and that what he is doing is ‘only a game’; but he does not know what exactly he ‘knows’ in knowing that.”⁷¹

For Gadamer, it is precisely this—play’s opacity to the player—that precludes any projected value from a purely subjective account of the phenomenon. Play is less like an activity over which we exercise control, and more like a situation in which we find ourselves

⁶⁹ Gadamer, 106.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

inexplicably caught up. The determining factor is not the *players* of the game but rather the *game itself*. In point of fact, ‘subjects’ are not even required for us to identify something as play. When we speak, for example, of the ‘play’ of light or the ‘play’ of waves we do not only speak metaphorically: “in each case what is intended is to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end.”⁷² In such cases, the play really is limited to the transparent presentation of a phenomenon. Of course, generally speaking we always choose to play and what to play at, but once a game is set in motion it circumscribes the agency of its players, holding them in thrall: “The attraction of the game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game masters the players... The real subject of the game (this is shown in precisely those experiences in which there is only a single player) is not the player but instead the game itself. What holds the players in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there is the game itself.”⁷³ If within the confines of the game players do have concrete objectives, concerns, and goals—in chess, for instance, one moves pieces in such a way as to capture the opponent’s king—it is only because these are what the game and its spirit demands: “such tasks are playful ones because the purpose of the game is not really solving the task, but ordering and shaping the movement of the game itself.”⁷⁴ It is not so much that human beings ‘make’ games happen, but rather that the game achieves presentation in and through the players who are caught up in its logic. A game always ‘plays itself out’ autonomously and for its own sake, without reference to anything external. “One can say that performing a task successfully ‘presents it’ (*stellt sie dar*). This

⁷² Ibid., 108.

⁷³ Ibid., 111.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 112.

paraphrasing especially suggests itself in the case of a game, for here fulfilling the task does not point to any purposive context. Play is really limited to presenting itself.”⁷⁵

One can recognize something vaguely Platonic about Gadamer’s model here. There is an element to his hermeneutic theory that complicates the line that is usually drawn between creation and discovery. Games are not simply arbitrary acts of invention, but develop according to an internal logic that seems to impose structure independently of the will of their creators—new games are always possible, as are variants on classics, but what makes a game playable seems to depend on a coherent ordering of rules that make the game satisfying. A game that is too easy, too difficult, or fundamentally disordered simply won’t ‘work’ no matter how much the players want it to: the tweaking of rules that is an integral part of game development really seems to be about uncovering an ideal and ontologically anticipatory structure that constitutes the ‘essence’ of the game. Once this essence has been uncovered it becomes repeatable—with every iteration of the game, the ideality of its structure once again comes to presentation and momentarily reshapes the horizons of experience. What is true of games is true also of artworks—an idea supported by the experience of creators themselves, who report that their truly great works ‘create themselves’ with surprising regularity. These works, too, become repeatable once they have been uncovered: novels are read, plays are performed, paintings are looked at, and in each instance the work again comes to life and offers understanding of the world.

With Gadamer’s observations in mind, we are now in a position to understand how, in spite of their superficial similarities, the nature of Futurist and OBeRIu spectacle fundamentally differ. Note firstly that one decidedly characteristic aspect of Futurist theatrics is that to an extent they always serve as a means to a particular end. Their utilization of *épatage*, the performative corollary to the notion of art for art’s sake, means that the Futurist spectacle was calculated to

⁷⁵ Ibid., 112.

shock and offend, for the abrogation of traditional values was seen as a necessary preliminary step towards a truly pure aesthetics of the perpetually novel. Their decidedly confrontational mien had broader social and cultural aims beyond the simple development of their unique brand of aesthetics. Futurist theater was, to be sure, a kind of game, but as a game it was fundamentally agonistic in nature. The transgressive nature of the Futurist spectacle circumscribes the kinds of comportment available to the scandalized audience. The audience too, takes part in the game, but their reactions—shock, anger, derision—are so desired and so expected as to be almost scripted. In this sense, what arises from the spectacle is always already predetermined. The goal-directed character of such theatricality is always one order removed from the ideality of deep play.

And yet... I have spoken already of the fact that Futurist performance, too, is a kind of game. Indeed, one must admit that there is *something* of the play element to be discovered in their spectacles. Furthermore, to the extent that Gadamer's analysis of art as play is meant to be a non-normative, but an account of what happens wherever and whenever there is an occurrence of art, it would stand to reason that Futurist spectacle, too, must participate to some degree in the play phenomenon. But if this is the case, then what exactly is it that comes to self-presentation in the work of the Futurists? I would suggest that the great irony of Futurist *épatage* is the fact that in spite of its bold contempt for the *sensus communis* and rejection of the past, it too is indebted to a particular tradition and appeals to a common set of values shared by previous avant-gardists. Traceable back at least as far as the publication of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* in 1857, it had been practiced unambiguously by European modernists for at least half a century by the time the Russian Futurists took it up for themselves—no doubt, traces of the practice can be found even in the outrageous lifestyles of Romantic figures such as Lord Byron. What I wish to suggest here is that if anything comes to presentation in Futurist spectacle, it is the motif of the artist as

outsider, the very mythos of aesthetic creation as the work of individual genius. Everything—from the linguistic and conceptual content of their spectacles, to their outlandish behavior and dress, to the scandalized reaction of their outraged audience—in all of this the recognizable game of *l'art pour l'art* comes dynamically to presentation.

What is at issue here is not the authenticity or *value* of Futurist theater as an artform. There is no doubt their work represents in many ways a unique aesthetic achievement, deserving of a more nuanced examination than is appropriate for me to provide here. What I wish to suggest is only that these poets and performers do conform to a recognizable and predictable model, one that ironically undercuts the thrust of the myth of autonomous creation they actively promote. Beholden to a tradition, albeit an avant-garde one, their performative work remains parasitic on the very conditions that it seeks to eschew. ‘Theatrics,’ as I have chosen to call the performative strategies of this type, are not wholly opposed to play and self-presentation—in a limited sense they *are* play and self-presentation—but a specific and unusually paradoxical form of it. Theatrics might be characterized as presentation in a ‘deficient’ modality, for it is presentation that partially obscures its essence and as such proscribes its own full realization. The question is: what does Futurist *épatage* really communicate? Apart from its own unwillingness to do so on any sort of common ground? There is something altogether reductively *phatic* about this particularly ostentatious performative mode. A scandal announces itself and unfolds as such. It interrupts and negates the import of *sensus communis*, but without entering into any kind of productive dialogue with it, it finds no lasting purchase in the world. As an object of ‘pure art’ Futurist spectacle “consists precisely in precluding any criterion of content and in dissociating the work of art from its world,” it has “passed beyond any determining and determinate taste, and

itself represents a total lack of determinacy. It no longer admits that the work of art and its world belong to each other.”⁷⁶

One of the Futurist’s self-evident pretensions was to obliterate the traditional boundaries that separated life from the artwork. What they achieved, however, was not a true synthesis of art and life; rather, their work represents a rupture of aesthetic consciousness into the habitual course of the everyday. “It is time for art to invade life,” Ilya Zdanevich and Mikahail Larionov state in the 1930 manifesto *Why We Paint Ourselves* (Почему мы раскрашиваемся). Their use of the word “invasion” suggests that not only did the Futurists retain a clear distinction between art and life, but also that they held the aesthetic in a clear position of normative superiority. For the Futurists, erasing the boundary between art and life meant making life more ‘aesthetic,’ disrupting the mundane course of events through violent insertions of the perpetually novel and unexpected. The autonomous, ‘self-sufficient’ word was destined to triumph over the outdated stumbling blocks of common sense and good taste. In this paradigm, the habitual modes of life were to be outrun and eclipsed by an ever widening and autonomous sphere of aesthetics. This is less a true merger of art and life than it is a radical aestheticization of life. Aesthetics spills over into the everyday. Art replaces life, but it does so without ever truly transforming it.

To be sure, the OBeRIu also sought a kind of merger of art and life, but this was a merger of a different quality than what was pursued by the Futurists. The older avant-garde generation saw everyday life as something fundamentally in conflict with the ideals demanded by a rarefied aestheticism. Art subsumes life. OBeRIu performance frustrates or even inverts this normative hierarchy—the operative term is life, not aesthetics. Druskin noted: “In the late 30’s Kharms said that the most important thing for him was never art, but life: to make his life like art. This is not aestheticism: ‘making life into art’ was for Kharms categorically not an aesthetic system but was,

⁷⁶ Gadamer, 77.

as they say now, existential.”⁷⁷ Vvedensky once said in praise of Kharms that he did not *make* or *produce* art, but that he *was* art. The extent to which Vvedensky and Zabolotsky also allowed their self-identification as poets to influence their private habitus and interpersonal relationships suggests the same could be said for them as well. The artistic practices that defined the OBeRIu were thoroughly grounded in the reality of their personal lives as individuals and in the shared practices that defined their common world. Rather than affecting an aestheticization of life in the style of the Futurists, the *oberiuty* sought to transform and elevate life to the level of art. This distinction is more than a question of mere semantics. There is a difference between trying to see life through the lens of aesthetics and dedication to the principle that art can enrich and transform the world we inhabit.

⁷⁷ Druskin, *Chinari*.

II. Against Kant : Presentation and Knowledge in OBeRlu Text

We are pleased; pleased to destroy
the unchained canvas of the sciences.
We considered Galileo an enemy,
when he provided new keys.
And now five *Oberiuty*,
having once more turned keys in the arithmetics of faith,
are obliged to wander between houses,
for violating customary rules of reasoning about meanings.
—Daniil Kharms, *Khniu*⁷⁸

Many things are inconceivable to us not because our
conceptions are weak, but because these things do not enter
the sphere of our conceptions.
—Koz'ma Prutkov

There are probably very few pieces of writing in existence that are simultaneously as hilarious and as absolutely bizarre as “Blue Notebook No. 10.” (“Голубая тетрадь но. 10) by Daniil Kharms. Taking its name for being the tenth entry in a collection Kharms penned in an unassuming blue composition book sometime between August of 1926 and October of the following year, the short prose piece is immediately disarming for its sheer *silliness*; a silliness that, however, quickly gives way to a strong sense of puzzlement: “There once was a red-headed man who had no eyes or ears. He didn’t have any hair either, so he was called a redhead by convention. He couldn’t talk because he had no mouth. He didn’t have a nose either. He didn’t even have arms or legs. And he didn’t have a stomach, and he didn’t have a back, and he didn’t have spine, and he didn’t have any insides at all. There was nothing! So it’s not clear who we’re talking about. Really, it’s better we don’t talk about him anymore.”⁷⁹ It is an undeniably fun piece of writing, made all the more alluring for the twisted literary paradox it presents to its

⁷⁸ Daniil Kharms, “Kniu,” in *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, ed. Vladimir Vesterman, (Moskva: Zebra E, 2009), 1:345.

⁷⁹ Daniil Kharms, “Golubaia tetrad’,” in *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, 2:265.

readers. Indeed, it is precisely its curious blend of the comedic and the bizarre that have made the text such a multifaceted source of inspiration for literary scholars attempting to gain a hermeneutic foothold in the esoteric literary project undertaken by the OBeRIu.

One common reading of “Blue Notebook No. 10”—perhaps the *most* common reading—presents the text as the archetypal example of the “Kharmsian anti-narrative.” This line of thought takes its departure from the observation that Kharms had an abiding penchant for composing texts that ‘self-destruct’ by undermining themselves. Not infrequently, his works end abruptly through unexpected lapses in the conditions that make story telling possible. In some cases his narrators run out of ink—“The Artist and the Watch” (Художник и часы)—or lack the necessary words entirely—“About Pushkin,” “I forget what it’s called,” “Is there anything on earth...” (О Пушкине; Есть ли что-нибудь на земле; Забыл, как называется). Other times his texts subvert themselves through a sudden and seemingly unmotivated loss of their subject matter: his characters suddenly die—“Events,” “A Dream,” “What They Sell in Stores Nowadays” (Случаи, Сон, Что теперь продают в магазинах)—or inexplicably vanish—“On Phenomena and Existences No. 2,” “How One Man Fell to Pieces” (О явлениях и существованиях No. 2; О том, как рассыпался один человек). In still other instances, the stories he writes can at least stand on their own without unraveling but are also completely devoid of any identifiable motivation for their telling; they conclude, seemingly, without having made any real point: “And that’s it, more or less,” Kharms concludes in “An Incident Involving Petrakov” (Случай с Петраковым), a story which consists entirely in recounting its eponymous character’s ridiculous attempts to fall asleep. As his texts confront absence—of words, of subject matter, of motivation—they fold in on themselves and collapse. In “Blue Notebook No. 10,” it would seem we have a confluence of these circumstances. The text is radically vacuous.

Concluding with a lack of language, a lack of its principal character, and a lack of message, “Blue Notebook” seems the epitome of the Kharmsian anti-narrative. On this reading, the text is presented as an extreme example of the Formalist concept of the literary device “laid bare,” thoroughly calling attention to its own being as literary artifice. While this essentially Formalist reading of the work represents a commendable attempt to make sense of Kharms’s unique brand of absurdity (and is probably not without some inkling of truth), I do not believe it does appropriate interpretive justice to his peculiar textual practices. Kharms was up to something far more interesting than simply constructing anti-narratives, and there is far more going on in “Blue Notebook” than the text initially seems to offer.

My proposed reading concerns the following fact: in the original *Blue Notebook* penned by Kharms, the author includes a note to the left of this 10th entry that simply reads: “Against Kant.” A good deal of ink has already been spilled over the significance that these two words have for deciphering “Blue Notebook No. 10” and, indeed, for the philosophical perspective present within the whole of the OBeRIu canon generally. The marginalium here suggests that even as the text masquerades as a narrative bent on its own self-destruction, it also serves to performatively refute certain key features of metaphysics as presented by Kant in his three *Critiques*—most evidently, the distinction Kant draws between the subjective, phenomenal world of experience and the noumenal world of “things-in-themselves.” On this reading, “Blue Notebook No. 10” becomes a humorous philosophical burlesque that blends literary ‘absurdism’ with epistemological thought experiment.

In the standard anti-Kantian reading of “Blue Notebook No. 10” the text can be seen as a contentious engagement with certain ideas put forward in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant’s concern in his first *Critique* is (1) to establish a firm basis on which we can ground our

knowledge of the world (2) to demonstrate precisely what this knowledge consists in. The thrust of Kant's thinking here stems from his observation that the skepticism which plagued much of modern philosophy is based on an epistemological error: that to 'know' something about the world means to possess a correct representation of it. The metaphysical tradition since Plato had interpreted truth as *orthotes* (ὀρθότης), the 'rightness' or 'correctness' of perspective. When Descartes worried about our ability to know anything about the world, he was concerned precisely with the question of how we can be sure that the content of our mental states (our beliefs, perceptions, judgements, etc.) accurately model reality, especially given the fact that our sense and reason sometimes comes into error. On this view, which had been hashed and rehashed in various configurations throughout the history of philosophical inquiry, we can be said to possess knowledge when our ideas correspond sufficiently to the way things are in actuality. Dissatisfied with the various metaphysical systems built on the basis of this epistemological presumption and doubtful of their veracity—indeed, many philosophers have suggested that Descartes's arguments for radical doubt are far more compelling than his attempt to dispel the threat of such skepticism—Kant instead proposed to reverse this basic relationship between thought and reality: what if instead of our idea conforming to the object, knowledge is actually possible because objects conform to our ideas?

Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them a priori through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an a priori cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 110.

This is Kant's "Copernican revolution" in philosophy. He overturns the preceding paradigm of knowledge by suggesting that objective reality is informed by features of the mind rather than *vice versa*: we can be assured of the validity of certain forms of knowledge not because our ideas mirror the world, but because the world conforms to the underlying mental structures that make experience possible. The 'intuitions' of time and space, as well as 'categories' such as quantity and quality are not characteristic of reality 'in itself,' but are instead understood as *necessary features of our experience*—you could not, Kant argues, fathom a world 'outside' of these fundamental structures of cognition.

One example should suffice to demonstrate the power of this radical Kantian shift: Modern philosophy was particularly plagued by skepticism concerning the concept of causation, which didn't seem to find sufficient grounding on either a rational or empirical basis. Causation does not seem to be a purely logical connection between events, since we will find that there is nothing about one event that *a priori necessitates* another certain kind of event will follow it. But as Hume pointed out, it does not seem to be a purely empirical principle either, since we only ever experience certain kinds of events existing in regular temporal succession: if we *infer* causality on the basis of this regularity, it is not because we encounter 'cause' and 'effect' directly within the content of our experience. According to Kant's picture, we can be assured in our knowledge of causal relationships because causality is an *a priori* condition for the possibility of experience at all. Causal relationships are not a mind-independent feature of reality, but a fundamental and necessary way in which the mind structures, interprets, and makes sense of the world.

Under Kant's new epistemological paradigm, most of our philosophical knowledge, then, does not consist in truths about a mind-independent reality—but concerns instead the

fundamental features of cognition that structure our experience. In this manner, Kant is able to avoid many of the skeptical problems that plagued the European epistemological tradition. He pays, however, a heavy price in that his new model places very stringent limits on the kinds of knowledge we can possess. Because the world is always filtered and interpreted by the intuitions and categories of mind, Kant must make an irreconcilable distinction between the ‘phenomenal’ world (the world as we experience it) and noumenal reality (the world as it is independently of our mind; things ‘in-themselves’). The knowledge we have access to always concerns this former, phenomenal world of experience; guaranteed because the way things appear to us is necessary and consistent. We cannot, however, have any knowledge about the world as it is in-itself. According to Kant’s conceptual framework the noumenon is always, by definition, beyond the scope of our cognition.⁸¹

Even with this admittedly perfunctory understanding of Kant, we see how “Blue Notebook No. 10” can be seen to function as a tongue-in-cheek parody of the central tenets of his epistemology. Kant included as a necessary aspect of his philosophy a reality beyond experience that is essentially featureless and therefore inherently unknowable. In “Blue Notebook,” Kharms demonstrates the absurdity of such an empty metaphysical postulate. Even taking his unusual absence of eyes and ears for granted we expect, given the initial presentation of Kharms’s redhead, that he must possess qualities that would justify the assertion of his (albeit fictional) existence. However, as Kharms deprives his red-headed man of properties increasingly essential to even his literary being, we are progressively aware of the absurdity that we are being asked to entertain. Kant defined the thing-in-itself as an ineffable *something* beyond any appearance it

⁸¹ This is an extraordinarily pared down account of the so-called “two worlds” interpretation of Kant’s metaphysics as presented in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Setting aside the problems inherent to presenting Kant in such truncated format, it is worth noting that some philosophers find the ‘two worlds’ interpretation of Kant uncharitable and overly simplistic. Other, more nuanced readings have been proposed. Nevertheless, this is considered the standard interpretation of Kant and is likely the one with which Kharms himself would have been familiar.

might have for us. Like Kant's noumenon, the deconstructed redhead, stripped of his features, also becomes an ineffable *something*, but a something that is so abstract it becomes seemingly disingenuous to affirm his purported existence: "There was nothing! So it's not clear who we're talking about anymore." By depriving his ephemeral ginger of his *appearance*, Kharms shows conclusively that he has been deprived of existence altogether. He affirms that a thing deprived of qualities cannot be said to *be* at all. Kant famously demonstrated the absurdity of considering existence as a predicate: here, Kharms performatively demonstrates the absurdity of existence in the absence of predication. So much for the Kantian noumenon: "It's really better if we don't talk about [it] anymore."

At this juncture, one aspect of "Blue Notebook No 10" bears further consideration.

Kharms's engagement with Kantian metaphysics in a performative, literary fashion suggests that he saw artistic creation as a form of epistemic practice. Kharms was hardly the only member of the OBeRIu circle who approached writing as a kind of exercise in philosophical study. Nearly every member of the group (especially those associated with the more private, inner circle of *chinari*, sometimes translated as "titled ones") held what literary theorist Laurence Lerner has called a 'cognitive' theory of literature. In tension with the idea that literary practice is concerned primarily with personal expression on the part of the author, or with the transmission of affective states to the reader, a cognitive or (to use what I consider a preferable term) *epistemic*⁸² theory of literature puts forward the view that literature, to quote Zabolotsky scholar Robin Milner-Gulland, should be considered primarily as "a special kind of, or route to, knowledge."⁸³

⁸² I prefer the term 'epistemic' because it is not clear to me that the knowledge available in a literary text is always 'cognitive' in the sense that it concerns conscious intellection, definable concepts, or empirical facts. Literature may, of course, pertain to such things, but this should not exclude 'softer' knowledge forms such as intuition or insight, which do not operate strictly within the bounds of 'reason.'

⁸³ Robin Milner-Gulland, introduction to *Nikolay Zabolotsky: Selected Poems*, by Nikolai Zabolotsky, ed. Daniel Weissbort, (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1999), 2.

Perhaps the member of the OBeRIu most fitting to be considered first in this respect is Vvedensky, who, Druskin tells us, held firmly to the conviction that poetry should be judged not as beautiful or ugly, but as true or false. Leonid Lipavsky similarly reports that the poet considered his entire oeuvre a “poetic critique of reason” (поэтическая критика разума) more fundamental and more penetrating than the one written by Kant: “I attacked concepts, basic generalizations, which before me no one had. In this way, I carried out a sort of poetic critique of reason—a critique more profound than that other, abstract one.”⁸⁴ It is worth noting here that Vvedensky speaks specifically about a ‘*poetic critique of reason*’ and not a ‘critique of *poetic reason*,’ as I have sometimes seen it rendered in the work of other scholars, notably Alexander Skidan.⁸⁵ That is, Vvedensky sees himself as engaged not merely in a sort of immanent critique concerning the limitations of or contradictions inherent to poetic expression—his project is broader in scope than this, I believe, and can be accurately construed as a critique of reason *in general* that is possible only in and through the medium of poetry. Vvedensky’s own explication further clarifies the breadth of his aims: “I doubted that, for example, house, cottage, and tower are connected and united through the concept of ‘building.’ Perhaps shoulder should be connected to the number four. I did this in practice, in poetry, and so I proved it. I became convinced of the falsity of former connections but I cannot say what the new ones should be. I don’t even know if there should be one system of connections or if there are many. And I have a general sense of the incoherence of the world and the disunity of time. But since this contradicts reason, it means that reason does not comprehend the world.”⁸⁶ It may be possible to tease out

⁸⁴ Leonid Lipavskii, “Razgovory,” *Logos* 4 (1993): 16.

⁸⁵ Alexander Skidan, “Trans-formation: The Poetic Machines of Alexander Vvedensky,” *Floor* 3 (August 2015), accessed December 4, 2017, <http://floorjournal.com/2015/08/06/trans-formation-the-poetic-machines-of-alexander-vvedensky/>.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

some of what Vvedensky is getting at here: there is a sense in which he seems to recognize the tenuous and arbitrary nature of all conceptual schemata (cf. ‘pataphysics’).⁸⁷ In certain ways his discourse here anticipates Borges’s treatment of taxonomy in his essay *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins*, which concludes in strikingly Vvedenskian fashion: “it is clear that there is no classification of the Universe that is not arbitrary and full of conjectures. The reason for this is very simple: we do not know what kind of thing the universe is.”⁸⁸ In any case, Borges aside, if Vvedensky’s philosophical poetic forays have not provided him with certainty concerning what the ‘proper’ relationships between concepts should be, or even if there is one singular divine taxonomy of things, one thing at least is clear: his conviction that mundane conceptual relationships are somehow deceitful or wrong was something born of and explored within his literary practice. Poetry, at least in his estimation, can do real philosophical work.

Vvedensky and Kharms were not the only member of the OBeRIu to view and utilize the literary mode explicitly as a form of knowledge production. Zabolotsky’s view that poetry has a deep connection to our desire for understanding is supported by a comment of his in Lipavasky’s conversations: “At one time poetry had everything. Then one after another science, religion, prose, and whatever else were taken away one after another.”⁸⁹ Indeed, the image of the poet as scientist, priest, keeper of occult knowledge, mystic sage—or any combination of these—is found so often in Zabolotsky’s writing as to be almost ubiquitous. The body of Zabolotsky’s work is rooted firmly in careful and studious *observation*. Responding to criticism towards his first collection of poetry, *Columns*, published in 1929, Zabolotsky defended himself by stating:

⁸⁷ Initiates to the pataphysical tradition consider the apostrophe before “pataphysics” an obligatory orthographic convention.

⁸⁸ Jorge Borges, *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins*, trans. Will Fitzgerald, accessed January 15, 2021, <https://www.english.org/essays/Wilkins.html>.

⁸⁹ Lipavskii, “Razgovry,” 14.

“What I write is not parody. It is my vision.”⁹⁰ Throughout the body of his work, whether it concerns the urban carnival of Leningrad during the NEP period, the shifting agricultural landscape of the Russian provinces, or the unadulterated phenomena of nature, Zabolotsky plays the role of the “supernatural naturalist” with steadfast regularity. Grounded in the experience of spiritual revelation that grows from careful observation, Sarah Pratt places much of Zabolotsky’s writing in the meditative tradition, represented in Russia by such poets as Derzhavin, Zhukovsky, Tiutchev, and—reaching further back—Lomonosov. Zabolotsky’s similarity to Lomonosov is felt most poignantly in those instances where the latter gives poetic expression to his capacity as polymath and scientist. Verses such as “Evening Reflection Upon God’s Grandeur on the Occasion of the Great Northern Lights” (“Вечернее размышление о божием величестве при случае великого северного сияния”) and “Epistle Concerning the Utility of Glass” (“Письмо о пользе стекла”) are fascinating poetic objects for the fact that they astutely showcase the keen powers of observation possessed by Lomonosov the chemist and physicist. He was among the first to suggest that the aurora borealis was an autonomous luminary phenomenon taking place in the Earth’s upper atmosphere, rather than a trick of reflected or refracted light; and his experiments with the mineral composition of silicates lead to a rediscovery of the glass arts in Russia and a subsequent revolution of the glass-making industry—the factory he established in Saint Petersburg produced not only stained glass for mosaics and other decorative arts, but also glassware and lenses for instruments to aid the enterprise of science. The aforementioned poems are positively rife with insights and observations Lomonosov gleaned in the course of his research—but more than this, the essentially odic timbre of these works transform the poet’s scientific insights into occasions for the meditative contemplation of the metaphysical underpinnings of the natural world.

⁹⁰ Pavel Antakol’skii, “Skol’ko zim i let,” in *Vospominanii o N. Zabolotskom*, 199.

Much of Zabolotsky's poetry effectively achieves this Lomonosovian blend of naturalistic observation and philosophical reflection. If Zabolotsky was not himself a scientist—and certainly not a scientist of Lomonosov's caliber—he undoubtedly absorbed a great deal of pragmatic knowledge concerning natural things from his father, Aleksei Agafonovich, a graduate of the Kazan School of Agriculture who practiced agronomy in the remote fields of Kukmor, Sernur, and Urzhum. This is to say nothing of the fact that during his approximately one-year stint at Moscow University (1920-1921) Zabolotsky studied not only literature but medicine as well, a fact that suggests he may have possessed an above-average understanding of the biological organism. It is unsurprising then, to find that agriculture and biological/organic processes are among the most common subjects of his poems. Across the entirety of his oeuvre, Zabolotsky's observations of the world around him are consistently detailed and expressive; they suggest the portrait of a writer with a keen and almost encyclopedic understanding of the natural phenomena that he thematizes. That his poems are undeniably motivated by a meditative or contemplative impulse is underscored by his bountiful use of poetic device, which add conceptual and philosophical depth to the reportage of what he sees. Here, Zabolotsky is particularly drawn to anthropomorphism—there is probably not a single poem of Zabolotsky's that does not employ personification and employ it almost to the point of pleonasm.

Significantly, anthropomorphism has special importance to Huizinga as an ever present and vital habit of the always playful mind: “Which of us has not repeatedly caught himself addressing some lifeless object, say a recalcitrant collar-stud, in deadly earnest, attributing to it a perverse will, reproaching it and abusing it for its demoniacal obstinacy? If ever you did this you were personifying in the strict sense of the word. Yet you do not normally avow your belief in

the collar-stud as an entity or idea. You were only falling involuntarily into the play-attitude.”⁹¹ Huizinga sees here the classic silhouette of the play phenomenon, “hovering between fancy and conviction.”⁹² In our almost ubiquitous thralldom to the “magical thinking” that is personification, he finds the essentially imaginative root of man’s struggle to comprehend the complex world in which he plays his part. More bluntly, anthropomorphism has a cognitive and communicative function, one that is felt most powerfully in creation mythology, which seeks to understand and convey the basic relationships that structure the natural and human world. “Personification,” writes Huizinga, “arises as soon as the need is felt to communicate one’s perceptions to others. Conceptions are thus born as acts of imagination.”⁹³ More generally, one does well to keep in mind that poetic devices are more than simply ‘window dressing’—metaphor, metonymy, rhyme, personification and the rest; these are all, first and foremost, intuitive ways of thinking and understanding.

Perhaps nowhere in Zabolotsky’s work is this originary unity of perception, play, and conceptualization so evident as in his long poem “The Triumph of Agriculture” (Торжество земледелия), completed in 1930, which possesses all the elements of a new-age creation myth. Here, Zabolotsky’s excessive use of personification reaches a fevered pitch—livestock, plants, insects, farm equipment, even the disembodied concept of ‘Night’ all raise their voices in the poet’s thoroughly anthropomorphized world. Indeed, in the exuberance of playful personification presented in “The Triumph of Agriculture,” one can perhaps detect the reason it was dismissed by contemporary critics as a childish lampoon of Soviet agricultural collectivization. As was true of *Columns*, however, the operative modality here is not mockery but rather *vision* (зрение) in

⁹¹ Huizinga, 140.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., 136.

the sense that the poem concerns both what Zabolotsky literally sees with his eyes, and also what he contemplates and understands about the world on the basis of these observations. The metaphysical themes explored in “The Triumph of Agriculture” are typical of Zabolotsky’s poetic meditations: the cyclical relationship between life and death, the prospect of resurrection and immortality, the nature of transfiguration, as well as the acquisition of knowledge, which for Zabolotsky is always codeterminantly both practical and esoteric. The manifestation of the tractor that closes “The Triumph of Agriculture” is not simply the arrival of some labor-saving farm equipment—or rather, it *is* this, but not only. The tractor appears bearing the visage of an occult machine: it is born of, and quite possibly itself constitutes, a kind of transfigurative knowledge.⁹⁴ Its arrival signifies a rebirth and radical reordering of the world; a transformation which itself opens new ways of being and novel paths of understanding for its inhabitants. The appearance of the tractor is prefigured by a proclamation from the character of Zabolotsky’s soldier, who—recall that during *Three Left Hours*, Zabolotsky, just having returned from a period of obligatory military service, read on stage dressed in his soldier’s uniform—is quite possibly a stand in for the poet himself:

Разрушив царство сох и борон,
Мы старый мир до тла снесем
И букву “А” огромным хором
впервые враз произнесем!”⁹⁵

“Having destroyed the kingdom of the plow and harrow, / we bring the old world
crashing to the ground / and the letter “A” in a great choir / we now pronounce
for the first time!”

⁹⁴ Without suggesting that the parallel constitutes anything more than an unconscious and fortuitous syzygy of language, I note with particular relish that both “tractor” and “tractatus” are etymologically derived from the same Latinate root meaning to “pull,” “draw out,” or “handle.” Those interested in a thorough treatment of the revelatory, truth bearing potential of *techne* as a form of *poesis* should consult Martin Heidegger’s essay *The Question Concerning Technology*.

⁹⁵ Nikolai Zabolotsky, “Torzhestvo zemledeliiia,” in *Metamorfozy*, ed. Igor Loshchilov (Moscow: Ob’edinennoe gumanitarnoe izdatel’stvo, 2014), 162.

This resounding “A,” produced in echo by the rumbling, mechanical drone of the tractor engine itself, is ripe with ready-made occult symbolism. The letter “A,” of course, recalls the “alpha and omega” of Christian theology, and in classical forms of gematria it is (unsurprisingly) assigned the numerical value of 1. Associated with unity and harmony, it marks beginnings, renewal, and the actualization of potentialities. Phonetically, ‘A’ is associated with the mystical ‘AUM,’ the musical tone that in some Eastern traditions expresses the nature of the universe. Lastly, the Latin and Cyrillic ‘A’ evolved from the Phoenician *aleph*, which takes its name from the Semitic word for ‘ox.’ Visually speaking, it is a stylized, pictographic representation of the head of this animal turned on its side, likely adapted from an Egyptian hieroglyph depicting the same. In its current form, the image of the ox head — ▼ — has simply been rotated to the point that it is now upside down. The rumbling ‘A’ emitted by the tractor is pregnant with significance, not the least of which here concerns the fact that in Zabolotsky’s mythos the machine liberates all agricultural beasts of burden, freeing them for their own scientific and artistic pursuits. The sacred, bovine head is an important occult image in many of Zabolotsky’s poems. Indeed, the imagery of the occult proliferates in Zabolotsky’s work, and for even the moderately initiated they serve as helpful keys to understanding the themes behind his own esoterica. The poem “Immortality” (Бессмертие), for instance, concludes with the rather grotesque image of a neighborhood cat that has been killed and strung upside down from a tree in Zabolotsky’s courtyard. Scholar Igor Loshchilov notes that despite evident discord with the poem’s title, the image is actually an explicit allusion to the Hanged Man, the twelfth card in the tarot’s Major Arcana, signifying passivity, surrender, and self-sacrifice. The card resonates strongly with the myth of the Norse god Odin, who hung himself upside down in similar fashion from the great tree Yggdrasil in order to ascertain the mysteries of life and death through the

study of runes. Thusly does the Hanged Man also represent knowledge and enlightenment as the fruit of new perspectives.

Questions of perspective also play a key role in *The Mad Wolf* (Безумный волк), another of Zabolotsky's long poems, written shortly after "The Triumph of Agriculture," in 1931. It concerns nearly identical themes. The work bears consideration here for the fact that its eponymous, Faustian hero is at once both scientific revolutionary, magician and—significantly—poet. At its outset, the work relates a dialogue between a bear and the "Mad One" himself, who divulges that his principal occupation in life consists in stargazing and composing songs; songs in which he contemplates why animals are cursed with horizontal necks that inhibit contemplation of the heavens. In conversation with his interlocutor, the Wolf resolves to break his own neck and reset his gaze vertically in order to "bite off a piece of science" (часть науки откусить).⁹⁶ Zabolotsky's description of the Wolf's research paints him as something of a polymath, and Darra Goldstein suggests that the character finds its closest (Russian) real-world parallel in the figure of Lomonosov. The Wolf's preoccupation with the planet Venus supports Goldstein's observation as one Zabolotsky potentially had explicitly in mind: Lomonosov was the first person to infer the existence of the Venusian atmosphere through direct observation of light refraction as the planet completed a solar transit in 1761. In any case, the Mad One's status as at once poetic scientist and scientific poet should be emphasized:

Надеюсь, этой песенкой
Я порастряс частицы мироздания
И в будущее ловко заглянул.
Не знаю сам — откуда что берется,
Но мне приятно песни составлять —
Рукою в книжечке поставишь закорючку,

⁹⁶ Nikolai Zabolotskii, "Bezumni volk," in *Metamorfozy*, ed. Igor Loshchilov (Moscow: Ob"edinennoe gumanitarnoe izdatel'stvo, 2014), 170.

А закорючка ангелом поет!⁹⁷

“I hope that with this little song / I’ve shaken the particles of the universe / And skillfully gotten a peek at the future. / I myself don’t know what comes from where, / But I enjoy making up songs — / By hand you’ll place a squiggle in a little book, / And the squiggle sings like an angel!”

The inherently poetic nature of the Wolf’s experiments is further underscored by the fact that many of them involve the application of *breath*, an image with self-evident connections to the practice of song-craft and versification. Much of the Wolf’s research seem fruitful; he has “discovered a multitude of laws,”⁹⁸ but he laments that his work is impeded by fellow creatures who do not understand his epistemic pursuits. As his final feat, the Wolf resolves to teach himself to fly and ascends to the top of a mountain in the middle a powerful thunderstorm. Here, he perishes. Some years later on the anniversary of his death, the Mad One’s progeny remembers his visionary legacy, which, as in “The Triumph of Agriculture,” concerns the transformative restructuring of the world in a singular, utopian vision. The Mad Wolf’s research has borne fruit; all of Woldom is now engaged in scientific endeavor:

Мы строим новый лес. Такой, каких на свете
Еще никто не видел. Ничего!
Мы строим все — мужчины, жены, дети,
И я клянусь — мы выстроим его.
Мы на глазах вселенную меняем.
Еще совсем убогие вчера —
Перед тобой мы ныне заседаем
Как инженеры, судьи, доктора.
Горит как смерч великая наука.

“We are building a new forest. One such as on the earth / Has not yet been seen. It doesn’t matter! / We’re all building together — men, women, children, / And I swear — we will complete it. / Before your eyes we alter the universe. /

⁹⁷ Ibid., 171.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Yesterday we were still miserable — / Today we sit before you / As engineers,
judges, doctors. / Great science burns like a fire whirl.”⁹⁹

To the ‘students’ among the Gathering that still effuse skepticism regarding the Mad Wolf’s more esoteric projects, the Chairman issues a reminder: the Mad One’s dream of flight may yet come to fruition, and if it does it will be because he was bold enough to envision it. What progress has been made was once also deemed impossible. New paradigms cannot be understood from within the logic of the old:

Веки идут, года уходят,
Но все живущее — не сон:
Оно живет и превосходит
Вчерашней истины закон.¹⁰⁰

“Centuries pass, the years go by, / But everything that lives is no dream: / It lives
and surpasses / The law of yesterday’s truth.”

For Zabolotsky, the Mad Wolf’s death is not emblematic of failure; here again Loshchilov’s observations concerning the role of tarotology in the poet’s work are instructive. The twenty-two cards in the Major Arcana (numbered 0 to 21) are representative of a cycle. At least four of these cards are discernible within “The Mad Wolf.” The Wolf himself suggests the zero card in the series, the Fool, known also as The Mad Man. In traditional depictions he carries a white rose and is accompanied by a small, white dog—imagery that may be combined by Zabolotsky in the “little doggy” (собачка) that the Mad Wolf manages to raise from a plant in the course of his experiments with breath. Poised to trot unwittingly off the edge of a cliff, the Fool represents engagement with the unknown and unexpected; the small knapsack, which he also bears, symbolizes unconscious collective knowledge. Zabolotsky’s description of the Mad Wolf’s doomed attempt at flight resonates strongly with the 16th manifestation of the Major

⁹⁹ Ibid., 176.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 179.

Arcana. Here, a great Tower set upon a mountain is cast down by a bolt of lightning; two upside down figures with their arms outstretched leap from the crumbling edifice and plummet to the Earth. This image has striking echoes in the story of the Mad Wolf's fall as recounted by the Chairman at the Gathering of Beasts:

Я побежал. И вот передо мною
Возвысился сверкающий утес.
Его вершина, гладкая, как череп,
Едва дымилась в чудной красоте.
Опять скатилась молния. Я замер:
Вверху, на самой высоте,
Металась чуть заметная фигурка,
Хватая воздух пальцами руки.
Я заревел. Фигурка подскочила,
Ужасный вопль пронзил меня насквозь.
На воздухе мелькнули руки, ноги,
И больше ничего не помню.”¹⁰¹

I ran. And there before me / Rose a mysterious cliff. / It's summit, as smooth as a skull, / Smoked faintly in awesome beauty. / Again the lightening coursed downward. I froze. / On high, at the very peak / A barely discernible figure rushed about, / Grasping the air with the fingers of his hand. / I roared. The figure jumped up, / A terrible howl pierced me through, / Arms and legs flashed in the air. / I cannot recall anything more.

The Tower is traditionally associated with revelation through calamity and upheaval, symbolism that undoubtedly forms the central theme of Zabolotsky's poem. Indeed, the Wolf is identified in the work's finale as the “Great Upside-Down Flyer” (Великий Летатель Книзу Головой), an epithet that clearly recalls the Hanged Man, which we discussed earlier in the context of the poem “Immortality.”

There is, perhaps, one last image from the tarot that lurks beneath the obvious content of both “The Mad Wolf” and “The Triumph of Agriculture.” The 21st and the final card in the series of the Major Arcana is the World, known also as the Universe. If the particular imagery of the card is not explicitly present within these poems, the content of its symbology certainly is—for

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 175.

the World represents completion and fulfillment as well as achievement and mastery. Classically, the twenty-one numbered cards of the Major Arcana are understood by some tarot hermeneuts as the Fool's journey—beginning in ignorance, the Fool activates his latent potential. Through observation and experience he gains the knowledge and wisdom to transfigure himself and the cosmos. As Sara Pratt suggests, texts such as “The Triumph of Agriculture” and “The Mad Wolf” poignantly convey “Zabolotsky's ‘whimsy’ in its most serious form—an unbounded curiosity about the universe and all its phenomena, which often [leads] to revelation.”¹⁰² Such is the dynamic of Zabolotsky's poetic episteme, which unifies mundane perception and the play of imagination to achieve a form of contemplative insight.

Some final considerations concerning the aleatory and essentially ludic nature of the tarot are here warranted before we conclude our discussion of Zabolotsky. Perspectives regarding the nature of tarot (and other divinatory practices) are varied. While there certainly exist practitioners who feel there is some kind of real ‘supernatural’ power at work in the deck, there are equally many serious tarot hermeneuts who argue that the ‘magic’ at work in the cards is rather more mundane. This perspective is particularly popular among artists (Burroughs, Dali, John Cage, to name a few) who harbor interest in occult machinery such as tarot and the I Ching. On this view, the essence of tarotology is, simply put, *observation* and *interpretation*. Fundamentally, the standard tarot deck is nothing more than a collection of 78 images (the twenty-two cards of the Major Arcana as well as 52 pip cards) that form a predetermined set. Each image can be individually read and interpreted visually on the basis of what it depicts. If the meaning of any particular card in isolation has become crystallized with traditional, ‘standard’ associations, the real ‘magic’ of the tarot begins when the cards are placed in conversation with one another. Every card possesses structural and thematic components that are

¹⁰² Pratt, 71.

echoed visually in others; to the observant initiate, as cards are drawn randomly from a well-shuffled deck their juxtaposed images begin to tell a story. Strictly speaking, the tarotologist is not interested in ‘divining the future.’ His craft, like that of any hermeneut, is rather one of narrative creation: he carefully reads the randomly generated story that the cards present. If the tarot can be said to have any ‘practical’ use at all then it is predicated on the principle of synchronicity: the story elicited in the aleatory process of the reading may resonate intuitively with circumstances and events external to the cards. To this extent (and to this extent only) the tarot may offer a previously unconsidered perspective on a problem or a novel understanding of a particular situation. The tarot is thereby seen clearly in essence as an aleatory device for the spontaneous and random creation of stories. The deck is an occult machine that, much like literature, deals in ‘imaginary solutions.’ There need be nothing spooky or supernatural about this. All metaphysical ornamentation aside, the tarot is simply a game where careful observation and interpretation of images creates a narrative that can potentially inspire insight. But this could very well be a workable definition of poetry.¹⁰³ One can well see why Zabolotsky (and, indeed, the other *oberiuty*) would have found the tarot especially compelling from a literary standpoint.

Consideration of the philosophical and epistemic character of OBeRIu literary pursuits would hardly be complete without including here some discussion of ‘fringe’ OBeRIu associates, the *chinari* Yakov Druskin and Leonid Lipavsky. Examination of these two wholly original thinkers is made all the more pressing by the fact that— in comparison to Kharms, Vvedensky and Zabolotsky—their writing has received relatively little attention. This is especially true in the anglophone academic world, no doubt a consequence of the fact that very few of their works are currently available in English. Another reason, however, may concern the curious genre in which

¹⁰³ Indeed, modern tarot hermeneut Enrique Enriquez (to whom I am indebted for much of the preceding information regarding the tarot) suggests on the back cover of his book on *Tarology* that one should “read poetry and about poetry while assuming that it is all about the tarot.”

their thinking lives and moves. I have suggested that in their own way Kharms, Vvedensky, and Zabolotsky were philosophers—as no doubt they were!—but *prima facie* they present as poets and their work is basically identifiable by convention as poetry. The matter is rather something of the reverse with Druskin and Lipavsky, both of whom received formal university training as philosophers. While their texts resemble traditional philosophy more closely than those regularly produced by their colleagues, they also operate in a distinctly poetic mode and constitute a complementary aspect of the unique OBERIU genre that Druskin has called the ‘lyrical philosophical tractatus.’ To put this another way: if Kharms, Vvedensky and Zabolotsky were ‘philosophical poets’ then Lipavsky and Druskin are ‘poetic philosophers.’ Their works are loosely recognizable as ‘essays’ insofar as they include some degree of conceptual analysis and argumentation, but they are hardly traditional. Eschewing typical scholarly discourse, they are deeply personal and strangely formatted, proceeding by association rather than by rules of logic. They typically prefer to suggest or point rather than prove or demonstrate. What Druskin says, introducing a concept in his essay “Death” (Смерть), completed in 1935, is applicable to these essays more generally: “It does not explain a lot, but perhaps it will show the way to a certain understanding.”¹⁰⁴

Two such texts by Leonid Lipavsky are the *Tractatus Concerning Water* (Трактат о воде) and his *Investigation of Horror* (Исследование ужаса), both written in the early 1930’s. Before proceeding to analysis, some consideration of the relationship between these two essays is warranted. For while it is obvious that they correspond, it is not immediately clear exactly what this correspondence consists in. Unfolding as a conversation taking place between four individuals at a restaurant, the texts in question explore the same themes and appear to feature

¹⁰⁴ Yakov Druskin, “Death,” in *OBERIU: An Anthology of Russian Absurdism*, ed. Eugene Ostashevsky (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 229.

the same characters—the captain, the champion, the diminutive Greek, and the fourth interlocutor. More than this, certain passages from one can be found practically verbatim in the other. While the *Investigation* seems to take its title directly from the *Tractatus*, where it appears as the name of one of four subsections, the latter text is considerably shorter than the former. Given the fact that neither piece of writing can be definitively dated and each contains unique material, it remains unclear which text possesses chronological primacy. As Branislav Jakovljevic notes: “The two texts dovetail and intersect, rather than follow one another in any strict chronological order of creation.”¹⁰⁵ One might be able to understand these texts as being ‘in conversation’ with, or perhaps even ‘hosting,’ one another in significant ways. In any case, it is evident, at the very least, that they constitute variations on a theme.

The real thrust of Lipavsky’s study can be found in the seventh section of the *Investigation*; the preceding six are perhaps best understood as specific, poetic illustrations of the ideas he develops later on—an unsurprising format for a thinker who once remarked that most conventional pieces of writing seem to end where they should have begun. Lipavsky begins his more pointed analysis by dismissing three mistaken assumptions which people commonly have about emotional states in general. The first of these is the idea that affective states can be coherently explained by appealing to the effect they have on our behavior. With respect to the phenomenon of horror, this functional or utilitarian view would have it that fear is either a cognitive or instinctual response that causes us to avoid those things in the world that might otherwise cause us harm. Lipavsky rejects this perspective since it is plain that (1) there are plenty of threatening things in the world that do not directly incite in us a fear response; (2) some of the things that do generate feelings of horror are, in fact, quite harmless; and (3) in extreme cases, such as when it causes paralysis and inaction, the fear response can actually be counter-

¹⁰⁵ Jakovljevic, 106.

productive; i.e., can result in harm that might otherwise have been avoided. Secondly, Lipavsky dismisses the notion that feelings are subjective, mind-dependent phenomena. Conversely, he views horror as an objective property of things: “Just as you can say about a thing or substance that it is hard or soft, luminous or dark, you can also say whether it is terrifying or not.”¹⁰⁶ Thirdly, Lipavsky will suggest that while we may be inclined to think that things can be horrible for a wide variety of reason, the objective phenomenon of horror is what he calls a “proper name” (ИМЯ СОБСТВЕННОЕ), by which he seems to mean that all horrible things are horrible because they participate in an ideal or share the same essential quality: “There exists only one fear in the world, singular is its principle, which manifests itself in numerous variations and forms.”¹⁰⁷

From a Western philosophical perspective, Lipavsky’s claims are somewhat radical, especially for their time. The fact that he specifically thematizes affectivity in any form is already significant, for, by and large, it has generally been felt that the amorphous, intangible, and allegedly subjective nature of *feelings* make them subject matter ill-suited for close philosophical analysis. Lipavsky’s interest in emotional states here independently parallels their thematic discovery in Europe with the emergence of Existentialism. Certain features of Lipavsky’s account resonate especially strongly with concerns explored in the work of Martin Heidegger, notably the latter’s account of anxiety in *Being and Time* as well as the lecture *What is Metaphysics?* What is particularly compelling about Lipavsky’s treatment of horror is that the phenomenon is for him at once both aesthetic as well as epistemic; and, moreover, that he examines these two polarities with equal intensity. Taking the form of what Heidegger calls ‘attunement,’ Lipavskian horror could be described as a collection of generally unpleasant

¹⁰⁶ Leonid Lipavskii, “Issledovanie uzhasa,” *Logos* 4 (1993): 81.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

physiological sensations and psychological states—specifically, a combination of fear and disgust—that do not have a purely subjective significance but reveal something fundamental and true about the world. It is important to keep in mind that this basic, cognitive moment of the horror phenomenon cannot consist in any sort of practical, ontic knowledge about a particular entity. For Lipavsky the quintessential object of horror does not in itself constitute any real danger and is not intrinsically repulsive—horror does not therefor arise from any kind of normative judgement regarding an entity’s status as physical threat, either through violence or contamination. Rather, Lipavsky will suggest that horror constitutes a specifically metaphysical revelation, one that occurs in the face of things that transgress or otherwise defy our fundamental categories of cognition.

The operative example of the horrible object in both of Lipavsky’s texts is rather unassuming—“желе”, jelly or gelatin: “A child cries with fright, having seen gelatin oscillating on a plate. The quivering of this almost alive, amorphous, and at the same time, elastic mass frightened him. Why? Is it because he thought it was alive? But many other living things do not arouse his fear, though they are sometimes actually dangerous. Is it because the vitality in question here is deceptive? But if the gelatin was, in fact, alive, it would not be any less frightening.”¹⁰⁸ Anticipating modern analysis of horror *qua* literary or cinematic genre, the vast majority of Lipavsky’s examples in the *Investigation* are liminal or interstitial things that transgress or otherwise complicate the fundamental distinction we draw between what is alive and what is not. Indeed, from zombies and vampires to alien blobs and giant insects, the horror genre abounds in monsters that signify an “irregular or unnatural animacy.”¹⁰⁹ For Lipavsky, however, the designation of ‘monster’ also includes things that are seemingly mundane: animals

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

with forms that are particularly alien or whose life processes are somehow unthinkable—jellyfish, cephalopods, worms, spiders, etc.—as well as substances that have some connection to the biological organism without being truly alive themselves—blood, mucus, semen, saliva, and protoplasm. In this latter category he also includes body parts considered in imaginary or physical isolation—severed limbs as well as internal organs, “the brain, intestines, lungs, heart, even living tissue, all the juices of the body in general.”¹¹⁰ With all of this in mind, Lipavsky’s answer to the question of how an innocuous plate of gelatin can horrify us is clear: it is horrible, not because it represents any kind of physical threat, but because it confounds the conceptual dichotomy we draw between the animate and the inanimate. It is, in common parlance, *undead*.

This, however, is only the beginning of the Lipavskian poetic analysis of horror. For while the cognitive dissonance produced by the encounter with undeath does not represent any strictly physical threat, it does constitute an existential one. The logic of this metaphysical menace is outlined by Lipavsky along the following lines: the unnaturally animate object provides a glimpse at the true nature of life; we discover that “life is always at its very base viscosity and turbidity... At the higher stages of organic life, this may be obscured but it never disappears. From this it follows, firstly, that something disgusting is hidden in every living being.”¹¹¹ Faced with an unindividuated and conceptually unthinkable form of animacy, our experience always necessarily contains a self-reflective element. The primal recognition of undeath is always simultaneously the latent recognition that *all* biological bodies, up to and including one’s own, are themselves nothing more than highly organized conglomerations of such beings. We suspect that our claim to an independent and autonomous subjectivity is illusion,

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 82.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

that we too are little more than an unconscious, blind striving. Lipavsky describes this experience poetically in the subsection of the *Investigation* entitled “Blood and Sleep.”

It is curious that to this day very many people are afraid of the sight of blood, they feel sick from it. And what would seem to be terrible in this? Here it comes out through a cut, a life-containing red moisture, it flows out freely and slowly and spreads out in an indefinite, ever expanding slick. Although, perhaps, there is really something unpleasant in this. Too simply and easily it leaves its home and becomes independent - a lukewarm puddle, it is not known whether it is alive or not. To one looking at it, this seems so unnatural that he weakens, the world becomes in his eyes a gray haze, dizzying languor. Indeed, there is something unnatural and disgusting here, like tickling not from the outside, but in the depths of the body, in its very interior. Slowly coming out of captivity, the blood begins its own, now primordially alien to us, impersonal life, the same as trees or grass - a red plant among the green.¹¹²

It is worth remarking here that nearly all of the physiological sensations associated with the experience of horror are themselves autonomic reactions of the organism, many of them viscerally connected with the bodily interior. Quivering, shaking, nausea, tachycardia, dizziness, horripilation (goose bumps), formication—these independent physical processes constitute a kind of embodied knowledge. Insofar as they mirror the basic qualities of the entity that awakens our horror, they call attention to the fact that though the undead object is encountered externally, the same blind striving abounds within the very interiority of our own body. All horror stems from this recognition “that the individual rhythm is always false, because it is only on the surface, and beneath it, choking and crushing it, is an impersonal, spontaneous life.”¹¹³

Lipavsky’s study in the *Investigation* is fascinating for at least one reason. He achieves a surprisingly nuanced understanding of the horror phenomenon, one that prefigures more modern analyses, such as that developed by contemporary philosopher Noël Carroll. The fact that Lipavsky, who was largely isolated from parallel developments in the work of his European

¹¹² Ibid., 79.

¹¹³ Ibid., 85.

contemporaries, was able to locate cognitive import in an experience that appears thoroughly affective and aesthetic is remarkable. But what is truly notable is how Lipavsky's understanding of horror fits into his broader philosophical schema, the outlines of which I would like to explore briefly now. This, I believe, will help to clarify how the *Investigation* relates to its sister text, the *Tractatus Concerning Water*. It seems to me that there are potentially two disparate sources of inspiration that Lipavsky is alluding to: Leonardo da Vinci's groundbreaking work on hydrodynamics and the anti-Kantian process philosophy of Henri Bergson.

Water was a muse of supreme importance to da Vinci, a subject that inspired him both artistically and scientifically from the early days of his youth up until the time of his death in 1519. Keen observations and detailed drawings of the 'element' fill his notebooks, the accuracy of which apparently astounds contemporary water engineers. Already as a young man, Leonardo dreamed of putting together a *Tractatus Concerning Water*, an unrealized project that, by title at least, seems a likely candidate to have served as an inspiration for Lipavsky's own. As much a philosopher as he was an artist and scientist, Leonardo (like Thales before him) saw water not only as a life-sustaining essence, but also as a kind of universal, creative principle:

So one would say it suffers change into as many natures as are the different places through which it passes. And as the mirror changes the colour of its object so it changed with the nature of the place through which it passes:--health-giving, noisome, laxative, astringent, sulfurous, salt, incarnadined, mournful, raging, angry, red, yellow, green, black, blue, greasy, fast, thin. Sometimes it starts a conflagration, sometimes it extinguishes one; is warm and is cold; carries away or sets down, hollows out or raises up, tears down or establishes, fills up or empties, raises itself or burrows down, speeds or is still, is the cause at times of life or death, of increases or privation, nourishes and at times does the contrary, at times has tang of salt, at times is without savour, at times submerges the wide valleys with great floods. With time everything changes.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Leonardo da Vinci, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, ed. Edward MacCurty (New York: Braziller, 1955), 734.

The association here drawn between water, time, and change would hardly be objectionable to Lipavsky. The nature of time was a subject matter of constant theorizing among all of the *chinari*, who readily associated it with all things aqueous. Indeed, water was one of many poetic figures that this circle of thinkers referred to as *hieroglyphs*. Among the *chinari*, the hieroglyph was a symbol of a supremely peculiar nature, a basic element of their thinking, the nature of which is perhaps so idiosyncratic that one wonders if it can really be understood by anyone who was not an unmediated initiate of the group. As a form of thought, hieroglyphs are undoubtedly more than simply signs or symbols; it would seem also that their essence cannot be adequately captured by thinking of them as similes, metaphors, or indeed any commonplace rhetorical trope. If the significance of rhetorical devices is somewhat amorphous, certainly at least context dependent, the hieroglyph seems to have had for the *chinari* a fixed, ‘objective’ meaning of a peculiar type. It seems to me that the hieroglyph is at once quite *literal*, yet in its literalness it also simultaneously encapsulates a multifaceted array of supplementary, higher meanings—some of them contradictory or absurd. In this, the *chinarian* hieroglyph is perhaps closest in nature to the deceptively simple linguistic phenomenon known as the pun. As much as we are accustomed to considering paronomasia as merely entertaining wordplay, this limited understanding tells us next to nothing about what a pun *is* or, indeed, why prior to the advent of Enlightenment thought it was considered the absolute epitome of wit. Puns are often funny, but need not necessarily be. If we take humor out of the equation entirely a pun is—in *essence*—a way of uniting two (or more!) distinct meanings within a single sign or set thereof. The hieroglyph, I propose, shares the indeterminate semiological structure of the pun, but here hermeneutic ambiguity occurs on the

level of the *symbol* rather than that of the *sign*.¹¹⁵ If a pun ‘points’ to two or more possible meanings on the basis of homophonic similarity rather than rational association, the hieroglyph *participates* in a manifold of ‘higher realities’ that relate or coincide in ways that defy logic and reason. The arationality implicit in the hieroglyph can be seen in Druskin’s belief that it comprises an “entelechy” (that which realizes or makes actual what is otherwise mere potential) of nonsense.

As hieroglyph, then, water is first and foremost itself, but also alludes to life in the abstract—specifically ‘unconcentrated,’ ‘unindividualized’ life—as well as the phenomenon of time. If the idea that time ‘flows’ is at least as old Heraclitus, its closest point of philosophical reference for the *oberiuty* specifically is likely Henri Bergson, whose concept of duration is readily associated with liquidity and current. Duration, first introduced by Bergson in his *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, was the end result of a rather complicated disagreement that Bergson had concerning Kant’s understanding of time and its relationship to free will. Without getting bogged down in specifics, the essence of Bergson’s quarrel lies in his assessment that Kant had erred in positing a unification of time and space and that as a consequence of this basic error he had effectively made time too ‘space-like.’ Bergson aimed to untangle these two intuitions. He claimed that space could be understood as a “quantitative multiplicity,” by which he meant that space is homogeneous collection of locations (points) that are discrete and therefore countable. In contrast to space, Bergson proposed that time constitutes a “qualitative multiplicity.” What precisely he means by this is not easy to ascertain, but he seems to be addressing the fact that we do not experience time as a progression of separate instances, but instead as a continuous flow that is always changing. One can perhaps

¹¹⁵ A more thorough analysis concerning the difference between sign and symbol is forthcoming in the chapter which follows. For now, it is imperative only to understand that signs ‘point’ to a meaning that transcends them, while symbols are understood to manifest or participate in the reality to which they *allude*.

grasp some of what Bergson is getting at by considering the rhetorical question: how many thoughts did you think today? Radically heterogeneous, “moments,” like thoughts, are constantly in flux. They bleed into one another in a way that eludes enumeration: they are not *countable*, though they are loosely distinguishable on the basis of their ever-shifting qualitative differences.

That time itself is unquantifiable and radically heterogeneous was a notion that the *chinari* readily assimilated. In his essay *Death*, Druskin speaks to this point rather matter-of-factly: “Maybe there exist different kinds of time. There is the time of thinking and the time of living, the time of the participant in life and the time of the man standing off to the side. There is the time of self-awareness—it is no longer than a moment—and the time of recollection, when two times coincide.”¹¹⁶ Central to their poetic and philosophical thematization of time, the *chinari* evidently held that certain kinds of experiences could provide one with a truer understanding of temporality than that provided by mundane clock-time—even if record attests that among themselves they could never completely agree what these experiences were or precisely what that revealed about time. A small excerpt from the *Conversations* captures something of Lipavsky’s perspective on the nature of time, which he evidently considered less of an objective ‘thing’ and more of a phenomenon that expresses a relationship between self and the world: “time... is not a thought, but a sensation founded on the real relationship between things, our body, in a general sense, with the world. It is rooted in the fact that there is individuality and in order to figure out what time is it is necessary to make real modifications, to test out its different variations. This is possible, since we actually perceive time differently under different physical conditions.”¹¹⁷ A bit later in the same conversation, Lipavsky further explicates this idea through the metaphor of interacting waves—when the wave of the world interferes with the wave

¹¹⁶ Druskin, “Death,” 228.

¹¹⁷ Lipavskii, *Razgovory*, 43.

of the individual, there is concussion and a perceived flow from event to event; but when the two waves coincide, there is no longer any relative motion and time seems to stop or perhaps disappear: “There are, as it were, two waves: the human wave and the world wave. When the wave of a person coincides with the wave of the world, there comes what [Druskin] calls a gap or eternity... When it does not coincide, then there is existence, concussion, time.”¹¹⁸ From these two diametric poles of interference, innumerable permutations are possible, and the *Tractatus Concerning Water*, with its constant allusions to waves and wave phenomena, appears largely dedicated to exploring them. One such exploration is Lipavsky’s discussion of what he calls “the tropical sensation,” which could be described as a kind of languor that befalls one in purely natural setting. He associates it with the experience of *panic* in its original Greek sense, a kind of terror that befalls one in lonely, inhuman, wild places. Here the individual wave merges with and dissolves into the sweep of the world, causing a perceived cessation of temporal flow:

Suddenly a premonition of irreparable misfortune seizes you: time is preparing to stop. Your day fills with lead. Catalepsy of time! The world stands before you like a clenched, spasmodic muscle, like a pupil numb with tension. My God! What a desolate stillness, what a dead bloom all around! A bird flies through the sky, and with horror you notice: its flight is motionless. A dragonfly has seized a gnat and is tearing of its head; and both of them, dragonfly and gnat, are completely motionless. How have I never noticed before that nothing is happening in the world and nothing can happen, it was like this before and it will be like this evermore. And there isn’t even a now, nor a before, nor an evermore. God forbid one realizes about himself that he is petrified, if he does then everything is finished, there will be no return. Is there really no salvation from the enchanted world, will the ossified pupil swallow you too? With horror and paralysis you wait for the liberating explosion.¹¹⁹

Horror, then, seems to take shape for Lipavsky as an experience that changes our relationship to the world by challenging how we cognitively categorize the entities that populate it. If horror is the explicit theme of Lipavsky’s essay, he suggests in passing that this is true of

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 42.

¹¹⁹ Lipavskii, *Issledonavie uzhasa*, 77.

affective states in general: emotions seem to be states that express a foundational relationship with the world at large; they prefigure and circumscribe the manner in which entities manifest themselves become available to us, often in ways that complicate (or demolish!) the well-ordered picture we have of things. While it may not provide the comfort and clarity of reason, this too is a form of understanding. And, for Lipavsky, it is a form of understanding that is perhaps more basic and more revealing than practical or theoretical forms of cognition.

The epistemic element of literature is a nearly constant theme in the OBeRIu canon. One could undoubtedly spill a tremendous amount of ink mapping the peculiar territory of their esoteric ideas. I have tried merely to touch upon just a few of the myriad philosophical trajectories of their thinking and writing. What is certain and what I wish to emphasize here is that a firm belief in the power of what Lipavsky once called “poetic research”¹²⁰—here in the sense of an investigation *through* poetry not *of* poetry—was common to the entire OBeRIu circle. I fear that an exhaustive analysis of these twisting paths to knowledge is beyond the scope of the present analysis. I also suspect that such an undertaking would likely involve a fair amount of speculation—and might very well benefit from a format somewhat unconventional for a traditional academic study. Indeed, the thinking of the *oberiuty/chinari* staunchly resists systematization and exposition. This is true, in part, because to a large degree their writings and discussions were informal—as most of their works remained unpublished during their lifetimes, it is debatable how many of them even qualify as ‘finished’—but also (and more to the point) because I suspect they did not particularly see the value of traditional philosophical principles such as comprehensiveness, completeness, or even coherency. “Certain thoughts,” writes

¹²⁰ Lipavskii, *Razgovry*, 14.

Druskin, “are interesting for their tone, and these are the hardest to write down.”¹²¹ Indeed, the thoughts that concerned this eclectic group of thinkers, predicated upon their abdication of logic and their interest in all things ludicrous or ‘absurd’ preclude the strictures of rational elucidation. Rather than trade in explanations, most OBeRIu texts develop their epistemic content through less obvious forms of disclosure—often demonstrating, showing, or suggesting instead of presenting an argument or directly communicating their ideas through concepts. The epistemological value of these works cannot be divorced from their poetics. “This is art, but it is also truth: why can’t it be so? We have grown unaccustomed to poetic investigations.”¹²² The work of literature—even at its most absurd—is a form of thought, and as a form of thought it is also a bearer and transmitter of knowledge.

I would like to conclude this chapter by returning to further consideration of Kharms’s “Blue Notebook No. 10.” If the text can truly be read as a thoughtful engagement with Kantian metaphysics, it is significant that Kharms chooses to express his philosophical criticism through *narrative*. Kharms does not merely ‘do philosophy’ here so much as he plays with it. Like works by Vvedensky, Kharms, Lipavsky, and Druskin, instead of offering a refined and careful argument in order to refute Kant on strictly logical grounds, the text instead attempts to undermine Kantian metaphysics by *performing* the contradiction contained in its basic tenets. Kharms allows the concept of the noumenon to show itself for what it is: nonsense and abstraction. It is precisely the ludic, performative, element of the text that makes “Blue Notebook No. 10” so humorous. Indeed, it is the text’s comedy that arguably makes it such an economical and effective refutation of Kant; the laughter precipitated in the reader is a visceral demonstration of the absurdity of Kant’s metaphysical schema. It is the play element possessed

¹²¹ Druskin, “Death,” 227.

¹²² Lipavskii, *Razgovory*, 14.

by the text that draws together Kharms's literary and philosophical impulses, revealing the epistemic moment harbored within every aesthetic enterprise. In this text, Kharms bridges the supposedly unbridgeable gap between aesthetics, on the one hand, and epistemology, on the other—two realms of human experience that hermeneuts since Enlightenment have traditionally held to be distinct and incommensurable.

That the work of art, seen as a manifestation of play, is at once both an aesthetic and epistemic phenomenon find well-reasoned theoretical grounding in the work of Gadamer. Of course, *Truth and Method* did not appear until 1960—there can be no possibility of influence here. I would rather suggest that the writing produced by the OBeRIu and *chinari* from the late 20's to mid-40's expresses an attitude towards literary craft that anticipates and finds theoretical purchase in certain features of Gadamer's hermeneutics. In light of the group's distaste for Kant, such affinity is perhaps unsurprising, given that *Truth and Method* is fundamentally anti-Kantian in its approach and philosophical outlook.

I have already provided some discussion in the previous chapter of the fact that Gadamer's line of thinking is rooted in the notion that the modern discipline known as "aesthetics" has been largely determined by the gradual de-emphasis of the concrete work of art in order to isolate an abstract field of subjective experience. Specifically, he traces this tendency towards aesthetic subjectivization to Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. In this third and final critique, Kant attempts to resolve what for him is an evident paradox, which assumes the following presentation. On the one hand, aesthetic judgments appear to be unjustifiable, at least in the sense that there is nothing 'objective' I can point to that would explain what makes something beautiful—I cannot make someone appreciate the validity of such an aesthetic judgement purely through force of argument. At the same time, Kant thinks that aesthetic judgements also seem to have built into them a

certain claim to universality. If I find that something is beautiful it cannot be the case that it appears only as “beautiful to me.” Rather, it must present itself precisely as “beautiful in general,” “beautiful to everyone,” — as *objectively* beautiful. In order to both account for and resolve the two contradictory moments of this aporia, Kant proposes that judgements of taste are based on subjective feelings of pleasure. He reasons that such feelings are *universally communicable* and therefore *objectively shareable*, but they are *unjustifiable* from an epistemological standpoint because they do not reflect anything about the way things actually are. In Kant’s paradigm, aesthetic pleasure affords us no real *knowledge* of the object from which it is derived but is grounded in the wholly subjective ‘free play’ of our cognitive faculties.

By stripping aesthetic judgements of any objective validity, attention in the philosophy of art shifts away from artworks themselves and is directed instead at outlining the horizons of pure aesthetic experience. We have already seen how this subjective turn results in what Gadamer calls aesthetic differentiation. There is no longer any reason to concern oneself with the art object itself, which becomes merely the occasion for pleasure. Herein lies the origin of the infamous claim in the *Critique of Judgement* that the hallmark of aesthetic experience consists in a state of disinterestedness—for what makes something beautiful is not anything in the object itself but something in the mind of the beholder. This foregrounding of indifference as an essential attitude in matters of aesthetic judgement not only means that such contemplation must be devoid of any social, ethical, or intellectual considerations—it should be emphasized that the Kantian apperception of the work of art is grounded in disinterest even to the extent that the subject should maintain passive indifference to the question of whether or not the aesthetic object actually *exists*: “Everyone must admit that a judgement about beauty in which there is mixed the least interest is very partial and not a pure judgement of taste. *One must not be in the least biased*

in favor of the existence of the thing, but must be entirely indifferent in this respect in order to play the judge in matters of taste."¹²³ As Gadamer explains: "through 'aesthetic differentiation' the work loses its place and the world to which it belongs insofar as it belongs instead to aesthetic consciousness."¹²⁴ It literally 'loses its world'—indeed, it doesn't even matter if it had one to begin with.

Criticism that casts "Blue Notebook No. 10" as an effective, if comedic, refutation of Kantian principles tend to focus primarily on the epistemological concerns addressed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. However, a consideration of the *Critique of Judgement* suggests a further degree of nuance to the anti-Kantian reading of Kharms's text. His literary burlesque can be understood not only to demonstrate the emptiness of Kant's epistemic categories—it also functions as a pointed rejection of the Kantian imperative for disinterest in matters of aesthetic judgement. In "Blue Notebook," Kharms presents his reader with an object of aesthetic contemplation—the eponymous redhead—only to confront them with an explicit denial of the object's purported existence. Significantly, the revelation of the red-headed man's status as a non-entity is simultaneously the occasion for the text's termination. The ending of "Blue Notebook" is less of a 'conclusion' than the narrative's paradoxical self-destruction; the erasure of its being as a work of art. Kant insists that without complete indifference to the actual existence of its object, aesthetic experience is impossible. In Kharms's text, we see the consequences of such aesthetic indifference played out performatively. As soon as the red-head is denied existence, the work of art can no longer sustain itself: "so we don't even know who we're talking about. It's really better if we don't talk about him anymore." Kharms is, as it were,

¹²³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 91. Italics mine.

¹²⁴ Gadamer, 79.

suggesting that aesthetic indifference does not *facilitate* the artworks realization. On the contrary: it renders it impossible.

Against the abstraction demanded by aesthetic differentiation, Gadamer attempts to preserve the integrity of the artwork by emphasizing that its extra-aesthetic dimensions are not merely incidental but essential. The work's rootedness in the world is integral to its meaning and import. "Since we meet the artwork in the world," he writes, "and encounter a world in the individual artwork, the work of art is not some alien universe to which we are magically transported for a time."¹²⁵ Gadamer elucidates his holistic understanding of art by emphasizing its essence as a play phenomenon. Kant, too, connected the work of art to the concept of play, but by this he means only the subjective "free play" of our mental faculties. For Gadamer the distinguishing characteristic of play is precisely the fact that it transcends subjectivity. Play does not happen *in* the subject, rather the individual is always himself *in play*, subsumed and directed by the task that play presents to him: "the players are not the subjects of play; instead play reaches presentation through the players."¹²⁶ Gadamer takes his lead from Huizinga, who had already noted this peculiar aspect of play in *Homo Ludens*. Childhood games of make-believe, for instance, take place within a liminal space that is removed from the 'objective' course of everyday events, but are imbued with their own sense of urgency and import. A child knows perfectly well that he or she is 'just pretending,' but this awareness does not prevent the game from proceeding with a seriousness that temporarily makes it 'more real' than reality. So long as we remain enraptured and absorbed in play, the demands of the game are absolute: what appears at a glance to be 'subjective' frivolity is seen on closer analysis to be 'objectively' serious.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 88.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 107.

Gadamer makes the same point in slightly different language when he observes that “play fulfills its purpose only when the player loses himself in play.”¹²⁷ This profound sense of the game’s reality is what makes play engaging, and engagement is, in turn, essential to what makes play *fun*. A game is more important than any of its players — the players play a supporting role in the context of the game, but “what holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there is the game itself.”¹²⁸

It is precisely this sense of engagement that Gadamer wishes to return to aesthetic experience in his consideration of the artwork as a form of play. In the introduction to this study, I spoke of several ways in which literary engagement parallels the kind of activity taken up in games of make-believe. As readers, we are occupied with fictional transpirings, yet we are seriously invested in these creations in spite of their status as things of the imagination. A work of literature is exactly like a game in its capacity to draw us in and hold us, and an engaged reader does not so much ‘have the experience of reading a good book’ as they undergo an experience and participate in something that surpasses them. As Gadamer says, “the ‘subject’ of the experience of the work of art, that which remains and endures, is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it but the work itself.”¹²⁹ We have already discussed that the being of the work of art, understood as play, emerges as what Gadamer calls self-presentation—through the literary work, something novel brings itself to presence for us. The work presents itself.

For Gadamer, what sets artworks apart from other forms of play is that their specific mode of self-presentation takes shape as re-presentation—it achieves full realization by becoming a presentation *of something for someone*. Our engagement with artwork ‘completes’ it, in a process

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 111.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 107.

that Gadamer calls *transformation into structure*. His treatment of this elusive concept is undoubtedly one of the most cryptic in the whole of *Truth and Method*, but what is vital to understand is that for Gadamer this transformation is also a “transformation into the true.”¹³⁰ In presenting itself for an audience, the artwork takes shape as something that possesses an available meaning, a meaning that is meant to be understood. The work that the work of art accomplishes is nothing short of an articulation of something about our shared reality that has heretofore remained unrealized, unrecognized and unknown. A portrait, for instance, is a representation of a person, but it offers us something more than simply a mimetic visual likeness. What the artist includes, excludes, and exaggerates shows us who the person is in essence, we recognize something in the portrait that reveals his character in a way that we might very well miss simply by looking at him. “The joy of recognition,” writes Gadamer, “is... the joy of knowing *more* than what is already familiar. In recognition what we know emerges, as if illuminated, from all the contingent and variable circumstances that condition it; it is grasped in its essence. It is known as something.”¹³¹ “Against Kant” (to echo Kharms here), the pleasure afforded by an artwork is indissolubly bound by the work’s status as a bearer of knowledge. The knowledge afforded by the work of art lies in its capacity to “produce and bring to light what is otherwise constantly hidden and withdrawn.”¹³² Such knowledge is not necessarily the sort that can be codified in ‘truth-apt’ propositions—we will see, in fact, that what the artwork articulates can only be articulated fully in and through the work itself. Moreover, it is not essential that art aspire to fidelity with anything ‘real’ for it to convey something true about the world. All that is necessary is that in self-presentation the work of art articulate something in such a way that it

¹³⁰ Ibid., 116.

¹³¹ Ibid., 118.

¹³² Ibid., 117.

becomes recognizable “that this is how things are.”¹³³ “Word and image are not mere imitative illustrations, but allow what they present to be for the first time fully what it is.”¹³⁴ In this light the artwork is seen to be no mere source of ‘illusion’ or ‘pretense,’ but a transformation of the world; in it, being is ‘raised up’ into truth.

Gadamer insists: “In being presented in play, what is emerges.”¹³⁵ The aesthetic project of the OBeRIu could in all probability not be summed up more succinctly. The literary texts of Kharms, Vvedensky and Zabolotsky emphasize precisely this ‘raising up’ of things, through art, into truth. When in their 1927 declaration the OBeRIu claim their art presents a ‘new apprehension of life and its objects,’ they suggest an ontology of the artwork strikingly similar to Gadamer’s. “Art has its own logic,” they insist, “which, rather than destroying the object helps us to know it.”¹³⁶ In keeping with Kharms’s rejection of the categories of Kantian epistemology the knowledge that the OBeRIu aim to produce is not ‘metaphysical,’ if by metaphysical is meant knowledge of an extra-sensory world transcending the bounds of human experience. It is rather a particular mode of engaging with and transforming the objects we encounter in the course of the everyday. OBeRIu texts articulate and show the truth of these objects, “expand and deepen” their meaning. It is telling that many of Kharms’s texts concern themselves simply with everyday events. Sometimes completely mundane, sometimes wildly unusual, the ‘events’ that Kharms presents to his readers never wholly leave behind the world in which we live. Cleansed of its everyday entrapments the object becomes the “property of art” and so is elevated, raised to the status of truth.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 143.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 117.

¹³⁶ Nikolai Zabolotskii, “Poeziia oberiutov,” in *Metamorfozy*, 522.

In *Homo Ludens* Johan Huizinga suggested that play was all the evidence necessary to prove that human beings are more than rational creatures: “From the point of view of a world wholly determined by the operation of blind forces, play would be altogether superfluous. Play only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable when an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos... We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational.”¹³⁷ OBeRIu texts showcase precisely this irrational moment of the ludic impulse. These literary ‘games’ correspond to the type that play theorist Roger Callois has called *ilinx*, associated with sensations of vertigo and dizziness. The form of play contained in OBeRIu texts shares a great deal with the dizzying games of ‘whirling’ sometimes undertaken by children, where the fun consists in losing control, deliberately pushing one’s physical limits to the point of disorientation. The OBeRIu writers strive to induce through their texts a similar sort of disorientation, albeit cognitive: if Kantian metaphysics stressed the comprehension of the incomprehensible as incomprehensible, Druskin suggested that the *oberiuty* attempted to induce ‘the *incomprehension* of the incomprehensible as incomprehensible.’ This twisting free of the limits imposed by reason should also be seen as a form of knowing. The bewilderment and the laughter that such mental vertigo induces is more than a mere sign of pleasure and frivolity. It is, as Gadamer says, the “the joy of knowledge.”¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Huizinga, 3-4.

¹³⁸ Gadamer, 116.

III. Beyond Literariness: OBERIU and Formalism

Language is the most powerful instrument of creation. In naming an object with a word I assert its existence. All knowledge results from naming. Knowledge is not possible without the word.

-Andrei Bely, *The Magic of Words*

The investment of the *oberiuty* in the status of the artwork as form of truth through a certain kind of experience places them in tension with (if not squarely in opposition to) one of the discourses that has predominated Russian literary theory since the early 20th century. I am speaking, of course, about Formalism, a branch of criticism associated with the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (Obshchestvo izucheniia poeticheskogo iazyka, or OPOYAZ) in Saint Petersburg, as well as the Moscow Linguistic Circle. The Formalists had a strong affinity for, and in some cases close personal and artistic ties to Futurism, a literary phenomenon that lends itself quite naturally to analysis through Formalist methodology. For this reason, there is a temptation among those who view the OBeRIu as a natural continuation of Futurist avant-garde aesthetics to read the work of the group through a Formalist lens.¹³⁹ This approach is not entirely unfounded from a historical standpoint; some direct connection between Formalism and the OBeRIu is well-documented and undeniable—Kharms, with certainty, was known to occasionally attend OPOYAZ meetings in the 20's and the names of Boris Eikhenbaum and Viktor Shklovsky appear regularly in his reading lists throughout the 30's as well. Prominent Formalist critics are known to have attended OBeRIu performances, and Vladimir Propp appears as an interlocutor in Leonid Lipavsky's *Conversations*, indicating that he was present at least one of the meetings of the *chinari*.

¹³⁹ A temptation no doubt exacerbated by Formalism's enduring position of dominance in the legacy of Russian studies.

Given the concrete historical connections that existed between the OBeRIu and certain founding members of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language, it is sensible to ask how much of the literary philosophy of the OBeRIu poets coincided with that of the OPOYAZ—and perhaps by extension to ask also to what extent the *oberiuty* and *chinari* felt their own work could be understood through the critical tools developed within Formalism. The prospect is appealing, especially when one considers the evident success of employing Formalist concepts to decode even the most novel and perplexing of the Futurists’s poetic experiments—the phonetic “sound” poetry known as *zaum*. Formalism, indeed, was in many ways an especially robust tool for considering the work of the Futurists, not least because some of the more prominent Formalist critics were themselves prolific and successful avant-garde poets. Skhlovsky’s account of art as form of, or occasion for, *estrangement* (остранение), perhaps Formalism’s most significant conceptual legacy, essentializes the import of *novelty* in the work of literature and so places the avant-garde in a relatively privileged position *vis-à-vis* literary development. OBeRIu texts are themselves, of course, absolutely rife with the materially unexpected and the linguistically novel—from conceptual nonsense to ‘sound’ poetry that at least *prima facie* appears similar to Futurist *zaum*. One can well understand how a Formalist approach to interpreting them is especially tempting.

There are, however, clear indications that we should avoid this impulse: whatever insight Formalism may have to offer about the nature of the literary, the *oberiuty* clearly positioned themselves against a purely Formalist conception of literature. Of course, this doesn’t mean that Formalist ideas are *useless* for analyzing the work of the *oberiuty*, but it does, I think, suggest that they will find limited purchase in OBeRIu texts and that application of the Formalist paradigm here should be undertaken with care and should by no means have the final say. I have

already noted that in spite of certain superficial similarities, OBeRIu literary practices differed in very significant ways from those of the previous avant-garde generation. Druskin wrote that Vvedensky once said: “Khlebnikov is alien to me, I find even Kruchenykh more relatable.” Druskin further clarifies that the “even” here does not indicate that Vvedensky has any love for Kruchenykh, but rather emphasizes his utter lack of kindred feeling toward either Futurist.¹⁴⁰ Kharms, in the proposed forward to his unrealized book of poems *The Directorate of Things* (*Управление вещей*), specifically asks his hypothetical readers to read his book over a second time before they compare him to the Futurists, but he also asks his would-be reviews to overlook any “formal deficiencies” (формальные недочёты)—a gesture that, at least insofar as it explicitly references ‘form,’ may suggest that Kharms felt uneasy about his work being scrutinized under a reductively Formalist critical lens. At least one scholar has suggested that the apparently nonsensical OBeRIu slogan “art is a cupboard” (искусство—это шкаф) can be read a tongue-in-cheek parody of the title of Shklovsky’s seminal essay “Art as Device” (Искусство как приём).¹⁴¹ It is difficult to gauge exactly how Propp was received when he sat down with the circle of *chinari* at some point in the 1930’s, but I would venture that the text of *Conversations* suggests the dynamic was one of tension rather than affinity. Lipavsky emphatically counters the basic tenets of Propp’s theory of the fairy tale: his attitude towards Propp’s ideas could be described as dismissive, to say nothing of the fact that Lipavsky portrays his Formalist interlocutor as timid and somehow out of place: “P. [Propp] did not agree. He was afraid to forfeit [his theoretical] differentiation, the right to be scientific.”¹⁴² Or, still more telling: “So spoke P. [Propp]. But in his voice there was no confidence. Perhaps he didn’t believe what

¹⁴⁰ Druskin, *Chinari*.

¹⁴¹ Pratt, 94.

¹⁴² Lipavsky, *Razgovory*, 39.

he was saying and another time he would have explained it differently.”¹⁴³ The picture that emerges from these observations strongly suggests that the OBeRIu relationship with Formalism was contentious. Furthermore, there are several texts that underscore and elaborate on the lineaments of this tension. I would like to discuss one notable example, a short poem written by Zabolotsky in the 1930’s titled, simply, “Art” (“Искусство”). Before doing so, it will be helpful to briefly review the basic tenants of Formalism, at least as they were initially set down and understood in the 1910’s and 20’s.

Speaking generally (and, admittedly, at the risk of oversimplification), the project undertaken by the OPOYAZ in the early 20th century began with a felt need for scientific rigor in the field of literary criticism. In contemporary literary studies they perceived a tendency towards speculative and, therefore, potentially specious approaches to textual analysis. In the view of the early Formalists, up until the early 1910’s there had been very little that was properly ‘literary’ in the study of literature. They argued that existing criticism could be reduced to little more than an unseemly blend of psychologism, historicism, and ill-conceived metaphysics. As they saw it, the problem with considering facts about an author’s temperament, or the socio-cultural or economic conditions under which they wrote, or using a text as an occasion for abstruse pontification is that none of these concerns relate to what is specifically *literary* about a text. The defining goal of the Formalists was to ‘lay bare’ literature as a formal object to study; only by having properly defined the literary as an object of study would it be possible to create a properly literary science. To do this, they argued, it was necessary to isolate literature from its extra-literary dimensions. This would uncover a work’s formal structure and, thus, reveal its literary essence — its ‘literariness’.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

In its most basic formulation, the Formalist conception of literary science shares certain features with phenomenology as it was initially developed by Edmund Husserl in his *Logical Investigations* and subsequent book *Ideas*. Aiming to restyle philosophy as a rigorous, description science of conscious experience, Husserl introduced to philosophy the procedure of the phenomenological epoché. Reasoning that the study of consciousness should proceed only from that which directly and immediately presents itself *to* consciousness, Husserl felt that phenomenological analysis should proceed first by ‘bracketing’ its objects of study so that they could be described *exactly* as they present themselves to subjectivity. This bracketing procedure (the epoché) involves temporarily casting aside any assumptions we may already have formed about the essence of the object on the basis of our ordinary, everyday experience. By suspending the judgements that arise from the prejudices of our ‘natural attitude’ in this manner, Husserl thought he would be able to focus solely on describing the features of experience itself. In other words, the phenomenologist brackets the content of their experience in order to isolate and study the forms and structures of our various intentional states. If we try to provide a description of visual perceptions, for example, we focus solely on describing the exact manner in which something presents itself specifically as an object of vision. We find, for instance, that visual objects always present themselves as having horizons. The angular profile of a cube suggests its three-dimensionality; I know that if I get up and walk around it I will be presented with other facets and profiles—but I anticipate already its three-dimensional form simply by looking. Such anticipation is an immediate quality of all perceptual experience. Note, however, that ‘having horizons,’ is not an objective property of the cube, it cannot be measured or quantified, or found *in* the cube at all—it is, rather, a necessary way in which the cube presents itself to me specifically as an object of vision. To have horizons is simply part of the ‘meaning’ of perceptual

experience. The epoché brackets the object from what is merely contingent and incidental in order to isolate and describe those things that *structure* experience, turning intentionality itself into an object of rigorous scientific study.

Despite its clearly disparate field of study, the Formalist approach to literary analysis is remarkably similar to Husserl's attempt to define conscious experience as the object of a precise descriptive science. The Formalist contention in the early 20th century was precisely that literature had never been properly isolated and defined as an object of scientific inquiry. The phenomenological epoché brackets our natural attitude, it places in suspension any preformed notions we may already have about something on the basis of our natural attitude. The formalist procedure similarly brackets a 'natural literary attitude,' which would include any information we might have about the author or a text of what he or she wanted to express, the overarching cultural milieu or social conditions in which it was produced, and how, if at all, a text presents 'real world' objects, events or individuals, be they physical or metaphysical. This Formalist epoché absolutely precludes looking for the meaning of a work anywhere 'outside' of the work itself. To the extent that we can speak of a 'method' here, it mirrors the phenomenological approach to experience in that it brackets a given text under consideration in order to put in relief its formal structure: "An absolute formalism demands a bracketing as radical as Husserl's in phenomenology."¹⁴⁴ Having performed this literary epoché, what is now under scrutiny is not so much the text itself as its purely literary qualities — its 'literariness'. The work is broken down into a conglomerate of 'devices' that the author has deployed in a uniquely literary way—this and only this is what makes the text a work of literature. Through the Formalist's 'bracketing' the work comes into literary relief—but the text as a mode of communication or representation is

¹⁴⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Archeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), 367.

occluded by its own ‘literariness.’ Eikhenbaum directly says as much somewhat oxymoronicly in his overview of Formalist criticism “Theory of the ‘Formalist Method’” (Теория “формального метода”), written in 1925: “the object of the science of literature is not literature, but ‘literariness’ — that is, what makes any given work a literary work.”¹⁴⁵

This Formalist preoccupation with ‘literariness’ over and above literary objects themselves looks suspiciously similar to the way in which, on Gadamer’s account, aesthetics has tended to overlook artworks in order to study an abstract field of aesthetic consciousness. Indeed, one might very well consider the Formalist epoché as manifestation of aesthetic differentiation—in this case a specifically literary differentiation—that Gadamer identifies as a symptom of the hermeneutic tradition since the Romantic period. True, the Formalist insistence of seeing texts as impersonal ‘constructions’ that operate with an almost mechanical precision does strike a particularly anti-Romantic chord, but the connection between Romanticism and Formalism is far less tenuous than it may initially appear. The concept of ‘estrangement’ (остранение), lauded by Russianists as one of Viktor Shklovsky’s more original and critical contributions to literary studies, actually has its roots in Hegel, and the concept plays no small part in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Boris Paramonov has convincingly laid bare Shklovsky’s indebtedness to Hegel in his “Formalism: Method or Worldview?”¹⁴⁶ What bears consideration here is the fact that both Hegel and Shklovsky view the artwork as an inherently *sensuous* thing. For Hegel, art comes to presence as the manner in which human beings give material expression to their understanding of the Absolute. One can sense something of this inherently sensuous understanding of art in Shklovsky’s claim that the function of the work is to reinvigorate our experience of things and

¹⁴⁵ Boris Eikhenbaum, “Theoriia ‘formal’ nogo metoda,” in *Literatura: Teoriia. Kritika. Polemika* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1927), accessed February 11, 2021, https://teoriaciek.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/eichenbaum_theoria-formalnogo-metoda.pdf.

¹⁴⁶ Boris Paramonov, “Formalizm: metod ili mirovozenie?” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 14 (1996): 35–52.

make them palpable: “And so, in order to return sensation to life, to feel things, in order to make the stone stony, there exists that which we call art.”¹⁴⁷ What this emphasis on the sensuous denies in both cases is the epistemic character of art. Both Hegel and Shklovsky explicitly deny that art is form of thought or a source of knowledge. Hegel says of art that it “has the task of presenting the Idea to immediate perception in a sensuous shape and not in the form of thinking.”¹⁴⁸ Similarly, Shklovsky opens “Art as Device” with a spirited refutation of the notion that poetry is “thinking in images.” The Formalist disavowal of the epistemic moment of artistic creation is further suggested in Eikhenbaum’s explication of the concept of estrangement: “art is revealed as a way of destroying automatism in perception, and the aim of the image is seen to be, not making its meaning more accessible for our understanding, but bringing about a special perception of an object, bringing about the ‘seeing’ and not the ‘recognizing’ of it.”¹⁴⁹

In the context of the present study, it is significant that Gadamer places the phenomenon of *recognition* at the forefront of his understanding of the kind of work that the work of art does. Art, understood as play, possesses an essentially apophantic function: it points to or shows something in such a way that it allows us—finally—to recognize it. We are all, I suspect, familiar with being smitten by a particular artwork because it makes recognizable something for which we earlier had lacked the words or images to describe: “in and through [the artwork] everyone recognizes that this is how things are.”¹⁵⁰ That the *oberiuty* held what was basically a Gadamerian understanding of the work of art as a form of knowledge already suggests that

¹⁴⁷ Viktor Shklovskii, “Iskusstvo kak priem,” in *O teorii prozy* (Moskva: Krug, 1925), accessed February 14, 2020. <http://www.opojaz.ru/manifests/kakpriem.html>.

¹⁴⁸ Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, “Extracts from *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*,” in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (New York: Routledge, 2000), 40.

¹⁴⁹ Eikhenbaum.

¹⁵⁰ Gadamer, 117.

would have been at odds with Formalism. I propose that this was not merely an incidental disagreement, but one that the OBeRIu themselves had already consciously formulated as early as 1928. Indeed, the text of the manifesto written by Zabolotsky on the occasion of *Three Left Hours* is positioned explicitly against a Formalist understanding of the literature *vis-à-vis* the epistemic potency of art.

In order to understand the theoretical position developed in the course of the OBeRIu manifesto, it will be helpful to draw a distinction between signs and symbols. I take my direction here from Paul Tillich, who outlines the difference in question in his *Dynamics of Faith*. According to Tillich, while both signs and symbols are alike in that both “point beyond themselves to something else,” signs possess only a tenuous relationship with their referent and their being is exhausted in their act of pointing. Symbols, in contrast, “participate in the reality of that to which they point.”¹⁵¹ That a downward facing white triangle outlined in orange should mean ‘yield’ is a matter of convention — it is mere sign. In contrast, objects like a national flag are symbols. A flag embodies the ideals and the sovereignty of a people. This is why desecration of the flag can be such a powerful act of provocation. The Formalists, representing a literary school that would (in one of its forms) eventually evolve into the Structuralism of Roman Jakobson and the Prague school, identified the nature of the written word unambiguously with that of the sign, the arbitrariness of which has been taken for granted since Saussure and his *Course in General Linguistics*. Together with the Futurists, Formalist literary critics heralded the autonomy of the written word *qua* arbitrary sign; their whole theoretical project is predicated on turning literary criticism into a rigorous scientific analysis of signs. One can already sense something of the OBeRIu’s resistance to this paradigm in Lipavsky’s almost derisive dismissal of scientific enterprise in general. At numerous points in *Conversations* he gives voice to his feeling

¹⁵¹ Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1957), 47-48.

that scientific method is fundamentally flawed (or at least misguided). Speaking specifically of his own theories concerning language, he writes: “I do not expect that my theory could be acknowledged. It does not just contradict some laws, but what is worse, [it contradicts] the very style of modern science, the unspoken rules that govern its present course... The path I walked is considered by science to be too simple, speculative, it is disgraced in advance. But speaking honestly, I don't think the style of modern science is correct...”¹⁵² If the Formalists took their direction from contemporary linguistics, then Lipavsky certainly would have looked at their project with suspicion. The *oberiuty* developed a theory of literature that drew less from the scientific insights afforded by linguistics, but one that was rooted, as Sara Pratt has convincingly argued, in Russian orthodox theology, where the Word is not understood as an arbitrary sign, but is categorically elevated to the status of symbol.

Of particular help in this discussion will be a firm understanding of the concept of the *eikon*, or divine image. To those uninitiated in the orthodox dogma surrounding iconography, icons can be immensely difficult to understand. Icons, for instance, typically employ unnatural or ‘reverse’ perspective, which contemporary Westerners mistakenly consider an indication of their ‘primitivism.’ Equally puzzling is that icons often contain seemingly impossible oddities, such as the fact that portrayals of John the Baptist depict the prophet, as a matter of course, with his head in two places: one sits neatly on his shoulders, where it should be; the other lies concurrently severed in his lap, hands, or sometimes in a basket at his feet. What is crucial to understand here is that these choices are stylistic and deliberate, for an icon is not intended to be a physical ‘likeness’ of the person or event therein depicted. These images are not intended to be faithful renditions of the historical or biological contingencies of the holy person or event; the true subject of the icon is, instead, the divine forces at work *in and through* these factual and finite

¹⁵² Lipavskii, *Razgovory*, 16-17.

accidents of nature. In fact, an icon is not intended as a ‘likeness’ at all, not even a spiritual one, if by likeness we mean some kind of mimetic representation; for to say that the icon possesses primarily a mimetic function would be to demote it to the status of mere reproduction, which like the sign can only point to its original without any hope of converging with it. According to orthodox belief, the icon is no mere sign, but a symbol in the sense that Tillich defined it—icons do not merely designate and refer to something but participates in the reality of that which they symbolize. We might say that a symbol *alludes* to a higher reality, if here we understand *allusion* in its ordinary etymological sense as a “playing towards” something. The Russian priest and polymath Pavel Florensky put this in a slightly different way in his book *The Iconostasis*: “If a symbol, as expedient, attains its end, then it really is inseparable from that end—the higher reality that it reveals.”¹⁵³

Therefore in the iconographic tradition the icon is not (or at least not only) a *picture* of a saint, in a very real sense it just *is* the saint: “the icon, by showing him, does not merely *depict* the holy witness but *is* the very witness himself.”¹⁵⁴ According to church dogma the intentionality—the ‘aboutness’—that the icon achieves is no mere pointing towards a reality that exists, as it were, ‘behind’ the image. Rather, the icon is instead conceived as a sensuous conduit whereby the holy is brought forth into presence for the viewer. In this sense, the icon is a representation only if we understand it quite literally as a re-presentation: “The painted work shares with all symbols generally their basic ontological character—to be that which they symbolize.”¹⁵⁵ It would perhaps be hyperbolic to claim that the image and object are here wholly united; suffice it to say that they share an insoluble ontological connection. In *Truth and Method*,

¹⁵³ Pavel Florenskii, *Iconostas*, (Biblioteka “Vekhi,” 2000), accessed February 12, 2021, <http://www.vehi.net/florensky/ikonost.html>.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Gadamer argues a similar point about the nature of artistic images, suggesting that religious painting in particular reveals something fundamental about the basic ontological nature of the picture: “The religious picture displays the full ontological power of the picture. For it is really true that the divine becomes picturable only through the word and image. Thus the religious picture has an exemplary significance. In it we can see without any doubt that a picture is not a copy of a copied being, but is in ontological communion with what is copied. It is clear from this example that art, as a whole and in a universal sense, increases the picturability of being. Word and image are not mere imitative illustrations, but allow what they present to be for the first time fully what it is.”¹⁵⁶ Here again we see that the primary function of the work of art consists in creating an occasion for recognition. The icon does not simply refer us to some kind of original something as if it were a reminder of something not present, but is itself an “event of being,”¹⁵⁷ an emanation or manifestation of a higher reality in which it directly participates.

Gadamer’s dual treatment of word and image in the above quotation is fitting, for in the Russian orthodox tradition it is not only the image that can serve as *eikon*—language can serve this function as well—indeed, orthodox dogma holds that the Gospel Book itself should be considered an icon of Christ. From a functional perspective the work of the theologian and the icon painter are considered more or less identical in the orthodox tradition. Insofar as, ontologically speaking, divine word and image share the intentionality of the symbol—they are inseparably bound to the realities to which they allude. Florensky touches upon the identity relationship between word and image in *The Iconostasis*:

[T]he icon painter expresses Christian ontology not by recalling its doctrine, but by philosophizing with his brush. It is not by accident that ancient reports refer to the greatest masters of icon painting as philosophers, even though by way of

¹⁵⁶ Gadamer, 143.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 144.

abstract theory they never wrote a single word. But, enlightened by divine vision, these icon painters gave witness to the embodied Word with the fingers of their hands and truly philosophized with their paints. Only in this way can we understand the endlessly repeated assertion of the church fathers, testified to numerous times by decrees of the Ecumenical Council, concerning the equivalence of the icon and the sermon: the icon painting is for the eye what the word is for the ear. And it is so not because the icon literally transmits the context of speech, but because speech and the icon, through their direct object, from which they are inseparable and in the proclamation of which they exhaust their essence, have one and the same spiritual reality. And witness to the world of the spirit is, according to all of antiquity, philosophy. That is why true theologians and true icon painters were equally called philosophers.¹⁵⁸

Whether they take shape as image or word, icons are fundamentally different from signs: they have an indissoluble ontological relationship with the realities to which they allude. In this passage Florensky also touches on another characteristic of icons—their status as bearers of knowledge. Indeed, icons were originally intended partially as pedagogical objects, visual manifestations of truth that are accessible even for the illiterate or uneducated. Intentionally fused with the realities they depict, icons make those realities accessible and recognizable as truth.

In its most radical form, the ontological bond between icon and reality is theorized as an absolute unity—a doctrine formally known as *imiaslavie* (имяславие) or *onomatodoxy* (ономатодоксия). Debates surrounding the orthodoxy of *imiaslavie* were raging shortly before the onset of the October Revolution, with Florensky and his fellow man of the cloth, Sergei Bulgakov, being major proponents of the theological idea. While the church eventually deemed *onomatodoxy* in particular heretical, the insoluble connection between word and reality has always been a central tenant of Russian orthodox thinking about language. That such ideas about the relationship between the word and world were ‘in the air’ at the turn of the century perhaps explains why they formed a basis for much of the literary theory espoused and put into practice

¹⁵⁸ Florenskii.

by the fin-de-siècle Russian Symbolists. That such thinking is basically at odds with Formalist conceptions about the nature of language and art, conceptions that begin from an understanding of the word as *sign*, should be clear. Indeed, it was against the basic tenets of Symbolism that the upstart Formalist were in revolt—it was precisely such orthodox ‘mysticism’ about language that they dramatically opposed as obscurantist and unscientific.

That orthodox theological perspectives on the nature of language should come to bear on OBeRIu aesthetics and their outlook on literary practice is less shocking than it may at first appear. Kharms’s father was Ivan Yuvachev, an ex-revolutionary and former member of The People’s Will (Народная воля) who underwent a religious awakening while imprisoned on Sakhalin Island for his involvement in terrorist activities against the Tsar. He subsequently went on to become a published religious writer.¹⁵⁹ Kharms, infamous now for his claim there were only two ‘lofty’ things in life—humor and holiness—evidently inherited some measure of his father’s religious feeling. His diaries provide ample evidence of his own commitment to the Orthodox faith—he attended church on more than one occasion in the 30’s despite the risk it involved, and several of his poems from this period take on the explicit form of divine supplication, such as “Prayer Before Sleep” (Молитва перед сном) from 1931:

Господи, среди бела дня
накатила на меня лень.
Разреши мне лечь и заснуть Господи,
и пока я сплю накачай меня Господи
Силою Твоей.
Многое знать хочу,
но не книги и не люди скажут мне это.
Только Ты просвети меня Господи
путем стихов моих.
Разбуди меня сильного к битве со смыслами,
быстро к управлению слов

¹⁵⁹ Yuvachev makes an appearance in Chekhov’s *Sakhalin Island* (Остров Сахалин), which recounts the latter’s journey to the prison colony in the early 1890’s. Yuvachev also corresponded with Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy and visited the novelist at his estate.

и прилежного к восхвалению имени Бога
во веки веков.¹⁶⁰

O Lord, amid the light of day / I have been overcome by sloth. / Permit me to lie
down and sleep, oh Lord, / And, while I slumber, fill me, oh Lord / with Thy
might. / I desire much knowledge, / but neither books nor men shall give it to me.
/ Only you, enlighten me, oh Lord, / by way of my verse. / Awaken me strong for
the battle with meanings, / Quick in directing words, / and diligent in Praise of
Thy Name / for ever and ever.

According to official NKVD reports, among the possessions seized from Kharms's apartment at the time of his final arrest were four icons, a cross, and "various religious books."¹⁶¹ Druskin claimed Kharms had been reading the *Philokalia* shortly before he was apprehended—an observation that coheres well with the fact that Kharms often included readings from the *Lives of Saints* in the imagined literary performances he would plan in his journals. Vvedensky evidently shared at least some of Kharms's fervent religiosity; Druskin tells us that he was interested in only three things—time, death, and God—and in the essay *Chinari* describes the poet's outlook on life as conforming to that of an Orthodox theist. Zabolotsky, the son of a small-town agronomist, was raised in the Russian church and was particularly enamored with icons from a young age. In his memoirs, Zabolotsky recalls numerous inspiring spiritual moments from his childhood. He tells, for instance, a story about the time one of his classmates was selected to join in an icon procession around the village. The weather was cold and the ceremony, which lasted from sunup to sundown, struck him as exhausting. For his service, however, the youngster received a small icon of Nikolai Chudotvorets, and Zabolotsky records being extraordinarily jealous of his schoolmate's good fortune. Lastly, as a philosopher, Druskin can best be

¹⁶⁰ Kharms, "Molitva pered snom 28 marta 1931 goda v 7 chasov vechera," in *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, 1:330.

¹⁶¹ Kharms, "I am a phenomenon quite out of the ordinary": *The Notebooks, Diaries, and Letters of Daniil Kharms*, 525.

understood as a proponent of unique form of Christian existentialism: the nature of faith, sin, prayer, and God are the abiding themes encountered in his writing.

Sarah Pratt has argued convincingly that, though it may not be immediately obvious, the OBeRIu manifesto of 1928 draws heavily from Orthodox theology concerning the Word, going so far as to suggest that much of the text resonates heavily with the language of Orthodox liturgy. The manifesto is indeed a testament to the epistemic power of the word, a compelling declaration of the indissoluble, iconographic relationship between symbol and that which it symbolizes. “We are the authors not only of a new poetic language, but the creators of a new sense of life and its objects,” they write. “Our will to creation is universal, it overruns all forms of art and bursts forth into life, grasping it from all sides.”¹⁶² The language here recalls that developed by Florensky in his discussion of icons. According to Florensky, the unnatural perspectives that are defining feature of icons are a deliberate stylistic choice with metaphysical implications. Whereas traditional, linear perspective creates the illusion of depth with lines that appear to meet somewhere behind the painting, the lines employed in reverse perspective “burst forth” out of the painting; their point of convergence is the locus of the viewer’s gaze. A characteristic feature of non-natural, iconic perspective is that it allows for the artist to simultaneously display facets of an objects that otherwise could not be seen at one and the same time, as if the viewer is no longer bound to a single point in space. For instance: where the gospel is depicted in an icon, three, sometimes even four, of the books facets are painted in addition to the book’s front cover—a view that is plainly impossible from a natural perspective. The icon painter attempts to paint things, as it were, *sub specie aeternitatis*, to include as much the object as necessary to show it exactly as it *is* in reality, irrespective of our limited and finite point of view. In this way, icons can be understood, using the language of Zabolotsky’s

¹⁶² Zabolotskii, “Poeziia oberiutov,” 522.

manifesto, to “grasp [life] from all sides.” By suggesting this strong parallel between iconographic intentionality and their work, the *oberiuty* emphasize the symbolic and epistemic character of their poetics. Time and again their manifesto emphasizes that the word and its object cannot be separated. On the basis of this assertion they proclaim that just as icons, through their unusual and expected visual conventions, can afford viewers knowledge of divine reality, poetry also offers a special epistemic horizon to its readers: “Art has its own logic, logic that does not destroy the object, but helps to know it.”¹⁶³

To readers familiar with Formalist literary theory and its concepts, Zabolotsky’s assertion that the members of the OBeRIu are the “creators of a new sense of life and its objects” initially suggests that the group took inspiration and direction from the Shklovsky’s notion that art is a form of ‘estrangement.’ Indeed, Shklovsky’s concept has long functioned for critics as a kind of ‘catch all’ for anything weird one encounters in a literary text that might otherwise seem to defy explanation. Zabolotsky’s manifesto does indeed suggest that the objects revealed in OBeRIu poetry are somehow different than those which we discover in the course of everyday life:

In our work we expand and deepen the meaning of the object and the world, but in no way do we destroy it. The concrete object, cleansed of its literary and everyday shell becomes the property of art. In poetry the collision of verbal meanings expresses the object with the precision of mechanics. You seem ready to say that this is not the same object that you see in life? Come closer and touch it with your fingers. Look at the object with naked eyes and you will see it for the first time cleansed of its antiquated literary gilding. Perhaps you will assert that our subjects are ‘unreal’ and ‘not logical’? But who said that ‘mundane’ and ‘everyday’ logic is necessary for art?¹⁶⁴

The language here does, perhaps, initially suggest homage to the Shklovsky’s concept of estrangement. Shklovsky argued that in everyday life our comportment towards things tends to become automatized. In the course of mundane, practical experience, we pay so little attention to

¹⁶³ Ibid., 523.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 522-523.

what is actually in front of us that they become, as it were, invisible. Familiarity breed transparency. By defining the artwork as an occasion for estrangement, he is saying that its essential function is to disrupt the ongoing and ever-present process of automatization that numbs our apprehension of reality. What is essential to remember here is that estrangement as Shklovsky outlined it in *Theory of Prose* is essentially a *sensuous* and *non-cognitive* phenomenon—it disrupts our habitual recognition of the object, draws our attention to its materiality, but does not add to our knowledge of it. In fact, Shklovsky indicates the object itself disappears completely behind its sensuous, aesthetic presentation: “Art is a means of experiencing the artfulness of an object. *The object itself is not important in art.*”¹⁶⁵ Properly grasped according to the outlines that Shklovsky himself draws for the concept, estrangement can be seen as a manifestation of aesthetic differentiation: the artwork throws the world into material relief by forcing to us to slow down and adopt a stance of aesthetic distance from that to which we have become desensitized.

Perhaps surprisingly, the OBeRIu manifesto pushes definitely against an understanding of art as estrangement; it develops and moves within a distinct and incommensurable conceptual framework. True, like Shklovsky, Zabolotsky suggests that art shows us the world in a fundamentally different way than that of everyday experience, but his emphasis on the object-directed intentionality of the word precludes understanding this new perceptual dimension in terms of estrangement: if, for Shklovsky, the object has no place in art, the *oberiuty* are careful to stipulate their art does not ‘destroy’ the things it thematizes. It is telling, in fact, that Zabolotsky here makes no explicit appeal to Shklovsky’s concept—with which he was certainly familiar. Interestingly, at least one contemporary reviewer of *Columns* intuitively felt that the transfigurative power of Zabolotsky’s poetry could not be adequately couched in Formalist terms:

¹⁶⁵ Shklovskii. Italics mine.

“The poems drew you in by means of some kind of organic *strangeness* (‘estrangement’ would not be the right word!) and by an inexpressible ‘third sense’ that had a hypnotic effect and made you a bit dizzy.”¹⁶⁶ Rather than couching their poetics in terms of a purely sensuous estrangement, the *oberiuty* choose instead to underscore the world-directed power of the word in a language of purification: the verb ‘to cleanse’ (чистить) and its derivatives (очищенный, чистота) are employed no fewer than three times in the course of their poetic manifesto, the substance of which consists of only two paragraphs. Such preoccupation with art as a means of purification has obviously religious undertones and strongly resonates with the language employed by Florensky in his ontological treatment of the Orthodox icon, which he likens to a window through which shines the pure light of God. The icon painter, Florensky writes, should take care to follow as closely as possible all iconographic conventions, lest stylistic accidents blemish or occlude this divine light:

Of course, the more important some part of the icon image is and, therefore, the more poignancy it demands, the greater the possibility that distortions will enter the icon — random lines and metaphysically unwarranted color spots, which in relation to the spiritual essence of the icon are like flecks of mud from a passing carriage on a window pane, that is, they simply interfere with seeing what is distant and don’t allow light to enter the room. No matter how much these distortions may amuse the eye, they are nothing more than dirty spots; but they can accumulate, finally, to such an extent that the spiritual essence of the icon becomes impossible to see.¹⁶⁷

By employing a language of cleansing, purification, and renewal in their manifesto, the *oberiuty* subtly concretize their indebtedness to the aesthetic categories of Russian Orthodox theology. Their “new sense of life and its objects” finds its origin not in the estrangement theory of Shklovsky, but relies instead on basic tenets concerning the ontology and unique spiritual intentionality of the Orthodox icon.

¹⁶⁶ Dmitrii Maksimov, “Zabolotskii (Ob odnoi davnei vstreche),” in *Vospominaniia o N. Zabolotskom*, 123.

¹⁶⁷ Florenskii.

If the *oberiuty* distance themselves from the theoretical gestures of the OPOYAZ by subtly evading Shklovsky's conception of art as estrangement, I propose that a close reading of the OBeRIu manifesto reveals two moments in which their rejection of Formalism is made quite explicit. It is significant here that they speak not just of cleansing the object of its mundane, everyday, habitual significance—they also declare their intention to strip it of its “literary husk” (литературная шелуха) and its “literary gilding” (литературная позолота).¹⁶⁸ At face, this seems an extraordinarily paradoxical claim for a specifically *literary* group, composing specifically *literary* texts, to make in the context of in their overwhelmingly *literary* manifesto. The significance of this claim can be properly grasped only if the word “literary” here is understood as a carrier of a semantic valence that is fundamentally Formalist in nature. Recall that the OPOYAZ were, above all else, interested in isolating that which makes any text a specifically literary one. I propose that the aforementioned moments of the OBeRIu declaration can be read explicitly as a rejection of the features that defined the Formalist concept of *literariness*. Undoubtedly, for the *oberiuty* the specificity of this concept was thought to be far too narrow: largely, their texts blur the line between art and science in a way to which the Formalist conception of literature simply cannot do justice.

There is here another potential point of coincidence with the current of Gadamer's thought. Literature occupies a special place in Gadamer's understanding of art, since it represents a ‘borderline position’ between the hermeneutic play structure of the artwork and the kind of knowledge that comes to presence in the sciences; it is “the place where art and science merge.”¹⁶⁹ For Gadamer, the concept of literature includes not only specifically ‘creative’ works, but anything presented in writing that can be re-presented through the activity of reading. This

¹⁶⁸ Zabolotskii, “Poeziia oberiutov,” 522-523.

¹⁶⁹ Gadamer, 163.

includes “religious, legal, economic, public and private texts of all kinds,” as well as “scholarly writings that edit and interpret these texts: namely the human sciences as a whole.”¹⁷⁰ One can glimpse something of this broad understanding of the literary especially in Kharms who could be considered a graphomaniac (even if he did evidently suffer from writer’s block). Kharms’s journal entries are an eclectic assortment of poems, personal observations, correspondences, and minutia, including grocery lists, financial expenses and receipts. Druskin tells us that Kharms rarely, if ever, threw away a piece of paper with writing on it, no matter how insignificant it may have been or whether he considered it a successful piece of writing: “It seems to me that he had, perhaps, an unconscious feeling of responsibility for every accomplished deed and for every word written or said, even if only in thought.”¹⁷¹ Indeed, these disparate scraps of text do add considerably to our knowledge of Kharms, his personality and his projects—they are hardly insignificant and can rightly be said to be constitutive of his literary oeuvre. Through them we can, as Gadamer says, “produce and achieve the sheer presence of the past.”¹⁷²

The evident OBeRIu quarrel with the concept of literariness provides a particularly fruitful way to understand a rather puzzling gesture in their manifesto: their complete and total dismissal of *zaum*’—the phonetic, ‘transrational’ sound poetry developed by poets of the previous avant-garde generation, most notably Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, and Tufananov. “Even now,” the *oberiuty* declare, “some deign to call us *zaumniki*. It is difficult to know what this is all about: a total misunderstanding or an inescapable failure to understand the fundamentals of verbal art? There is no school more hostile to us than that of *zaum*’.”¹⁷³ To be clear: I call this wholesale

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 162.

¹⁷¹ Druskin, *Chinari*.

¹⁷² Gadamer, 163.

¹⁷³ Zabolotskii, “Poeziia oberiutov,” 522.

rejection of *zaum*’ a puzzling gesture because only a few years earlier Kharms and Vvedensky had both participated in the transrational poetry workshops orchestrated by Tufanov at GInKhUK. Kharms, in particular, continues to employ elements of phonetic ‘nonsense’ in his work well into the 1930’s. From whence, then, this wholesale rejection of and even evident disdain for the poetic phenomenon on *zaum*’?

The answer, I believe, lies in the fact that it is nearly impossible to separate the phenomenon of *zaum*’ as it was actually practiced by the Futurists from the way in which it was *theorized and interpreted* by their Formalist contemporaries. The practice of *zaum*’ itself grew out of the Futurist notion of the “self-sufficient word” (самоценное слово) and their rallying cry for the right to champion an “arbitrary” (произвольный) and “derivative” (производный) poetic lexicon (c.f. *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*). For the Formalists, striving as they were to isolate and define the literary as an object of scientific inquiry, poetry that did not *prima facie* appear to contain any actual subject matter made the perfect literary object with which to demonstrate their new theory. The poetic purity of *zaum*’ was felt by the Formalists to lie precisely in its complete lack of communicable content. Since the ‘words’ which compose such poems have no identifiable meaning in a traditional sense, one cannot ask what such poems are ‘about,’ nor does it seem to make a great deal of sense to ask what the poet intended to ‘say’ when he wrote them. A work of pure *zaum*’, such as Kruchenykh’s infamous “Dyr Bul Shchyl” (Дыр бул щыл), has no identifiable content. Being composed on nothing but pure sound, it communicates nothing, possesses no relationship with the world. The poem’s ‘meaning’ is created solely in the relationship of phonemes, one to another, as units of sound; its significance as a work of art lies in the fact that certain of these phonetic juxtapositions are encountered rarely,

or are totally unheard of, in everyday, spoken Russian.¹⁷⁴ This novelty exhausts the poem's sense. Transrational poetry already came 'pre-bracketed,' as it were; it served as a ready example of how a text's 'meaning' could depend solely on the sensuous linguistic material from which it was constructed. A text that presents the reader with nothing more than arbitrary signs that create meaning via their juxtaposition with other signs, the *zaum'* poem is, if you like, the perfect Formalist work of literature. Here, there is no need to worry about extra-literary material, since the texts apparently don't contain or consider anything extra-literary to begin with.

As I have been consistently suggesting throughout the course of this chapter, the Formalist approach to literature is simply incompatible with the world-directed, epistemic kind of poetry that the OBeRIu were trying to cultivate. It is unsurprising, therefore to find in their major poetic declaration from 1928 explicit points of contention with the whole of the Formalist project. They suggest that considering only what is purely literary about a literature risks stripping poetry of its power and fertility: "As people who are real and concrete to the marrow of our bones, we are the first enemies of those who would castrate the word and turn it into an impotent and senseless mongrel"¹⁷⁵ Because the Formalists reduced everything literary to the interplay of self-sufficient *signs*, the *oberiuty* evidently felt they had effectively ignored everything that was truly significant about literature as an art form—namely, its transformative power as a source of knowledge unattainable through other means. The OBeRIu was, after all, the Union of Real Art. Through their work they believed they could penetrate to the truth of things; that poetry should do more than simply coat the world with a sensuous and artificial literary sheen.

In short verse composed in 1930, Zabolotsky brings the OBeRIu quarrel with Futurism out of the declaratory mode of the art manifesto and gives it a poetic voice of its own. The poem,

¹⁷⁴ The hard vowel 'ы' for instance, never occurs following the soft consonant 'ш'.

¹⁷⁵ Zabolotskii, "Poeziia oberiutov," 522.

simply and appropriately entitled art “Art” (Искусство), can clearly be read as an attempt on Zabolotsky’s part to poke holes in (and poke fun at) the Formalist contention that a literary work is best understood as a collection of devices. In the first stanza of the poem, Zabolotsky uses one of his favorite images, the tree, to suggest that an analysis that proceeds purely through a consideration of form is necessarily incomplete:

Дерево растёт, напоминая
Естественную деревянную колонну.
От нее расходятся члены,
Одетые в круглые листья.
Собрание таких деревьев
Образует лес, дубраву.
Но определение леса неточно,
Если указать на одно формальное строенье.¹⁷⁶

A tree grows, recalling / A natural wooden column. / From it radiate limbs /
Dressed in round leaves. / A collection of such trees / Makes up a forest, a grove. /
But the definition of a forest is imprecise / If we indicate only its formal structure.

Here, Zabolotsky operates according to a logic of materiality and structure, which parodically emulates the Shklovskian concept of estrangement. A tree can be more or less accurately described as a vertical, wooden column (a trunk) from which protrude smaller wooden appendages (branches) that taper off and produce at their points of terminus flat growths of uniform shape and size (leaves). Continuing with this analysis by way of parts vs whole, Zabolotsky notes that a forest can be understood simply as a collection of many such tree-structures. Considering the poem’s title, it seems likely that we can read Zabolotsky’s gesture here as a rather transparent parody of the Formalist approach to literary analysis, which sees the work of literature, like Zabolotsky’s forest, as a collection of devices that work structurally to produce meaning. The final lines of the stanza drive home the suspicion that the poem will unfold as a critique of ОРОУАЗ theory: his use of the word *formal’noe* (формальное) here is

¹⁷⁶ Zabolotskii, “Iskusstvo,” in *Metamorfozy*, 115.

deliberately charged. While he suggests that there is nothing necessarily *incorrect* about seeing a forest as a collection of trees, such an understanding is incomplete and unsatisfying. Like Plato's definition of man as a "featherless biped," the reduction of an artwork to its formal components is not necessarily wrong, but it leaves everything absolutely essential out.

In the second and third stanzas Zabolotsky further elaborates his poetic critique of Formalism. He proceeds again by way of analogy:

Толстое тело коровы,
Поставленное на четыре окончания,
Увенчанное храмовидной головою
И двумя рогами (словно луна в первой четверти),
Тоже будет непонятно,
Также будет непостижимо,
Если забудем о его значенье
На карте живущих всего мира.

Дом, деревянная постройка,
Составленная как кладбище деревьев,
Сложенная как шалаш из трупов,
Словно беседка из мертвецов,—
Кому он из смертных понятен,
Кому из живущих доступен,
Если забудем человека,
Кто строил его и рубил?¹⁷⁷

The fat body of a cow, / Set down on four ends, / Crowned with a temple-like head / And two horns (like the moon in its first quarter), / Will also be unintelligible, / Will also be inconceivable, / If we forget about its significance on the map of the whole world's living things.

A house, a wooden construction, / Put together like a cemetery of trees, / Assembled like a shelter made of corpses, / Like a pavilion made of the dead — / To whom among mortals is it understandable, / To whom among the living is it comprehensible / If we forget the man / Who built and erected it?

As in the first stanza, Zabolotsky's language here is heavily loaded with 'estranged' connotations of material and structure. A cow becomes a 'fat body' placed atop four 'ends,' 'crowned' with a head and two horns. Similarly, a house is simply a 'wooden construction' which is 'put together'

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 116.

and ‘assembled’ from the corpse-material of the same trees that appeared in the first stanza. Again, in each stanza Zabolotsky repeats his conviction, through rhetorical questioning, that a purely formal understanding of things is somehow inadequate. In both instances, this inadequacy could be said to stem from different aspects of bracketing. The cow becomes incomprehensible if we “forget its significance on the map of the whole world’s living things.” Trusting in what has already been established—that Zabolotsky here is making substantive claims about what art is and how it should be understood—then he would seem to be issuing a warning about isolating a work from its relationship to the world. If we read a text, as the Formalists would have us do, as a wholly autonomous dimension of meaning, we risk losing the epistemic dimension of the work as truth and revelation. Similarly, Zabolotsky says that a house cannot be understood if we ignore the fact that a specific person built it with a specific intention—in other words, a work of art cannot be understood without considering who produced it, its author. The bracketing of authorial intent was, of course, a stipulation of Formalist methodology. If the first stanza sets “Art” up as a poetic critique of Formalist ideas, the second and third stanzas drive home specifically the idea that the literary epoché occludes more than it reveals: unless we understand the work of literature as a deliberate attempt to communicate something on the part of the author, we lose the epistemic element of the poetic.

Continuing this line of argument, the fourth stanza equates a ‘Formal’ understanding of things with the will to violence:

Человек, владыка планеты,
Государь деревянного леса,
Император коровьего мяса,
Саваоф двухэтажного дома,—
Он и планетою правит,
Он и леса вырубает,
Он и корову зарежет,

А ВЫМОЛВИТЬ СЛОВА НЕ МОЖЕТ.¹⁷⁸

Man, overlord of the planet, / Sovereign of the wooden forest, / Emperor of cow
flesh, Saboath of the two-story house, — / He rules the planet, / And he cuts down
the forests, / And he slaughters the cow, / But utter words he cannot.

Zabolotsky here suggests that while a purely structural understanding of any phenomenon can give us power, it also carries within it an inherent potential for destruction. If we see the world as only so much material that can be restructured and reshaped in any way we deem fit, we do indeed have enormous power—power to cut down forests for building homes or to slaughter cattle for butchering and consumption. Tempered, this capacity can be positive and necessary, but left unchecked it can also become an entrenched impulse to manipulate things, to break them down and compromise their integrity in the service of utility. In the final line of the stanza, making his allegory explicit, Zabolotsky brings these considerations to bear on language: to consider a poem merely as a collection of devices is to compromise its organic integrity. Poets who see the word as material that can be shaped according to their whim are not *using* language so much as *abusing* it: without a more robust understanding of language the poet effectively becomes mute.

In the final stanza of the poem Zabolotsky presents the reader with his own significantly un-Formalist take on his own work as a poet:

Но я, однообразный человек,
Взял в рот длинную сияющую дудку,
Дул, и, подчиненные дыханию,
Слова вылетали в мир, становясь предметами.
Корова мне кашу варила,
Дерево сказку читало,
А мертвые домики мира
Прыгали, словно живые.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

But I, a monotonous man, / Took in my mouth a long, shining flute, / I blew, and, subjugated to my breath, / Words flew out into the world, becoming objects. / The cow made me porridge, / The tree read me a tale, / And the dead houses of the world / Jumped up, just as if alive.

Here, Zabolotsky establishes and affirms the connection between author, word, and world, first by claiming authorship of his verse—the words which he produces are “subjected to [his] breath”—and secondly by stating that his poems do not exist as some sort of inert literary fact: his words are not motionless, but instead “[fly] out into the world” and become objects. This last image resonates strongly with a frequently quoted statement made by Kharms in a letter he wrote to his friend Klavdiia Pugacheva that a poem “isn’t just words or thought printed on paper, it is a thing as real as a crystal inkwell standing in front of me on the table. It seems that these verses have become a thing, and you could take them off the paper and throw them at a window, and the window would break. That’s what words can do!”¹⁸⁰ Literalism aside, the message here is clear: in essence, poetry is a mode of comportment with the world and brings its meaning to bear on it. A text is inextricably bound up with the world and possesses connections to reality that are not mere contingencies, but are representative of art’s potential to change and transfigure things. This capacity is integral to their very being works of literature. In the second half of Zabolotsky’s final stanza, the poet receives some sort of reaction from the world in response to his words: the cow makes him porridge—provides, perhaps, spiritual sustenance or mystic revelation. The tree similarly provides a kind of ‘natural’ revelation, responding to the poet by telling a story of its own. Finally, the houses that were previously described in pleonastically thanatological terms jump up and down ‘just as if alive’—suggesting that, as it investigates the world, the authentic poetic word is capable of breathing spirit into even the most lifeless objects.

¹⁸⁰ Kharms, “K. V. Pugachevoi,” in *Daniil Kharms: Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, 1:38.

If we allow the title of Zabolotsky's poem to bear on its subject matter and if we also take Zabolotsky's allusion to the inadequacy of formalist definitions in the initial stanza at face value, then I believe my reading of 'Art' is quite plausible—it stands as a playful diatribe against Formalism. It is a poetic expression of an approach to literature that eschews the concept of “literary gilding” in favor of a more organic and integrated understanding of textuality. Indeed, we can allow the poem's Russian title—“Искусство”— to guide us to a deeper understanding of art if we consider it in the context of the word's Slavic etymology. For *искусство*, when translated correctly, if somewhat banally, as ‘art,’ is severed from its connection to the Old Church Slavonic *искусъ*, a word that carries connotations of observation, verification, examination—and also revelation. In this originary sense, *искусство* is a closer analogue to the Latin *experimentum* than the English *art*. Indeed, this etymological approach presents a fair picture of how the *oberiuty* understood the basic task of poetry as an epistemic enterprise. With this in mind, the idea that OBeRIu poets would have found Formalist theory unconvincing should come as no surprise—in their scientific approach to literary analysis, the Formalists effectively deny poetry its communicative and world-revealing character. For the *oberiuty*, the idea that words could be bracketed off from the world and treated as inert, literary material would have been tantamount to heresy. The word—that is, the *authentic* poetic word — cleaves to the world and brings new meaning to bear on it. Poetry is about so much more than literariness.

Echoing Zabolotsky, Kharms expressed a vision of the vital and real work of poetry in the aforementioned letter he wrote to Klavdiia Pugacheva in the fall of 1933. Kharms claims here that in the writing of a poem he is not principally concerned with an idea, with content or form, or with “some vague concept of quality,” but with something he enigmatically refers to as the

“purity of order” (чистота порядка).¹⁸¹ Kharms writes that as a poet he is acutely conscious of being not simply a writer but “the creator of [a] world, the creator of “something new.”¹⁸² Comparing the writing of a poem to the creation of a boot, Kharms clarifies that his primary concern is not whether the ‘boot’ will be comfortable, durable, or beautiful—what concerns him above all else is that his creation will merge seamlessly with the inherent order of the world, “so that the order of the world does not suffer, is not marred by contact with leather and nails... that it should remain as it was, that it should remain pure.”¹⁸³ Here again, in Kharms’s preoccupation with conceptions of purity, we see the influence of iconographic logic in the OBeRlu understanding of the poetic. We also get a further sense of what kind of relationship the OBeRlu text is felt to have with the world. It is clear that Kharms places import on the novelty of things—the creation should be something new—hence, poetry is evidently not seen a form of *mimesis*. He is not, after all, trying to *reproduce* the order of the world in his writing. But it is equally important to him that the work be truly “created” (созданный) rather than simply “invented,” “imagined,” or “dreamed up” (вымышленный).¹⁸⁴ It seems that for Kharms the task of poetry was, rather, *methectic* — the poem adds to the order of the world in a way that ‘helps it along,’ and perhaps makes this mysterious order salient and recognizable. If the everyday, human order of social and economic *habitus* somehow upsets this order, the work of art can set it right again. One could say, with Kharms, that poetry helps the world be more fully what it is:

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 37-38.

¹⁸² Ibid., 37.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 38. Kharms claims here that he never bothers to read the newspaper because the world he encounters there is “invented” rather than “created.” A similar sentiment can be found in a statement made by Vvedensky: “my poetry isn’t *zaum*’, but this article is.”

“True art stands in the same order as primary reality; it creates the world and constitutes its primary reflection. It is necessarily real.”¹⁸⁵

Kharm's understanding of the poetic as a form of *methexis* suggests a significant point of overlap between function of the OBeRIu text and that of the sacred rite. In *Homo Ludens*, discussing the nature of religious ritual, Huizinga elucidates a vision of sacrament that closely parallels the theories of “symbolic” intentionality developed by the likes of Tillich, Gadamer, and Florensky. The ritual, rite, or feast occurs within the confines of a magic circle, which is always a basic hallmark of the play state—the eruption of the sacred event necessarily disrupts the order of the everyday, sometimes to the point that normative categories are entirely upended or reversed. The order of the sacred is qualitatively different than those of mundane habit. Whatever happens within this space hovers between the imaginary and the actual—even as participants remain aware that what transpires as part of the rite has no *literal* significance, they remain in thrall to the absolute reality of what is transpiring. Playing at make-believe, children do sometimes experience *genuine terror* in the face of a ‘monster,’ and such fear is not entirely mitigated by the child’s recognition that the monster is only their own mother or father in disguise. Similarly, it is moot to question whether or not the Catholic participating in the sacred rite of Holy Communion actually believes that he is consuming the body and blood of Christ—he knows full well that what is placed in front of him is only bread and wine: it is the ritual act of consumption that effects the transformation into what they are ‘in reality.’ This is paradoxical only to the extent that we fixate on the tried, common sense dogma that what is real is only that which is literally the case. The Holy Communion is not simply the imitation of an event that transpired long ago, such that it would remind us of this past event’s significance. It is rather

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

entelechy by way of re-presentation: the sacred act is not mimetic but methectic. Through reenactment, the primary reality is revealed and renewed. Symbols are never ‘merely’ symbols:

The rite produces the effect which is then not so much shown figuratively as actually reproduced in the action. The function of the rite, therefore, is far from being merely imitative; it causes the worshipers to participate in the sacred happening itself. As the Greeks would say, “it is methectic rather than mimetic.” It is “a helping-out of the action.”¹⁸⁶

I believe that the revelation of OBeRIu texts as, above all, methectic *events* on the same standing as the sacred ritual opens the most fruitful horizon for understanding them, even as it presents significant, perhaps impassible, boundaries to their interpretation. For it is the basic nature of the ritual that its real import and significance cannot be understood, as it were, from ‘outside.’ If it is true that one can get a passable sense for what is ‘at stake’ in the production of the rite, one would be mistaken to assume that an analytic account of its symbolic transpirings means one has truly understood it. Such understanding belongs solely to the participant, who has exclusive knowledge of ritual’s claim to truth because he has directly experienced it as such. To enact the rite, to participate fully in its symbolic reality, *to play along*—only this constitutes its understanding. There is no substitute.

¹⁸⁶ Huizinga, 15.

IV. Conversations: OBeRIu as Ludic Community

It's interesting how a circle of people comes together. In Moscow, you could say for sure that there are no such people [as us]. And it's interesting that people who are suited for one another find, bump into one another, as if by accident, but like a law, always.

-Leonid Lipavsky, *Conversations*¹⁸⁷

Scholars interested in the OBeRIu are invariably faced with the difficult task of marking out the boundaries that defined the group; a taxonomic task complicated by the dynamism of its lineaments. The association that would eventually become known as the OBeRIu went through several names and an array of changes in membership as it set down roots in the vibrant avant-garde culture active in Leningrad during the latter half of the 1920's. Its principal members emerged publicly in 1925 under the moniker of the "Left Flank" (Левый фланг) and subsequently went through two minor name changes—"Flank of Leftists" and "Academy of Left Classicists" (Фланг левых, Академия левых классиков, respectively)—settling eventually on the "Union of Real Art" in 1927. In addition to their association with Tufanov's *zaum* workshops at the State Institute of Artistic Culture, in 1926 Kharms and Vvedensky (along with several other soon-to-be OBeRIu members) were briefly involved in an (unsuccessfully) attempted staging of Vvedensky's play *My Mama All in Watches* (*Моя мама вся в часах*) with the experimental theater group "Radiks." The Union of Real Art itself was an incredibly short-lived organization whose public activity amounted to little more than a handful of performances around Leningrad between 1928 and 1930. According to the manifesto written on the occasion of "Three Left Hours," the group officially included, in addition to Kharms, Vvedensky, and Zabolotsky: Konstantin Vaginov, Igor Bakhterev, Boris "Doivber" Levin, Aleksandr Razumovich, Klimentii Mints, and Nikolai Kropachev. These latter apparently had little contact

¹⁸⁷ Lipavskii, "Razgovory," 25.

with the group's principal triumvirate following the collapse of the OBeRIu's public presence in 1930.

Behind and underpinning this flurry of 'official' activity, there existed yet another group—more intimate, more private, and more stable than those that graced Leningrad with public performances in the late 20's. The group, which referred to itself as the *chinari* (roughly the 'titled ones'), could trace its roots back a decade or so to the period when Druskin, Vvedensky, Lipavsky, and another young poet by the name of Vladimir Alekseev attended the Lydia Daniilovna Lentovskaya gymnasium in Leningrad. Vvedensky, Lipavsky, and Alekseev, all self-identified poets, were especially close and collaborated together on a piece entitled *Buddha's Ox* (*Бык будды*)—an evidently good-natured schoolboy caricature of Futurism that parodied the avant-garde group's poetic innovations.¹⁸⁸ Druskin, their elder by several years, was aware of the trio but did not associate with them initially. Prior to graduating in 1919, however, he had befriended Lipavsky, who just one year later would prove instrumental in convincing Druskin to transfer out of the pedagogical institute and study philosophy with him at university. Several years later, in 1922, as Alekseev drifted away from the group, Druskin grew increasingly close to Vvedensky as well. Kharms, Oleinikov, and Zabolotsky joined the circle in 1925, filling out the group and bringing the number of *chinari*, including Lipavsky's wife Tamara Aleksandrovna and literary critic Dmitrii Dmitrievich Mikhailov, to a grand total of eight individuals.

Notable here is that the group of *chinari* excludes many (most, in fact) of the writers officially associated with the OBeRIu collective as listed in the 1928 manifesto. Also conspicuous is the inclusion of several individuals among the *chinari* who were not counted

¹⁸⁸ Druskin gives this title as well as another possible variant—*The Futurist's Ox* (*Бык будды*). The confusion stems from his inability to remember how they wrote the title's second word: *буд*—nominally 'Buddha'—could also be understood as a shortened form of *budetlianin* (будетлянин), from the future third-person singular conjugation of 'to be,' *budet* (будет), a moniker preferred by some Russian Futurists in order to distance themselves from their European counterparts.

among the ranks of the Union. How does one explain this apparent discrepancy? What precisely was it that constituted the difference between these two distinct, but heavily overlapping groups? Druskin provides some commentary that may help to answer this question. The artists who comprised the OBeRIu came from varying backgrounds and, individually, their artistic outlooks and directions were commensurably heterogeneous. Their association, Druskin suggests, came about principally as a matter of professional expediency: “it was easier for young poets of little renown to perform and print if they were members of a literary organization.”¹⁸⁹ Case in point, the OBeRIu manifesto confirms Druskin’s assessment here, calling attention to the diversity of perspective among members of the group:

We expand the meaning of the object, the word, and the action. This work advances in diverse directions, each of us is in possession of his own creative personality and this circumstance often confuses some people. They speak of an accidental confluence of different people. Evidently they suppose that a literary school is some kind of monastery, where every monk is exactly the same. Our union is free and voluntary, it brings together masters, not apprentices — artists, not decorators. Each knows himself and each knows what connects him to the rest.¹⁹⁰

This does not, of course, mean that the *oberiuty* shared no common artistic vision or goal: we have already seen a great deal of agreement, especially among Kharms, Vvedensky, and Zabolotsky, regarding the status of the work of art as an epistemic tool. It does, however, suggest that the relationship between the *oberiuty* taken as a whole was essentially of a working, professional nature—they came together under a common banner to promote themselves and their art.

Conversely, the *chinari* appear to have been a more casual and personal—even intimate—collective, one that lacked the avant-garde flair and public ‘office’ of the OBeRIu or any of its

¹⁸⁹ Druskin, *Chinari*.

¹⁹⁰ Zabolotskii, “Poeziia oberiutov,” 523.

prior iterations. The OBeRlu was an *объединение*, an association or union. In contrast, Druskin consistently refers to the *chinari* as a *содружество*—literally a ‘coming together of friends’—a *community*. The group evidently met quite frequently, between three to five times a month by Druskin’s reckoning, unusually at his apartment or else at the Lipavskys’. Meetings were convened in order to read and critique each other’s work, but more broadly, also to facilitate discussion of a wide variety of subject matter, ranging from topics in literature and philosophy, to music, mathematics, religion, science, and the occult, among others too numerous to list here. As Druskin notes, the *chinari*’ “was no narrow professional and wasn’t afraid to encroach upon ‘foreign’ territory, be it linguistics, number theory, painting, or music.”¹⁹¹ Their approach to group discourse was freewheeling, irreverent, and informal in nature, interspersed with personal banter, jokes—and even the occasional game. Beyond keeping themselves amused, the *chinari* did not seem to have any concrete mission or goal. For a time Kharms, in particular, dreamed of publishing a collective journal, tentatively to be titled “Archimedes's Bath” (Ванна Архимеда) but no such project came to fruition and was evidently never seriously pursued. As a group, the *chinari* gave no performances and published no materials: in fact, they had no discernible public facet whatsoever. By all accounts, the group appears to have been an entirely self-contained phenomenon. Its members congregated for the simple purpose of spending time with one another. They met in order to foster their community. The activity at the root of this community-building, I argue, was play.

Play theorists and researchers have long been aware that ludic activity is particularly adept at creating cohesive social groups with a strong sense of identity. Most games are essentially social in nature; of course, they bring people together while they are being played, but the sense of togetherness that fun creates, as Huizinga notes in the first chapter of *Homo Ludens*, generally

¹⁹¹ Druskin, *Chinari*.

lasts longer than the game's duration and even tends towards a state of permanence: "The feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, or mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game."¹⁹² Though admittedly something of a trite example, one need only consider the phenomenon of the sports fanatic to see how substantial and enduring one's sense of belonging can be with respect to nothing more than a simple and 'pointless' game. Where games are enjoyed with any degree of regularity, repetition naturally leads to the formation of lasting social groups, formal or informal—I personally know individuals who have met with the same group of people bi-monthly to play *Dungeons and Dragons* for decades. Look to nearly any social club—chess, debate, drama, comedy—and you will inevitably find that some form of play serves as the locus of its existence. Given the essentially ludic nature of sacred rite and ritual, one could include religious groups and all manner of fraternalia under the heading of the play community, although admittedly in an unfortunate number of cases the serious wend of institutionalization has obscured this originary spirit of playfulness: "It would be rash to explain all associations which the anthropologist calls 'phratia'—e.g. clans, brotherhoods, etc.—simply as 'play communities'; nevertheless it has been shown again and again how difficult it is to draw the lines between, on the one hand, permanent social groupings—particularly in archaic cultures with their extremely important, solemn, indeed sacred customs—and the sphere of play on the other."¹⁹³ Even in those cases where play is not most obviously the *raison d'être* of a particular association or club, one will inevitably find certain necessarily ludic elements responsible for cementing the social integration of its members: costumes, titles, slang, and other forms of highly idiosyncratic language, gestures, and specialized codes of conduct.

¹⁹² Huizinga, 12.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

It is clear that at least in certain cases, play is sufficient for the formation of cohesive social community; that, as Huizinga says, “the club pertains to play as the hat to the head.”¹⁹⁴ I would like to suggest, however, that the issue at hand may in fact be deeper than conditions of sufficiency: play may be necessary for the development of any real community. Play-workers and play-researchers agree that play is integral to creating the sense of trust that is needed for a group of individuals to function effectively as a social body. Children, in particular, use play to challenge and explore limitations—this includes their own limits and the limits of their environment, but crucially it also includes the limits of others. It is through such exhaustive probing of boundaries with companions that individuals begin to understand the principles of reciprocity and care. Research shows that individuals who are deprived of free play as children have a harder time navigating interpersonal situations and demonstrate suboptimal emotional regulation and impulse control. Some will develop anti-social or even violent tendencies as adults. Psychiatrist and founder of the Nation Play Institute in California, Stuart L. Brown, who has done extensive work in this area of research, states unequivocally in his book *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens Imagination and Shapes the Soul* that if you study individuals with a history of violent crime you will undoubtedly discover that they grew up in environments where opportunities for play were either generally unavailable or actively suppressed. Of particular relevance to the cultural climate of the present-day United States, he considers play deprivation the most common psychological factor in individuals who contemplate or carry out seemingly random acts of mass murder:

A close look at the biology and neuroscience of play reveals it to be a fundamental survival aspect of all social mammals, with measurable negative consequences in controlled laboratory settings that limit or deter animal play behavior. The linkages from the objective findings in animal play deprivation to the clinical findings in human is, as yet, unproven. However, the subcortical

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

physiology and anatomy is similar, and the inability of play-deprived animals to deter aggression or to socialize comfortably with fellow pack members is demonstrable. The remediation of these socialization deficits in the animals by inclusion of play in developmentally appropriate forms reveals the effectiveness of play as a means of achieving more social normalcy and non-violent alternatives in the playful, social mammal domains.¹⁹⁵

Even at the risk of getting slightly off-topic, I quote Brown here in order to demonstrate that there is real and pertinent scientific evidence to suggest that play is not just beneficial for the development of sociality but, in fact, integral to it. The sense of trust that is essential for community building and conflict resolution proceeds directly from knowing how to play with others. While it would perhaps be maudlin to claim that every community is a “play community” it would also not be a claim totally without merit: play is the foundation of community and no community would be possible without it. This socializing element of play is precisely why a historian like Huizinga can argue that ludic activity possessed a “civilizing function” and why in the course of *Homo Ludens* he can make a compelling case that nearly all cultural spheres—law, war, philosophy, religion, art—arise and develop as play forms. The collaborate effort that is human culture does not just grow out of play, it *is* play, through and through. If, in Huizinga’s esteem, practices originally rooted in the symbolic surplus of *ludos* tend over time towards ossification as rigid and ‘serious’ institutions, there always remains the possibility of regeneration and renewal by way of the latent potential of the ludic impulse.

The *chinari*, of course, were far cry from the sort of ‘institution’ in desperate need of ludic revitalization. If anything, the group’s relative seclusion from the conventional literary establishments of the day was one of its defining characteristics. Indeed, the *chinari* existed as one historical manifestation of a distinctive tradition of Russian literary groups that have

¹⁹⁵ Stuart Brown, “Play Deprivation... A Leading Indicator for Mass Murder,” The National Institute for Play (Blog), The National Institute for Play, June 1, 2014, accessed February 28, 2021, <http://www.nifplay.org/blog/play-deprivation-a-leading-indicator-for-mass-murder/>.

intentionally operated as extra-institutional play communities. The first of such groups in Russia was arguably the Arzamas Society of Obscure People (Арзамасское общество безвестных людей), which was active over a three-year span from October of 1815 to April of 1818. The association, which took its name from a humorous pamphlet by literary statesman Count Dmitri Bludov entitled *A Vision at the Arzamas Inn, Published by the Society of Scholars* (*Видение в арзамасском трактире, изданное обществом ученых людей*), was founded by a collection of Sentimentalist-leaning litterateurs in opposition to another group, the Colloquium for Lovers of the Russian Word (Беседа любителей русского слова). This latter, headed by admiral and philologist Aleksandr Semenovich Shishkov, was the chief organ of the so-called Archaist movement. It was comprised of individuals who adopted a generally conservative approach to question of literary progress that came to the head at the beginning of the 19th century.

Laying aside the antediluvian, even if important, matters of literary convention about which the two groups debated—both certainly left a lasting mark on the development of Russian writing—the most striking point of divergence between the Colloquium for Lovers of the Russian Word and the Arzamas Society of Obscure People was the overall demeanor in which they each pursued their respective literary programs. At a time when many of Russia’s prominent writers were also statesmen, gatherings of the Colloquium were infamous for their serious air and intensely bureaucratic proceedings. From the outset it was decided that the group itself was to be composed of exactly 24 individuals and that meetings would take place once per month, exclusively in the fall and winter seasons, for the purpose of publicly reading works of exemplary literary merit. In the interest of maintaining order, the 24 members of the group were divided into four “ranks” comprised of six individuals. Each rank prepared materials for meetings in turn. Official procedure was to have the appointed chairman read one piece, after

which other members of the Colloquium were welcome to read additional works, but only if the consent of the entire society has been obtained in advance. Meetings, in their entirety, were to last no longer than two and half hours. Lest the officialdom of the Colloquium be in any way questioned, its charter and activities were approved by the Minister of National Education, Count Aleksei Kirillovich Razumovsky as well as Tsar Aleksandr I himself. The group's meetings were sometimes visited by as many as 500 attendees, including ministers of state, senators, and members of the state council. Men were expected to attend in full uniform; ladies, in lavish ball attire. Admission was granted to visitors only upon presentation of a ticket. Decorum was heavily orchestrated, dry, and stiflingly serious.

The Arzamasians conducted their meetings in a diametrically opposed air—in fact, the group appears to have formed principally in mockery of the Colloquium's stolid air of beadledom. This burlesque was unquestionably as deliberate as it was comical. Whereas the *besedisty* held their meetings, without exception, in the stately setting of Gavril Derzhavin's palace on the Fontanka River embankment in Saint Petersburg, the Arzamasians made it a point to conduct their 'official' group business in a continuously shifting variety of colorful locales—perhaps the most notable example is a gathering held within the confines of a carriage during a ride from Petersburg to nearby Tsarskoe Tselo.¹⁹⁶ Meetings of the Arzamasians followed parliamentary procedure, albeit in a highly comical key that bordered on the ludicrous: the society had bylaws, a pledge of allegiance, and elections—all of which were meticulously documented in 'galimatias,' a special, home-grown parody of bureaucratese so opaque that it was evidently scrutable only to a genuine Arzamasian. Nicknames—both for their co-conspirators and their literary enemies in the Colloquium—were a common feature of the

¹⁹⁶ Alessandra Tosi, *Waiting for Pushkin: Russian Fiction in the Reign of Alexander I (1801-1825)* (New York: Rodopi, 2006), 99.

group's discourse, as were cryptic euphemisms for significant personal, literary, or society events: Zhukovsky, for instance, was called Svetlana by members of the group—the name being taken from the eponymous heroine of one his ballads—and the premier of A. A. Shakhovskoi's *Lipetsk Spa (Липецкие воды)* in 1815 became known forever afterwards among Arzamasians as the “Lipetsk flood,” an event that formally marked the beginning of the group's own esoteric calendar. Notably, the group religiously observed peculiar and arbitrary rituals: initiates were required on induction to deliver eulogies for still-living members of the Colloquium, and all meetings were summarily concluded with the collective consumption of jellied goose, a dish for which the eponymous town of Arzamas was apparently well-known. Such rituals, procedures, and language were consciously adopted as burlesque of the Colloquium, which the Arzamasians felt could more accurately be described as an organ of state than a genuine literary society.

The *chinari* shared a great deal with their Arzamasian forebears, not least by being a playful and parodic take on more formal literary salons: Kharms humorously suggests that the group could best be understood as a “society of semiliterate scholars” (общество малограмотных ученых). The informal and irreverent demeanor common to both groups is crucial for understanding their essence and the unique place they occupy in the tradition of Russian letters. While the *chinari* lacked specifically the parodic devotion to ritual and decorum that was the calling card and apparent *raison d'être* of Arzamas, notes taken by both Druskin and Lipavsky suggest they developed their own peculiar way of conducting serious literary business in an impudent key. Heady scholarly discussion regularly gave way to undisciplined speculation, random observations, personal anecdotes, and lighthearted joking. Remarkably, one cannot read Lipavsky's *Conversations* without feeling that, no matter how *prime facie* serious or whimsical, these disparate speech registers were somehow commensurate with one another for the *chinari*,

interchangeable or perhaps even equivalent. I quote a somewhat lengthy passage below in order to provide a sense for the freewheeling and unexpected course an evening among the *chinari* could take:

Scientific conversations.

Ia. S [Druskin]: I find it difficult to say anything about my unconscious, but my subconscious is simply stupid. Problem: How to retrieve a damper fallen into the flue. You can't reach with your hand because the flue goes in loops. Solutions:

L.L. [Lipavsky]: Bring an elephant from the zoo, he'll get it with his trunk.

D. D. [Mikhailov]: Lower a cat on a rope, she'll hook it with her claws.

D. Kh. [Kharms]: To make her hook it you need to instill in her a conditioned reflex toward cast iron. Not hard to do: you need to rub all the metallic things in the room with mice.

Next: about miracles of nature.

D. Kh. [Kharms]: Crickets are the most loyal spouses among the insects, like zebras among animals. I used to keep two crickets in a cage, male and female. When the female died, the male stuck his head in between the bars and committed suicide.

L. L. [Lipavsky]: It's surprising that crocodiles hatch from eggs.

D. Kh. [Kharms]: I myself hatched from caviar. This almost led to an unfortunate misunderstanding. My uncle dropped by to offer his congratulations, it was right after the spawning and my mom was still sick in bed. So he sees the cradle and it's full of caviar. And my uncle loved to eat. He spread me on a piece of bread and had already poured a shot of vodka. Fortunately, they managed to stop him in time; it took them a long time to gather me up again.

T. A. [Tamara Lipavskaya]: So how did you feel in that state?

D. Kh. [Kharms]: I must confess that I can't recall, I was unconscious after all. All I know is that, for a long time, my parents refrained from sending me to the corner because I stuck to walls.

T. A. [Tamara Lipavskaya]: And were you unconscious for a long time?

D. Kh. [Kharms]: Until the end of high school.

After N. M.'s [Oleinikov's] return from the Caucasus he and L. L. [Lipavsky] discussed Turkic theater, Japanese volunteer torpedo pilots, bachelors, and the philosophies of the intelligentsia of various periods.¹⁹⁷

Much like the Arzamasians, the *chinari* employed the use of nicknames and mock-titles as part of their discourse: Vvedensky signed poems as the “*Chinar*’ Authority of Nonsense” (чинарь авторитет бессмыслицы) and Kharms similarly adopted the neologistic title “Gazer-*Chinar*” (чинарь-взиральник), a moniker he featured prominently for a time on his calling card.

¹⁹⁷ Lipavskii, “Razgovory,” 19-20.

Also like the Arzamasians, the *chinari* developed a specific and codified lexicon that was decipherable only by those who were properly initiated into the circle. The very term *chinar*' is the most obvious example, having no readily available meaning in standard Russian. One possible etymological connection, as Eugene Ostashevsky has noted, is with the verb *chinit*' (чинить). In modern usage this word typically means 'to fix' or 'to repair,' but even today it still retains some of its bygone connection to the process of creation: *chinit*' can also mean 'to accomplish,' 'to cause,' or 'to build.' This would perhaps make *chinar*' a Russian equivalent of 'poet' in its originary Greek sense as 'one who brings something into being.' Druskin himself traces the word to the somewhat archaic word *chin* (чин), meaning in English roughly "rank," and suggests that the operative connotation here is a hierarchy of divine order, as opposed to earthly, 'official' (официальный) rank. The religious overtones of *chin*, which can also mean "order," "rule," or "ritual" are not remiss: I have already noted the group's deeply ingrained, if playful, commitment to Orthodox theology. Moreover, Druskin writes that when he was recognized 'officially' as a member of the group in the late 20's he was not simply 'inducted' by Vvedensky but "ordained" as a *chinar*' (посвятил меня в чинари).¹⁹⁸ Other terms of special and esoteric import to members of the *chinar*' circle were the concepts of the star of absurdity (звезда бессмыслицы), the neighboring world (соседний мир), the hieroglyph (иероглиф), and that of the messenger or herald (вестник), all of which held occult and philosophical significance for the group that is not immediately available to an outsider. They evidently developed and shared enough specialized vocabulary with one another that they felt it might be pertinent to compile and comment on the shared lexicon in an expository dictionary.

Joe Peschio has lucidly discussed the prominent role that "domesticity" (домашность) played in Arzamasian discourse. Borrowing the term from the Formalist Boris Eikhenbaum,

¹⁹⁸ Druskin, *Chinari*.

Peschio defines the concept as “that private reserve, that exclusive and insular social space in which one is much freer to do as he pleases and be who he wants.”¹⁹⁹ It is “distinct and isolated from larger structures of social power”²⁰⁰ and, as a literary element, it is especially prominent in the context of the group’s internal documentation in such forms as bylaws and procedural protocols, the society’s meticulously kept meeting minutes, and the personal correspondence (i.e. written letters) exchanged between the group’s members. The operative genre running through all of these different forms of writing was known to the Arzamasians as “galimatias.” To any outside observer any instance of galimatias appears to be nonsense, but it was actually a highly specialized code language rife with double entendre and esoteric significance. A sophisticated parody of highly stylized ‘official’ language, it was decipherable only to the members of Arzamas themselves. As a genre, its primary motivation seems to have been that it was *fun*. Functionally though, it served the purpose, as all secret languages do, of strengthening social ties among members of the group and cementing their collective sense of themselves as a community, set apart from the rest of the social and literary world. Galimatias were indeed essentially a ‘domestic’ genre, not to be shared with society at large. Peschio discusses at least one instance in which a dispute arose because Nikolai Turgenev was sharing jokes about Vasilii Zhukovsky with non-Arzamasians. As a genre, galimatias “had to be policed because [its] meanings and social significance... became distorted when removed from this controlled domestic context.”²⁰¹

If one wanted to classify Arzamasian galimatias as a recognizable linguistic register, the operative category in question would have to be: bullshit. Harry G. Frankfurt has offered a compelling philosophical analysis of this mundane and under-considered speech genre in his

¹⁹⁹ Joe Peschio, *The Poetics of Impudence and Intimacy in the Age of Pushkin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 5.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 50.

short book, *On Bullshit*. What is essential to understand about Frankfurt's account is that bullshit is qualitatively different than lying—it is not, or at least is not primarily, simply a form of deception. For the liar, as Frankfurt notes, is not someone who has the luxury of being indifferent to the truth: he must, in fact, possess an accurate and even nuanced understanding of what is and is not the case. Indeed, the liar's entire deceptive project is contingent on this understanding, for to hide the truth one must know it, and to hide it effectively one must know it well. In contrast, Frankfurt suggests that, as a speech genre, bullshit seems to have a general lack of regard for the truth of the matter. While the bullshitter is always, as it were, trying to 'get away with something,' her purpose is not necessarily at odds with reality and she does not possess the liar's explicit concern with hiding what may or may not happen to be the case. As Frankfurt suggests, "she is not concerned with the truth-value of what she says.... her statement is grounded neither in a belief that it is true nor, as a lie must be, in a belief that it is not true. It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as the essence of bullshit."²⁰² Listener attitudes similarly suggest that there is a difference between bullshit and outright deception. Bullshit, in at least certain contexts, can be tolerated in a way that lying never is: it is sometimes assented to (or at least played along with) in situations where it is immediately recognizable, and even when it is called out and rejected it does not necessarily constitute a breach of trust in the same way that lies—even relatively 'insignificant' ones—do. The man who has been branded a liar is always suspect, whereas a known bullshitter is sometimes merely someone whose claims should be taken with a grain of salt. An essentially liminal attitude towards veracity is the hallmark of all bullshit, a fact that lays bare its status as a fundamentally ludic genre of speech.

²⁰² Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 33-34.

One can readily detect various registers of bullshit throughout the OBeRIu canon. It is certainly evident in the somewhat lengthy passage from the *Conversations* quoted above, concerning malfunctioning flue dampers and Kharms's rather spectacular account of his birth as a nonsentient wad of caviar. In the first instance, Druskin's invitation for solutions to what seems a rather practical problem immediately degenerates into absurdity. However, nobody seems to bat an eye at the outlandishness of suggestions such as borrowing a zoo elephant or training a cat to retrieve cast-iron objects by rubbing everything metallic with mice. The party is equally willing to entertain (at least as a pretense) the preposterous story of Kharms's birth, even going so far as to ask him how it felt to be a ball of fish ovum during the earliest years of his life. Many of the *chinari* conversations are marked by such lack of evident concern for either pragmatic feasibility or theoretical veracity. Truth, in its commonplace understanding, is simply not what is for sale here: thus Kharms can state matter-of-factly that one day upon awakening blood and milk came pouring out of his nose, and Lipavsky can regale his compatriots with tall-tales about being nearly sucked into a ceiling fan or washed down a bathtub drain. In another passage, the group discusses the possibility of rigging up an elaborate system of boatswain's chairs (of the type used by painters and window washers) so that the physical height of two interlocutors can be adjusted according to the loftiness of the subject matter under discussion: "when the conversation sinks, both go down a few steps, and then joyously climb up again."²⁰³

Such radical openness to simply entertaining and exploring ideas—at least conceptually—is detectable throughout the entirety of the *Conversations*. Another passage, for example, finds the *chinari* discussing a variant of the "hollow earth" theory, according to which we do not dwell on the convex surface of a sphere surrounded by outer space, but on the *concave* surface of a spherical hollow, with the heavens located centrally within this internal cavity. None of the

²⁰³ Lipavskii, "Razgovory," 30.

present *chinari* seem to take the notion particularly seriously, but they are nevertheless willing to *entertain* it, to consider what it would mean and what sort of corollaries it would entail.

Oleinikov, no doubt somewhat tongue-in-cheek, surmises that it would render his theory of light propagation effectively moot. Lipavsky speculates that voyages by deep-sea creatures through holes in the ocean floor to the outer void beyond the universe might account for their especially nightmarish and unearthly forms. Kharms imagines a scenario in which a high-altitude dirigible departing Russia floats up until it suddenly finds itself in America: “Everyone, of course, is flabbergasted; how it could deviate so much from its heading, they check the instruments. But in fact they simply flew straight through the universe.”²⁰⁴ That Kharms’s contribution to the conversation would be right at home in the context of his collection of *Events* (*Случаи*) is worth noting. Indeed, there is no doubt the discussions that occasioned *chinari* gatherings often served as fodder for written texts: one regularly meets with topics in the *Conversations* that dovetail seamlessly with themes present in group members’ literary productions. In this sense, *chinari* bullshit served a double function: motivated by fun, it cemented group ties and helped build a sense of community just as galimatias did the for Arzamazians. Simultaneously, bullshit served as a collaborative linguistic workshop for ideas, generating collective sources of inspiration that could then be directed in their individual literary projects—projects that would then be brought back and read to the group for the purpose of further discussion. Kharms’s account of being born as a ball of caviar is, for instance, mirrored in two equally fantastic written accounts of his birth—“Now I’ll Tell You How I Was Born” (Теперь я расскажу, как я родился) and “The Incubator” or “The Incubator Period” (Инкубатор, Инкубаторный период).

Interestingly, while bullshit itself is a linguistic timbre that is particularly concerned with facts, there is nothing specifically that precludes it from being a truth-telling genre. Bullshit is

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 31.

essentially a liminal speech register when it comes to truth, and the careless way in which it relates to reality can, I would suggest, open a particularly fecund horizon for creative forms of understanding that sincerity and well-reasoned thought do not. To paraphrase Frankfurt, bullshit is “expansive and independent” with “spacious opportunities for improvisation, color, and imaginative play.”²⁰⁵ Indeed, this ludic potential of bullshit allows it to function as a uniquely powerful, if somewhat circuitous, locus of certain kinds of understanding, an idea that comes most clearly into focus in Frankfurt’s discussion of what he calls the *bull session*—a term that applies readily to no small part of recorded *chinari* discussions. A bull session can best be understood as an informal conversation that—no matter how serious or significant its content—is never conducted entirely ‘for real.’ Frankfurt notes that such discussions often concern topics that are highly sensitive and that individuals may regard with some degree of ambivalence. These kinds of subject matter can be difficult to speak openly about if one is concerned that a ventured opinion, especially a tentative one, might be taken too seriously. “What tends to go on in a bull session,” Frankfurt observes, “is that participants try out various thoughts and attitudes in order to see how it feels to hear themselves say such things and in order to discover how others respond, without it’s being assumed that they are committed to what they say: it is understood by everyone in a bull session that the statements people make do not necessarily reveal what they believe or how they really feel.”²⁰⁶

That what an individual may give expression to within the context of a bull session is not *necessarily* an indication of belief is a notion worth pondering. It seems to be implicit in Frankfurt’s discussion here that bullshit, at least as a *domestic* genre, is capable of productively generating certain kinds of understanding: when it occurs in the context of a play community,

²⁰⁵ Frankfurt, 53.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

where everyone is ‘in’ on what is transpiring, a devil-may-care attitude towards any topic of discussion creates a safe space for the exploration of ideas. When there is an underlying assumption that nothing said can be taken altogether seriously, there is tremendous opportunity to speak freely: one can give voice and expression to misgivings or confusion that might be considered stupid or inappropriate if they were taken seriously as one’s heartfelt conviction. Somewhat paradoxically, the veritic ambiguity that hangs over the bull sessions does open a horizon for genuine sincerity: avenues become available that otherwise wouldn’t be for safely testing ideas that are peculiar or even potentially off-putting—without risking the untempered rebuke of his or her peers. With the bull session, we see again the “magic circle” that Huizinga took to be indicative of all play: everyday norms are suspended and the distinction between serious and the non-serious discussion is effectively moot. Since the epistemic waters are sufficiently muddied, and everything is said as if ‘off hand,’ interlocutors can freely explore ideas and attitudes without the risk of losing face.

Of course, in actuality, it can be difficult or impossible to draw a hard distinction between ‘serious’ and ‘non-serious’ communication within the course of a discussion. In the right sort of company, the linguistic register of even a singular conversation can move quite freely between disparate speech registers: unbridled bullshit can quickly give way to sincere discussion, and earnest debate can just as easily devolve into jocular nonsense. This is certainly true of the conversations conducted by the *chinari* and recorded in writing by Lipavsky. Yes, a good deal of what was talked about by the group certainly constitutes ‘nonsense’ of the sort captured quite astutely in Frankfurt’s notion of the bull session (and there is more to this ribald jocularly than initially meets the eye), but it is clear also that at times they pursued forms of understanding that were both more sober and more substantive. However, it is not always easy to draw the

distinction and in certain instances it may be impossible. Not only do the *chinari* themselves shuffle seamlessly back and forth between speech registers, it is also true that even apparently nonsensical, ‘bullshit’ points of discussion were sometimes motivated by more serious interests. The aforementioned discussion of hollow earth theory, for example, begins when Zabolotsky mentions an article he read in an American magazine. While I cannot comment with absolute surety, in all likelihood Zabolotsky is here referencing the work of Cyrus Teed, a American medical practitioner, alchemist, and fringe religious leader who, in the early 20th century, advanced his concave hollow earth theory through publications produced by the print organs of his utopian cult, the Koreshan Unity. While the conversation undoubtedly unfolds, more or less, as bullshit, it also seems likely that Zabolotsky and other members of the group would have read publications like Teed’s with genuine interest—an attitude quite fitting for a group who generally expressed disdain to immediately acknowledge as true anything derived from widely-accepted, but ‘abstract,’ scientific practice.

That conversations can unfold to varying degrees of seriousness depending on their subject matter and the personal temperaments of their participants should not blind us to their essentially playful nature. Indeed, we can allow our analysis of bullshit and the bull session to open a path for a consideration of conversation more generally construed. Gadamer is, again, helpful in this regard. When we speak offhandedly of conversation as an artform we perhaps say more than we really know: there is indeed a particular art to conducting a conversation or participating in a discussion. Indeed, genuine conversation shares with the work of art a fundamentally ludic essence and, crucially for our discussion of the *chinari*, takes shape as a medium through which understanding transpires. Gadamer rightly points that a conversation is much like a game in the sense that it is never wholly determined by the whims of its participants. One can, of course,

speaking cogently of conversational genres, some of which may demand more or less rigid behavior decorum or conformance to particular registers of speech, but even more informal and improvisational forms of discussion are structured by an expectation of mutuality as a fundamental term of engagement. Anyone even passably familiar with improvisation in a theatrical setting knows that such performances take direction from “yes and” thinking. Probably the singular golden-rule of all forms of improvisation, “yes and” captures in two words the idea that one must accept and work with what others contribute to a narrative process and make one’s own contribution on the basis of this established assent. What is true of theatrical improvisation is also true of conversation: one must be able to listen and affirm what has already been said at least as well as one is able to speak and impart one’s own perspective. Even when circumscribed by convention and stricter rules of decorum, there is always some element of improvisation at work in a conversation: discussions tend to ‘play themselves out’ in ways that cannot be wholly controlled or directed by their participants. Also much like a game, the outcome of a conversation can never be known in advance. Gadamer suggests that the most successful conversations are the ones that take us into unfamiliar territory:

We say that we ‘conduct’ a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders than the led. No one knows in advance what will come out of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us. Thus we can say that something was a good conversation or that it will ill fated. All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it—i.e., that it allows something to ‘emerge’ which henceforth exists.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Gadamer, 401.

Conversations seldom unfold in the way we expect them to, and one can never tell what kinds of speech will push a discussion forward or arrest it: such things as crosstalk, non sequiturs, and bullshit are sometimes a hindrance, but at other junctures they can be just what is necessary to help a discussion along. The most successful conversations—and certainly the most interesting ones—are always unique experiences that take us in unexpected directions.

If we follow Gadamer here, we must accept that conversations are always specifically directed towards the ‘event’ of understanding. Some attention should be paid to what he means by this. Crucially, understanding here is not simply a matter of clearing aside subjectivity for the sake of better grasping an objective state of affairs. Rather, understanding in Gadamer’s sense is in inherently intersubjective *process* in which parties are able to successfully reconcile opposing perspectives. To reach understanding means, above all, to achieve consensus: “understanding is primarily agreement.”²⁰⁸ In this sense, the logic of a conversation is basically different than that of debate: conversation encompasses more than simply attempting to persuade through rhetoric or logical argumentation. Rather, according to Gadamer, a conversation is most aptly understood as a situation in which we our prejudices are “brought into play.” As an active conversational participant I, in fact, *risk* my prejudices, for I thereby open myself up to the possibility that they require reexamination. As Gadamer explains: “our own prejudice is properly brought into play by being put at risk. Only by being given full play is it able to experience the other’s claim to truth and make it possible for him to have full play himself.”²⁰⁹ If two interlocutors allow themselves to be ‘guided’ by the topic under discussion—if they, “less the leaders than the led,” allow the essence of the subject matter at hand to emerge and come to presentation—this playful back and forth of perspectives turns out to be no mere ‘trading’ of opinions, but is itself becomes

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 186.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 310.

the production of substantive agreement. Understanding occurs as a ‘fusion’ of horizons “in which something is expressed that is not only mine or my [interlocutor’s], but common.”²¹⁰

The fusion of horizons that Gadamer speaks of does mean that one perspective subsumes another. Nor does it mean that two interlocutors merely hear the other, consider what they have to say, and respectfully agree to disagree. Rather, I myself must find something in the perspective of my interlocutor that is worthy of recognition, just as they must likewise appropriate something from my position that they can apply to their own picture of the world. Each participant should come away from a conversation having discovered something that previously went unrecognized. We always, says Gadamer, “understand in a *different* way, *if we understand at all.*”²¹¹ A conversation conducted in genuine openness, then, is always an event that changes its participants in some way: crucially, for Gadamer, this fusion of horizons is an event that does not only produce knowledge—but also produces community. More precisely, this communal aspect of understanding is not merely incidental to the achievement of truth, but is constitutive of and integral to it:

Something is placed at the center, as the Greeks say, which the partners in a dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another. Hence reaching an understanding on the subject matter of a conversation necessarily means that a common language must first be worked out in the conversation. This is not an external matter of simply adjusting our tools; nor is it even right to say that the partners adapt themselves to one another but, rather, in a successful conversation they both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.²¹²

²¹⁰ Ibid., 406.

²¹¹ Ibid., 307.

²¹² Ibid., 386-387.

One detects here in Gadamer a potential re-cognition of the legitimacy of the *sensus communis* as a form of knowledge that gathers human beings and binds them together as a community. Truth—or at least some *kinds* of truth—have an irreducibly normative component; they find validity and purchase only when they are formulated, assented to, and shared by a group.

Conversation, at least a literary pretense, is a genre one encounters with conspicuous frequency throughout the entirety of the OBeRIu canon. A significant number of works produced by various *oberiuty* explicitly take shape as dialectic between two or more principal characters. In some cases this dialogic format seems to be a more or less incidental occasion for showcasing ribald nonsense. In this vein, some of Kharm's shorter dramas come to mind—in such works his characters are typically argumentative, mendacious, and closed-minded. Texts such as “The Mathematician and Andrei Semenovich” (Математик и Андрей Семенович) seem to showcase, more than anything, a failure to reach any kind of substantive understanding. Many of them end in violence. In other cases, however, the dialectical form of OBeRIu writings strikes a far more productive tone and it is clearly of significance that they unfold in and through discussions that involve multiple voices and differing points of view. Zabolotsky's longer poems “The Triumph of Agriculture” and “The Mad Wolf,” discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation, are fine examples of literary dialogue conducted in a more productive key: something substantive is worked out in these fictional discussions that suggests not only new ways of understanding but, importantly, also transfigures and revitalizes the imaginary communities that Zabolotsky presents to us in his writing.

One could point to Vvedensky's *A Certain Quantity of Conversations* (Некоторое количество разговоров) as another OBeRIu text that employs fictional dialogue with purpose: it is clearly significant that Vvedensky's text unfolds as a series of discussions, that—as

Vvedensky states repeatedly throughout the work—his characters are “conversing” or “exchanging thoughts.” *A Certain Quantity of Conversations*, in which three unnamed characters pass through a series of ten absurd dramatic situations, showcases nonsense of a type that is typical of Vvedensky’s oeuvre: the *Conversations* proceed through stops, starts, and non sequiturs, its principal interlocutors voicing their thoughts and observations in interjections that are incomplete, off-topic, or otherwise seemingly out of place. A short excerpt from the first “Conversation about the Insane Asylum” will be enough to get a sense of the a-logical manner in which much of Vvedensky’s imaginary dialogue proceeds:

Первый: Вот он какой сумашедший дом. Здравствуй, сумашедший дом.
Второй: Я так и знал, что он именно такой.
Третий: Я этого не знал. Такой ли он именно.
Первый: Пойдемте ходить. Всюду все ходят.
Второй: Тут нет птиц. Есть ли тут птицы.
Третий: Нас осталось немного и нам осталось недолго.
Первый: Пишите чисто. Пишите скучно. Пишите тучно. Пишите звучно.
Второй: Хорошо мы так и будем делать.²¹³

First: So that’s how the insane asylum is. Hello, insane asylum.
Second: I knew it’s just like that.
Third: I didn’t know. Is it just like that.
First: Let’s walk. Everyone walks everywhere.
Second: There are no birds here. Are there birds here.
Third: Not many of us remain and we won’t remain for long.
First: Write purely. Write boringly. Write richly. Write sonorously.
Second: Good that’s how we’ll do it.

Clearly, ideas are subject to some degree of exchange here. This snippet of conversation, however, seems to have no biding thread and no immediately recognizable trajectory. Much of the dialogue basically consists of non sequiturs, and considered in isolation, the statements themselves are notable for their ambiguity. This is especially apparent in the original Russian text, where, for example, Vvedensky uses the interrogative particle “ли”—which normally

²¹³ Aleksandr Vvedenskii “Nekotoroe kolichestvo razgovorov (ili nachisto peredelannyi temnik),” in *Krugom vozmozhno bog* (Sankt-Peterburg: Azbuka, 2012), 199-200.

indicates the posing of a question—without placing a question mark at the end of the sentence as required. The effect produced here is rather odd—especially aloud, one stumbles over whether to read the interjections with the intonation of a question or a statement. The ambiguous, fragmentary nature of his character’s speech is underwritten by Vvedensky’s narrative commentary, in which he admonishes his readers repeatedly: “Respect the poverty of language. Respect impoverished thoughts.”²¹⁴ Putting aside the complicated question of what exactly is nonsensically ‘played out’ in the series of conversational episodes that compose *A Certain Quantity of Conversation*, it is notable that in the tenth “Final Conversation” something takes place that generates a significant tonal shift: the three disparate voices that have been communicating ‘out of sync’ with one another throughout the previous nine dialogues suddenly begin to work in concert as one:

Первый: Я из дому вышел и далеко пошёл.
 Второй. Ясно, что я пошёл по дороге.
 Третий. Дорога, дорога, она была обсажена.
 Первый. Она была обсажена дубовыми деревьями.
 Второй. Деревья, те шумели листьями.
 Третий. Я сел под листьями и задумался.
 Первый. Задумался о том.
 Второй. О своём условно прочном существовании.
 Третий. Ничего я не мог понять.
 Первый. Тут я встал и опять далеко пошёл.²¹⁵

First: I left home and walked a ways.
 Second: Clearly, I walked along a road.
 Third: The road, the road, it was planted all along.
 First: It was planted all along with oak trees.
 Second: The trees, these made some noise with leaves.
 Third: I sat under the leaves and thought.
 First: I thought about that.
 Second: About my own contingently durable existence.
 Third: I could not understand anything.
 First: So I got up and walked a ways again.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 200.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 218.

The rest of the “Final Conversation” continues in much the same fashion. Notably, the situation seems to be less that the individual interlocutors are really speaking more coherently than in the previous conversations and more that their voices work together to produce something meaningful. Each unit of dialogue, considered in isolation, remains somewhat fragmentary—sometimes the speakers still decline to express themselves in complete sentences. Unlike the previous nine of Vvedensky’s *Conversations*, however, crosstalk here is reduced to a minimum. The inchoate voices instead come together and work in chorus: each speaker picks up, as it were, where the other leaves off, weaving together a single, substantive message from what would otherwise be rudimentary, fragmented speech.

Some comments made by Druskin in his essay on the *Chinari* bears out the interpretation I’ve suggested above: “Vvedensky has a play ‘A Certain Quantity of Conversations.’ In the seventh and tenth conversations, three interlocutors understand each other so clearly and precisely that a sentence started by one, sometimes even the first word spoken by him, is continued by the next interlocutor.”²¹⁶ He goes on to say that such preternatural union with respect to understanding indicates that the “neighboring worlds” of Vvedensky’s imaginary interlocutors “are not only close, but completely coincide.”²¹⁷ Indeed, in the course of Druskin’s brief commentary on *A Certain Quantity of Conversation*, he provides a small but telling glimpse of the significance that the concept of the “neighboring world” had for Vvedensky and the other *chinari*. The term was evidently introduced to the group by Lipavsky, who as an amateur linguist had independently developed a view similar to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the notion that the world looks different to speakers of different languages. Druskin tells us that Lipavsky held the

²¹⁶ Druskin, *Chinari*.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

view that language “divides the World into parts in order to understand it.”²¹⁸ He evidently believed not only that the “lifeworlds” of speakers of different languages could be different, but also that even among speakers of one and the same language there could be considerable differences in how the world looks. Even as we share in the common the basic normative systems that structure language and make it mutually intelligible, each of us uses language in idiosyncratic ways: the differences may seem small, but they can also be quite significant. The idea that the other is himself in possession of a unique and distinctive lifeworld gives rise to the Lipavsky’s notion that his world “neighbors” mine: “Each person sees the same world in his own way, each has his own conception of the world—his own world; I can call this world neighboring on my world.”²¹⁹ In Lipavsky’s understanding worlds can closely neighbor my own—perhaps the lifeworld of an intimate friend would fall under this category—or from a distance, as presumably the lifeworlds of animals or plants do. Druskin suggests that “imaginary worlds” (воображаемые миры)—perhaps these are the kind one encounters in a literary work—are especially far-flung, but even these peculiar worlds somehow neighbor our own: indeed, “heralds” (вестники) were conceived by the *chinari* to be hypothetical visitors from such worlds that we can occasionally communicate with in some fashion when they drift close enough to our own. In any case, Druskin’s commentary on “A Certain Quantity of Conversations” here suggests that the distance between any two worlds is not fixed, and that dialectic can be an effective way of bringing them closer together, perhaps even to the point of coincidence. But this already resonates uncannily with Gadamer’s notion of a “fusion of horizons.”

Lipavsky was undoubtedly the figure for whom the phenomenon of conversation clearly held the most noteworthy significance, and his previously considered *Tractatus Concerning*

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

Water and *Investigation of Horror* both take shape as variants on a conversation unfolding between four mysterious interlocutors. Not only are these texts written in dialogic form, but each of them contains short passages where Lipavsky explicitly thematizes conversation and considers its essence more closely. In the *Tractatus*, the relevant material occurs towards the conclusion of the text, where the character known only as the Champion observes: “Our conversation is at an end. Our closed system is at an end.”²²⁰ Conversations are not the only phenomenon that Lipavsky refers to using the notion of a ‘closed system’—at other junctures he speaks also of dreams and literary texts as bounded worlds that operate according to their own particular rules in a way that resonates strongly with Huizinga’s concept of the magic circle. This similarity is all the more striking when considered in light of the very opening to *Conversations*, where several of the *chinari* provide in turn an exhaustive list of their interests. Hidden in the middle of Lipavsky’s own exorbitantly eclectic list, he states that he is interested in the existence of “the chess board as a special world.”²²¹ Lipavsky here employs the term *особый*, which can mean ‘special,’ but might also be glossed as ‘particular,’ ‘distinct,’ or ‘separate.’ Lipavsky may not explicitly reference play as a concept, but there is evidence to suppose he had an intuitive sense of the fact that game realities constitute their own circumscribed worlds and that one can speak meaningfully of texts, dreams, and conversations in similar terms. “So what is the outcome of our conversation?” asks the Diminutive Greek at the close of the *Tractatus*.²²² And the enigmatic Fourth Speaker answers him with a parable about a man who receives a bank check for a large sum of money: “He used to buy goods in just one store, say, a shoe store, and so he thought his check was for shoes. Then he discovered that the check was for money: that is to say for nothing,

²²⁰ Leonid Lipavsky, “Water Tractatus” in *OBERIU: An Anthology of Russian Absurdism*, ed. Eugene Ostrashevsky (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 215.

²²¹ Lipavskii, “Razgovory,” 8.

²²² Lipavsky, “Water Tractatus,” 216.

for anything. He was glad.”²²³ A conversation is always a peculiar change of venue. Conducted in the ludic spirit, it becomes a ‘world’ that is radically open for anything its interlocutors may find pertinent to the topic at hand. Echoing Lipavsky we could say a conversation is for nothing in particular—that is, for anything at all.

The importance that conversation held for Lipavsky as a specific mode of communication is especially apparent in a short passage found in the *Investigation*—a passage that resonates uncannily with Gadamer’s account of dialectic presented earlier in this chapter. In an interjection that does not appear attributable to any of the texts four characters, Lipavsky muses:

How wonderful is unselfish conversation! No one needs anything from anyone, and everyone says when he wants, what he wants. It is like a river: it does not hurry and flows in the direction of the sea, now slowly, now quickly, sometimes straight, sometimes bending to the right or left. Two goddesses stand behind the shoulders of the interlocutors: the goddess of freedom and the goddess of seriousness. They watch the people favorably and with respect, they listen with interest to the conversation.²²⁴

If, again, Lipavsky does not explicitly reference play in this excerpt, there is, I think, a rather remarkable intuition of the essentially ludic nature of genuine dialectic. Lipavsky clearly recognizes, like Gadamer, that one does not conduct a conversation so much as one is conducted by it. Engaging in dialogue means to become drawn into and caught up in something that possesses its own logic and follows its own particular course. Perhaps more significantly, I think Lipavsky quite elegantly captures something of the essence of the ludic spirit in his image of the two goddesses that “stand behind the shoulders of the interlocutors” and observe their discourse “favorably and with respect.” These two figures—the goddess of freedom and the goddess of seriousness—beautifully capture the interstitial nature of play as activity that essentially defies any rigid dichotomy between levity and gravity. What is ‘at stake’ in any given conversation

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Lipavskii, “Issledovanie uzhasa,” 80.

may indeed be quite a serious matter, but this does not mean that discourse will necessarily benefit from an oppressive air of severity. Indeed, taking *anything* too seriously can quickly become a hindrance to open discussion: some degree of levity—of freedom—in how we speak and express ourselves can only benefit the communal task that is the achievement of genuine understanding.

With these considerations, we find ourselves in an ideal position to consider Lipavsky's *Conversations* more closely: they suggest an approach to what is otherwise simply a highly eccentric, meandering, and cryptic collection of disparate textual episodes. That the *chinari* conversations were, above all, domestic and play-filled affairs, should always be kept in mind: in addition to genre of bullshit discussed earlier in this chapter, it is worth noting that at several junctures in the course of *Conversations* Lipavsky makes note of the fact that discussion has explicitly given way to game playing. He tells us, for instance, that on one occasion: "A. V. [Vvedensky] and L.L [Lipavsky] vied with one another for range of vision with the right and left eyes, for the speed of multiplication in the mind, for erudition (the names of the ministers and members of the State Council) and for who had forgotten more in their lives."²²⁵ In another episode, during a lull in conversation, Zabolotsky suggests it may be preferable to "play in silence" (поиграть молча) rather than try to continue speaking when there is nothing to say. So the *chinari* proceed to play a game that Lipavsky refers to only as "boats" (играть в кораблики).²²⁶ One final example will serve to cement the highly playful nature of *chinari* gatherings. Shortly before the aforementioned boat episode, there occurs a passage in which Oleinikov has just read to those present at Zabolotsky's his poem "Praise to Inventors" (Хвала изобретателям). The host states matter-of-factly that he enjoyed the poem, but takes issue with

²²⁵ Lipavskii, "Razgovory," 21.

²²⁶ Ibid., 24.

Oleinikov's use of the word *бирюльки*—the Russian equivalent of the English 'spillikins' or 'jackstraws'—a game in which players attempt to remove assorted baubles from a pile one at a time without disturbing the others. "Do you mean to say by this that it's a lot of tripe?" retorts Oleinikov, evidently playing off a just-palpable slant rhyme between *бирюльки* and *требухи* (tripe).²²⁷ At this juncture, Lipavsky interjects with the following commentary: "Here began a special verbal game, consisting in the transformation, substitution, and tossing about of words according to elusive stylistic features. It is impossible to convey; but a very large part of the conversations among this circle of people boiled down to such a game; N. M. [Oleinikov] most often emerged the victor. In this instance, it began with tripe and ended with head meat."²²⁸ While it is perhaps unsurprising to find a group of poets passing the time with word association games, Lipavsky's observation that such games made up an inordinate amount of *chinari* conversation, in conjunction with the other previously mentioned episodes of gaming, underscores the basically ludic motivation of the group's gatherings.

Gatherings of the *chinari* were relaxed, domestic affairs, and yet they undoubtedly took this collaborative community building seriously, and the group certainly had its share of heady discussions. Lipavsky's 'goddess of seriousness' is certainly present among the group. A remarkably rich intermingling of voices and ideas, the text of *Conversations* offers the inquisitive a thorough and powerful account of the myriad philosophical and artistic questions that the circle of *chinari* regularly concerned themselves with. In this respect, *Conversations* constitutes a kind of ur-text for the group as a whole and is of unparalleled importance for ascertaining the depth and breadth of their collaborative literary endeavor: when one is struggling to find foothold in a text produced by one of the *chinari*, it is a fair bet to assume that

²²⁷ Ibid., 23.

²²⁸ Ibid.

one can find some direction somewhere in the *Conversations*. The subject matter taken up for discussion at gatherings of the *chinari* were varied and eclectic—language, literature and art were, of course, regular fare, but the group also explored a broad range of topics in the sciences and mathematics, as well as a multitude of issues with a philosophical bent. These included (but were certainly not limited to) time, death, and God, as well as such topics as the nature of happiness, sexuality, and dreams. In general, the *chinari* approached these subjects in a thoroughly ‘existential’ manner that made even the most abstract of them suitable not only for conceptual theorizing but also discussion of a deeply personal, but equally serious, nature. Indeed, for the *chinari* philosophical reflection was never simply an occasion for abstract understanding, but always oriented towards praxis. Late in the text of conversations, Kharms’s speaks of Eastern ‘yogis’ in a way that cements this point: “they are wise people. They discovered how to live correctly, the exact rules of the game of life. And this is the whole point.”²²⁹ Similarly to the manner in which the OBeRIu performance of self, discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, was not simply about the production of narrowly ‘aesthetic’ spectacle, but a question of playful living, neither did the group’s interest in philosophy primarily concern the production of abstract theories: at issue almost always was a manifest need to uncover effective strategies for playing what Kharms here calls the “game of life.”

The substantive matters discussed in Lipavsky’s *Conversations* are rich, varied, and—due in no small part to their authentic conversational register— frankly somewhat overwhelming. One could easily write an entire book working primarily from material found in this text alone. I leave close examination of content for future work. At present, I am far more interested in the dialogic form of the *Conversations* than I am in arduously unpacking the warp and weft of its subject matter. This latter would be no easy task: it is important to state matter-of-factly here that

²²⁹ Ibid., 66.

these are not meticulously crafted literary productions but *real* conversations. While there are undoubtedly omissions—occasionally the text provides only a brief gloss concerning what was talked about and by whom—Lipavsky recorded the conversations with care. They possess as much authenticity as one can reasonably expect from someone who was not only trying to write down what he heard by hand, but also himself taking part in discussions as they unfolded around him. Undoubtedly, the work of Lipavsky the archivist here bears out Gadamer’s account of how conversations tend to unfold organically in the playful risking of perspectives. Above the bullshit, crosstalk, random asides, and good-natured harassment that are the hallmark of discourse among close friends, there is a consistent ‘back and forth’ throughout the entirety of the *Conversations*, a generally respectful and productive trading of opinions and viewpoints. Members of the group display a fundamental willingness to listen to one another and consider what the others have to say. They also demonstrate an ability to express straightforwardly their opinions and ideas—as opposed to *arguing* them—an attitude very much in keeping with an adage of Lipavsky’s that rather than chase the “illusion” of reliability through proof and argument it is preferable to simply say: “I have penetrated and saw that this is so; you also should understand.”²³⁰

Being, more or less, authentic recordings of real discourse, Lipavsky’s *Conversations* pointedly showcase Gadamer’s observation that the event of understanding either happens naturally or it doesn’t. Sometimes the *chinari* are able to come to some kind of substantive agreement concerning the topics they take up for discussion, and sometimes they are quite clearly at odds. The majority of time, I would argue, it is hard to say: because the group allows their discourse to evolve naturally—the conversation never seems forced—it is subject to frequent and abrupt shifts in both tone and subject matter. They simply pick up threads of conversation that are ready to hand, follow them for a while, and drop them, sometimes only to

²³⁰ Ibid., 40.

pick them back up for reconsideration at another point in time. The *chinari* themselves seem to be keenly aware of and unperturbed by this fact: “In conversations,” Druskin observes “people go from one theme to another according to some kind of law; then they suddenly cast aside a line they were following and start up another.”²³¹ Shortly thereafter Lipavsky, evidently in agreement with Druskin’s earlier point, remarks that “when ants carry a piece of straw, they don’t at all carry it along the shortest route. That, I suppose, is exactly how people also get to where they’re going.”²³² The group was undoubtedly more interested in the journey than the destination, and it is clear that they derived a great deal of pleasure from their discussions, whatever their outcome.

If the *chinari* were not always in substantive agreement about the topics that interested them, there was an incontrovertible harmony to the register of their discussions and they certainly seemed to be in agreement concerning the collaborative nature of their philosophico-literary project. It is worth noting that at the very end of the *Conversations* Lipavsky closes with some commentary about why precisely he devoted an entire year to recording the discourse of his circle of friends. “I was interested in photographing conversations,” he writes, “in that which, it seems, no one had ever done before: I tried to preserve the words of several people connected with one another at a time when their connection began to disintegrate; I desired to assemble an inventory of personal thoughts, in order to figure out what to do next.”²³³ Lipavsky’s observation that during his transcription project in 1933 and 34 the group was beginning to fall apart bears consideration, for it suggests that earlier there was, perhaps, more cooperative energy and more substantive agreement among the *chinari* about the things that interested them. Certain concepts referenced or alluded to in individual works of the *chinari*—heralds, hieroglyphs, neighboring

²³¹ Ibid., 64.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid., 69.

words—were undoubtedly felt to be communal intellectual property; ‘defining’—or at least outlining a general sense—of these concepts was felt to be an essentially collaborative affair, and in certain passages from the *Conversations* Lipavsky criticizes his comrades for flagging in their mission. Lamenting that the dictionary of shared lexicon they wanted to create has not come to fruition, Lipavsky scolds the group:

Neither you, Ia. S. [Druskin], nor the others, desire cooperation and you are not capable of it. You don’t even obey the rules that you yourselves have established. And most importantly, each of you is sure that only he does wonderful things; there is actually no need for other people. Disrespect for one’s neighbors is an unenviable privilege. Yes, you don’t expend the effort to understand what the other thinks.²³⁴

If the passage here calls attention to a present lack of cohesion among the circle, it also underscores the notion that at one time collaboration was felt to be of the utmost importance. Lipavsky, at least, has retained some sense of this illustrious past and calls attention to it at certain points in his documentation:

How far away was the time when N. M. [Oleinikov] proclaimed the wisdom of the grasshopper and inked a beetle on a placard. When D. Kh. [Kharms] himself believed, that not today but tomorrow he would become a saint and begin to work miracles; while in the meantime he was preparing himself for this, giving himself enemas every day. When the others were also shining, each with whatever they had. Now a long epoch of thoughtlessness had come.²³⁵

Towards the end of *Conversations*, Zabolotsky and Lipavsky, aware that the group appears to be splintering, discuss possible reasons for a lack of cohesion among the *chinari*. After the two touch on the difficulties of financial and material circumstance, as well as the various personal shortcomings of the members of the group (Kharms is indifferent, Druskin is “despotic,” etc.), Zabolotsky ultimately suggests a much simpler reason for what felt like the group’s inevitable disbandment:

²³⁴ Ibid., 13.

²³⁵ Ibid., 24.

N.A. [Zabolotsky]: That's what it all comes down to: creating conditions to give your maximum in art. The box turned out to be poor lodging, it follows that we should smash and walk out of it. Okay, so our group is falling apart. When I had comrades in high school it also seemed, will I really ever be without them? But life creates something new all the time. Now our company is no longer the thing, now — save yourself if you can.

L. L. [Lipavsky]: Yes, whoever can, will. But I think this was the only possible way out. Today it's clear: you're left to yourself.

N. A. [Zabolotsky]: The main thing is that it's no longer fun to be together. Have you seen how N. M. [Oleinikov] goes out visiting? Sullen, collar up, little cap, long nose turned downward, a pod of pepper in his pocket in case there will be vodka.²³⁶

The operative word used by Zabolotsky here is *fun*—that delicate balance between seriousness and levity that creates enduring engagement. The social and artistic cohesion of the *chinari* ultimately depended on play. The seriousness of their thinking, the felt importance of their collaborative literary endeavor—this was dependent on the consciously playful manner in which the communal project of the *chinari* took shape. In the absence of the symbolic excess that is the mark of all play, without a felt sense of pleasure and enjoyment—without fun—the *chinari* community simply could not sustain itself and continue its work. But it is, perhaps, not at all as depressing as it might seem to be. The group itself seems to understand that all communities have a natural lifespan. Their coming together as well as their falling apart is a matter of circumstance. Like one prolonged 'event' of understanding, their success and their failure are not something over which we exercise ultimate control.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer's interest in conversational dialectics foregrounds the real focus of his investigation, which is the art of textual interpretation. To read and interpret, he argues, is to become creatively involved in a conversation with tradition. Texts, even those from the remote past, really do *speak* to us, and they demand to be understood just as do interlocutors in a spoken dialogue:

²³⁶ Ibid., 68.

“Dialectic is also the art of seeing things in the unity of an aspect... it is the art of forming concepts through working out the common meaning. What characterizes a dialogue... is precisely this: that in dialogue spoken language—in the process of question and answer, giving and taking, talking at cross purposes and seeing each other’s point—performs the communication of meaning that, with respect to written tradition, is the task of hermeneutics.²³⁷

In the years that followed the demise of *chinari* community, Druskin—one of the few to survive the purges of the Terror and the Leningrad siege—continued to work independently with the conceptual material produced by the group. He did so, in part, by imaginatively continuing his conversations with Lipavsky, both unconsciously in dreams and consciously through his writings.²³⁸ For contemporary scholars with an interest in the OBeRIu, the *Conversations* constitute a special document, one that allows us to bear witness to a unique and living process of thought. That so much of the group’s thinking was never formally codified—that it remains somewhat vague and ill-defined—should perhaps be seen more as an opportunity than a frustration. The intellectual work and community of the *chinari* lives on, in a sense, through Lipavsky’s timely archival effort in the *Conversations*. We are blessed with the good fortune to continue them.

²³⁷ Gadamer, 376.

²³⁸ Marina Lupishko, “In Search of Hieroglyphs: Iakov Druskin's Bach ‘Lexicon’ in the Aesthetic Context of the Russian and Soviet Avant-garde,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 72, no. 4 (October 2019): 650.

Epilude: Literature as Festival

We need a dream-world in order to discover the features of the real world we think we inhabit.

— Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*

At many points in the development of this dissertation I have had occasion to walk out onto my porch in the dead of night when the world is quiet and, under the teeming, silvery auspices of the Milky Way, to ponder the sheer strangeness that constitutes the activity of reading. Largely, I have been left with a profound feeling of awe—as much at the fact that we manage to take the experience for granted as at the sheer ludicrousness of the process itself. Physically speaking, a book is little more than a compact parcel of tree-flesh that has been ground down, pulped, pressed into sheets, and dried. Using ink, these flat sheets of wood-fiber are marked with a series of special squiggles and subsequently bound together. This bundle of cellulose and pigment is now available to be picked up and read—which means, especially in regard to a work of fiction, something like: looking with intensity at the squiggles and hallucinating. Sometimes vividly. For hours at a clip. Often, the intense experience of emotion is involved. And this is to say nothing of one of literature’s more miraculous feats: that through a work of literature the thoughts and images of another human being, even from the very remote past, become present and accessible to us. They say that dead men tell no tales, and yet an enormous corpus of literary tradition clearly speaks against this supposed truism: “written tradition, once deciphered and read, is to such an extent pure mind that it speaks to us as if in the present. That is why the capacity to read, to understand what is written, is like a secret art, even a magic that frees and binds us. In it time and space seem to be superseded.”²³⁹ When, in the introduction to this dissertation, I called reading an “altered state” I meant it—though further

²³⁹ Gadamer, 163.

reflection on the material realities of the process have led me to believe I was perhaps saying more than I knew at the time. Now, it strikes me as something of scandal that, without batting an eye, we somehow take all of this in stride.

That the activity of reading constitutes a kind of ‘magical’ experience, in which one can, for a time, be transported to strange and fantastical worlds, is probably not an idea that any of us are entirely unfamiliar with. Typically, however, when one encounters this sentiment, it is often being bandied about as a kind of platitude for children—an effective way to make young students feel excited about the intimidating prospect of mastering literacy. It is seldom, I think, taken seriously by adults as an authentic or ‘realistic’ account of what reading is. If my research for this dissertation has taught me anything, however, it is that this idea is perhaps deserving of genuine consideration. We might even take it at face value. It seems to me more than simply a ‘metaphor.’ Engaged reading really is a very peculiar kind of experience, which one journalist has aptly characterized in a recent publication that I think is worth quoting here:

The cover [of a book] is also a ritual boundary... There is an inside and an outside. The cover indicates that you are about to start something that will have its own experiential process of buildup and completion, distinct from the world outside. It is a warped space in experience: there is depth to it. It needs to be penetrated, and some kind of essential secret needs to be revealed. To understand it is to go through it. This means there is necessarily something held back that emerges in the process of engagement as it builds towards its own internal climax—a world with an inner and an outer, a surface and a depth, a front and a back, a manifest and a latent, a seen and an unseen.²⁴⁰

The idea that reading constitutes, first and foremost, the occasion for a deep and transfigurative kind of passive *experience* is one that I fear is not taken nearly as seriously as it should be, particularly in the prim halls of institutional academia, where it seems to me that ‘understanding’ a book is generally taken to entail the active ‘mastery’ of literary material through close,

²⁴⁰ Daniel Silver, “The Logic of the Like: Bourdieu or Dewey,” *Examined Life*, *The Point* no. 24, March 24, 2021, <https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/the-logic-of-the-like/>.

intellectual analysis. I do not wish to be misunderstood on this point, so let me state this straightforwardly: there is nothing to suggest that close reading *necessarily* takes anything away from our engagement with a literary work. I believe in fact that it can add to it. My concern is rather that when critical analysis is overemphasized at the expense of *understanding qua experience*, this has the capacity to eclipse what is essential about a work of literary art: namely, its power to transform us and to enrich our world. If you're clever, you can bullshit your way through textual analysis—you might even learn something in the process—but ultimately you're only duping yourself. Intellection can be faked. Experience cannot. If analytical interpretation can deepen our engagement of a text in important ways, it is neither necessary, nor sufficient, for the kind of experience I am speaking of here: when it comes to art, to understand is to undergo.

There exist, I think, certain works of art that make this unbridgeable rift between analysis and experience especially palpable. Such works seem to defy all of our attempts to find a firm intellectual foothold, such that seemingly all that is available to us is to simply go through them. So it is, I would suggest, very often with reading the OBeRlu. Having spoken with other Russian scholars—both students and professors alike—I am struck by just how inscrutable many find the group's writings to be. If I say: "Kharms is wonderful... but what would I begin to say about him?" I will have done a passable job at expressing a common enough sentiment among Russianists. Texts by the *oberiuty* are—almost invariably—fun. Being enjoyable, they draw us in. They engage us immediately. No small part of this engagement, I suspect, comes from the fact that they are puzzling. There is an urgent sense that something of import is at stake, and yet... it can be supremely difficult to identify this import precisely and say something meaningful about it. If scrutinizing them in terms of *form* and material is, as I have argued in the third chapter of this dissertation, fundamentally misguided, then reading them for their *content* seems, at times,

next to impossible. This struggle with content is probably an unavoidable frustration when dealing with a body of work that (1) is fundamentally preoccupied with ‘nonsense’ and (2) seldom conforms to the outlines of accepted literary genres—indeed, how many of these works can even be considered ‘finished’ is a debatable question. True, one can look to statements that the *oberiuty* themselves made about their work. This may help us to read it through a useful philosophical lens—it is indeed, the strategy I have overwhelmingly favored throughout the present study. This can be quite a freeing hermeneutic strategy: it does justice to the overarching philosophical concerns of the group while simultaneously providing ample opportunity for imaginative and creative reading. This, I think, is already an attempt to *experience* the works and to become *engaged* with the community that produced them—but I think that even this is a strategy that ultimately suggests its own limitations. For to simply translate OBeRIu texts into traditional philosophical discourse is to undercut or ignore their radical alterity: these are not simply philosophical essays, and to treat them as such is to imbue them with significance that their unique lineaments actively resist. If one is truly to play along with the *oberiuty*, one is forced to reckon with the idea that there may, perhaps, be something *untranslatable* about much of their work.

If numerous OBeRIu texts seem, quite doggedly, to resist any and all attempts at straightforward analysis, if there remains, at times, some doubt concerning whether or not there is anything like a coherent message behind the evident nonsense, then such indecipherability seems largely to have been the point. Druskin writes that Lipavsky felt Vvedensky’s enigmatic drama *Frother* (*Иومهу* in Russian—a playful portmanteau of the words for ‘father’ and ‘sweat’) was his most perfect work, precisely in virtue of its unintelligibility: “Here the star of absurdity reigns supreme; perhaps nowhere else does Vvedensky possess such a perfect and clear—both

semantically or morphologically, and architecturally—construction of the star of absurdity; nowhere else does he reach such rigorously logical alogicality in completely uninterpretable absurdity.”²⁴¹ Indeed, in chapter two of this dissertation I made note of Druskin’s observation that the *oberiuty* were concerned principally with the “incomprehension of the incomprehensible as incomprehensible” and felt that this too constituted a positive movement of human understanding. One thing, certainly, can be said about absurdity: its meaning—or perhaps rather its lack thereof—is immediately apparent.

At a glance, this seems a rather uncomfortable position for the would-be literary critic—for how do we aim to interpret something that rather explicitly lays claim to being uninterpretable? I propose what at first may seem a rather peculiar critical gesture: that we defy our implicit need for interpretation and instead allow the ludic dimension of *methexis* to open the work as the occasion for play. Whatever function play might possess—however it can be biologically, socially, psychologically ‘interpreted’—it must first of all be *fun*. The broader significance of play, the lasting enrichment that it offers us is contingent on a certain *quality of experience*: it must be pleasurable for its own sake. In the sphere of literature this means that before reading can be transformative, before it can be intellectually productive or communally vitalizing it must first be *intrinsically* engaging, richly satisfying, and deeply pleasurable. If we truly wish to understand a text we must first experience it for what it is. Because it is especially playful, it is imperative the body of OBeRIu literature be engaged with in this fashion: however we may interpret them, we read them best experiencing them, and experiencing them deeply. OBeRIu texts are at turns humorous, disturbing, and profound, but above all—they are perplexing. I propose that we understand these authors best when we allow ourselves simply *to*

²⁴¹ Iakov Druskin, “Stadii ponimaniia” in *Aleksandr Ivanovich Vvedenskii: Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh*, ed. Mikhail Meilakh, (Moskva: Gileya, 1993), 2. <https://ruslit.traumlibrary.net/book/vvedenskiy-ss02-02/vvedenskiy-ss02-02.html>, accessed February 17, 2021.

be perplexed. In the second chapter of this work, I suggested that as ‘literary games’ the writings of the *oberiuty* most closely resemble what Roger Caillois has called presentation of *ilinx*, that is vertigo or disorientation. They are akin to childhood games of whirling, or perhaps in a more adult key, the experience of intoxication. When we undergo their absurdity, these texts effectively twist us out of “customary rules of reasoning about meanings”²⁴² and induce in us a kind of cognitive vertigo. Whatever we may say about them, we cannot truly claim to have *understood* them if we do not, above all, appreciate the simply joy of dizziness that they offer.

The basic problem of uninterpretability remains at issue only so long as we insist on reducing understanding to explanation. I take it as a basic premise that, as far as most literary scholarship is concerned, to understand a text means first and foremost to ‘unpack its content’ or ‘explain what it means.’ But explanation does not exhaust the horizon of understanding: the former is only one facet of the latter, and hardly its deepest or most robust modality—especially when it comes to the realm of art. What might be a difficult pill to swallow is actually a common enough sentiment among artists, at least of a certain temperament: sometimes, explanations of an artwork don’t add anything worthwhile to our understanding of it. Sometimes, artists even express concern that explanations actually diminish our understanding of an artwork. One example that comes to mind is contemporary filmmaker David Lynch, who has always expressed an extreme reticence to offer (or confirm!) interpretations of his films. To do so, he argues, would be to reduce them: “When you finish anything, people want you to then talk about it. And I think it’s almost like a crime. A film or a painting—each thing is its own sort of language and it’s not right to say the same thing in words. The words are not there. The language of film, cinema, is the language it was put into, and the English language—it’s not going to translate. It’s

²⁴² Kharms, *Kniu*, 345.

going to lose.”²⁴³ To those who want to know what his films mean, Lynch’s demand is stern and unflinching: watch them. And watch them properly—on a large screen with quality sound. Make it an experience. Any further attempt at interpretation is always secondary.

To draw this point back into the field of literature—and Russian literature no less—it should be noted that Tolstoy expressed something similar in a letter he wrote to philosopher and critic Nikolai Strakhov in the spring of 1876. Responding to Strakhov’s attempt in an earlier letter to sum the basic “idea” of *Anna Karenina* in a few words, Tolstoy wrote: “If I truly wanted to say in words everything that I intended to express through my novel, I would have to write the very same novel I wrote, from the beginning.”²⁴⁴ Tolstoy would formally expound on this view three years later with the publication of his book *What is Art?* (Что такое искусство?). If an artist has taken the time to express something in the medium of his choice, he reasons, then the artist has done so because it *could not be expressed in any other way*. Working from this premise, Tolstoy argues against the critic’s role as interpreter or explainer of artworks:

An artist, if he is a real artist, has transmitted in his work to others the feeling that he has experienced; what is there to explain? If the work stands as good art then the feeling, be it moral or immoral, expressed by the artist is transmitted to others. If it is transmitted to others, then they experience it, and, moreover, each experiences it for himself, so all interpretations are superfluous. If the work does not infect people then no interpretation of any kind will suffice to make it contagious. An artist’s work should not be interpreted.²⁴⁵

While Tolstoy’s assessment of criticism in *What is Art?* is perhaps unduly stringent, I believe there is some merit to this view. Sometimes, explanations don’t add—they diminish.

²⁴³ David Lynch, “David Lynch: ‘You gotta be selfish. It’s a terrible thing,’” interview by Rory Carroll, *The Guardian*, June 23, 2018, accessed February 18, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jun/23/david-lynch-gotta-be-selfish-twin-peaks>.

²⁴⁴ Lev Tolstoy, “Pis’mo N. N. Shtrakhovu 1876 g. Aprelia 23 i 26. Yasnaia Poliana,” in *L. N. Tolstoyi Sobranie sochinenii v 22 tomakh* (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1984), 18:784, accessed February 18, 2021, https://rvb.ru/tolstoy/01text/vol_17_18/vol_18/0656.htm.

²⁴⁵ Lev Tolstoy, “Chto takoe iskusstvo?,” in *L. N. Tolstoyi Sobranie sochinenii v 22 tomakh*, 15:139, accessed February 18, 2021, https://rvb.ru/tolstoy/01text/vol_15/01text/0327-full.htm.

Every comedian knows that if they have to explain the joke, they've already lost the laugh. Texts such as those produced by Kharms, Vvedensky, and other *oberiuty* certainly fall into the peculiar category of works that are probably best read and accepted for the puzzles they are than meticulously interpreted. They are most fully appreciated and best *understood* when we allow them to become a lived experience. They are an event to be undergone, rather than a task to be undertaken. Language here should master the reader, not the other way around.

Already in his letter to Strakhov, Tolstoy has expressed what he felt was a pressing need for a different type of criticism; a criticism that did not seek to explain works of art, but that could “consistently guide readers through that endless labyrinth of connections which is the essence of art, and towards those laws that serve as the foundation of those connections.”²⁴⁶ While I, myself, balk at Tolstoy’s mention of “laws,” I generally agree with his sentiment. What is needed, perhaps, are critics who are as sensitive to the play spirit of artworks as the writers and artists who produce them—critics who can orient the inquisitive with respect to the literary games that constitute a text and initiate them into the “neighboring worlds” that these games create for their readers. Any explanation, any context or background for interpretation offered by the critic should serve the fundamental aim of ushering the reader more deeply into these worlds; to make them richer and more accessible. Treated in this fashion, in and through the spirit of play, a text takes on all the ritual significance of the festival. Only in this way does the work of literature realize its inherent potential for transformation. And though this festival is temporally and spatially circumscribed, its methectic potential ensures that its effects ripple out, revitalizing and reshaping the outside world that it helps us to recognize. For “with the end of the play its effect is not lost; rather it continues to shed its radiance on the ordinary world outside, a

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

wholesome influence working security, order and prosperity for the whole community until the sacred play-season comes round again.”²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ Huizinga, 14.

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