CRIME AND VIOLENCE IN THE MODE OF ABSURDITY:
THE IMPORTANCE OF SHERLOCK HOLMES IN THE WORKS OF DANIIL
KHARMS.

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Daniil Kharms was one of the last members of the early Russian avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s. He was prolific in several genres, but is perhaps best known for his children’s poetry and two late works; the Sluchai cycle and the short story, Starukha (Incidences and The Old Woman respectively). Scholars have noted that the thirty pieces that compose Sluchai seem unrelated and because of this, the normal thematic and stylistic links that warrant interpretation of a piece as a cycle are difficult to identify. It is my contention that there exists a possible link between the events of Sluchai and Sherlock Holmes that could classify the text as a cycle, and possibly offer a new interpretation of the work. This analysis suggests that Sluchai can be read as a Holmesian view of Soviet Russia in the 1930s, and posits that importance of Sherlock Holmes to the work of Daniil Kharms is worthy of further research.

Though scholarship has noted that Kharms would often dress up as Holmes, it has yet to suggest any further significance between the English detective and Kharms. Considering the history of zhiznetvorchestvo or life-creation and its lineage in the Symbolist and Futurist tradition, it stands to reason that acting as Holmes was not merely and absurdist stunt, but perhaps the inclusion of an aesthetic motif. The Symbolists and Futurist often used their vestiary theatrics as a means to include another realm of life into
art, or vice versa. Perhaps Kharms was following similar aesthetic philosophies in his choice to don the famous deer-stalker and pipe, but this does not yet offer any insight into his literature.

Using the world of Sherlock Holmes as a reference point will reveal that the events of *Sluchai* are perhaps not so disconnected or absurd. Considering the social climate of Russia in the 1930s, there was a need for a detective to expose the secret injustices of the Soviet government. Kharms’s choice to become a widely recognized symbol of justice reveals his attempt to defy the government and protect the Russian people. In *Sluchai*, it is necessary to investigate as a detective each piece to gain a certain level of understanding, and this offers a united motif that would suggest the collection is a cycle. Along with this, the results of the investigation often expose the atrocities carried out by the Soviet government under Stalin again uniting the pieces to some degree. *Sluchai* proves that Sherlock Holmes was not just a marginal influence in the work of Daniil Kharms, and that other works could benefit from a Holmesian interpretation.
Dedicated to my mom and dad
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I am forever grateful for my dad who instilled in me a need for knowledge no matter how trivial or exalted.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Меня интересует только "чуть", только то, 
что не имеет никакого практического смысла.  
-Даниил Хармс¹

Dissecting Daniil Kharms,² a verb that seems appropriate in view of the violent nature of his work, is often more challenging than one expects. His style and language are simple, but every attempt to peel back a layer leaves one with only more questions as to the message and meaning behind his works. As more information, both in scholarship on Kharms and literature from the archives, is produced, it appears that we are only marginally closer to understanding his work. Of course, researchers have tried to gain a fuller appreciation of Kharms’s work both by acquiring some knowledge of his life and of his literary antecedents (Russian and foreign), as well as of the contemporary cultural milieu and of Soviet history during the 1920s and 1930s, but perhaps the most important prerequisite for a fuller understanding of this writer is a willing desire to relax the rational mind and allow the events of a Kharmsian tale to

¹ "I am interested in only “nonsense”, only in that which has no practical meaning.” - Daniil Kharms
² This OBERIU writer’s real name was Iuvahev – see the discussion of his choice of pseudonym below.
happen as they must. This willingness includes following seemingly irrelevant clues, such as Kharms's "childish pranks" and dialogue with "popular" literature. This is an approach that the current thesis is following, examining the writer's vestiary games with the Sherlock Holmes role, as well as Arthur Conan Doyle's stories about the famous detective and their impact on Kharms's prose.

Daniil Kharms (1905-1941) was one of the last members of the early twentieth century Russian avant-garde. For a long time, the bulk of his published work existed solely as children's poetry he wrote for various Soviet publishing houses. This work allowed him the means by which he was able to survive considering the repressive aesthetic limitations enacted by the Soviet government under Stalin. Though Kharms was prolific as a children's poet, he also wrote in numerous other genres including short stories, even shorter anecdotes, and plays which all bear the mark of absurdist techniques and style. As an active member of the OBERIU\(^3\) Kharms participated in their theatric performances that attempted to remove the barriers between the artist and spectator and push the envelope of aesthetics and taste. As Neil Cornwell notes, "Their publicity antics and semi-scandalous public performances became, for a brief period a highlight of Leningrad artistic life."\(^4\) Unfortunately the vibrant and rebellious nature of the 1920s would be replaced by state-dictated (reformed) aesthetics and ideas of art, and groups like the OBERIU would be dissolved and disappear. (They would not only disappear from the public eye, but just disappear completely).

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\(^3\) Ob’edinenie real’nogo iskusstva or Union of Real Art was a leftist avant-garde movement of the 1920s. It included members other poets such as Alexander Vvedenskii and Nikolai Zabolotsky. Members of this group will be further referred to as per the Russian, obieruty.

\(^4\) Cornwell, 6
Though Soviet society of the 1930s, as is well known, was aesthetically highly repressive, this time period marks the birth of two of Kharms’s masterpieces in prose, *Sluchai* and *Starukha*. Kharms completed both works in 1939, but he would write very little after this with the ensuing war, his eventual arrest, and untimely death. *Sluchai* is an assembled collection of thirty short works ranging in length from two sentences to several pages. Of the two late works, *Sluchai* is the most structurally challenging and thematically diverse, while *Starukha* is more coherent because of its singular narrative and structural unity. Neither work is stylistically complex, yet both works are characterized by the thematic complexity and obfuscation, which is inherent in most of Kharms’s work. Of the two, *Sluchai* is more relevant for the purpose of this analysis as it is oftentimes considered the more difficult to understand of the two works, i.e. offers more unintelligible clues for the investigative detective work. This cycle of minimalist prose will therefore be treated in greater detail than the coherent – albeit still highly absurd-grotesque – “Starukha.”

Previous biographical investigation and analysis of *Sluchai* have laid the groundwork for interpretation, but the work as a whole entity continues to baffle scholars and readers. The fascination Kharms has for so many lies to a great extent in the very elusiveness of his works and for the scholar this means that s/he must engage in extensive scholarship and painstaking analysis. Sometimes it also requires taking different avenues to discover new clarity of Kharms’s work; as already mentioned, this includes pursuing what some might consider trivial side notes. Looking at Kharms’s

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5 I use the word assembled here to point out the author’s, not the editor’s, hand in the selection and arrangement of the pieces.
theatrics as a member of the OBERIU might suggest possible sources of decipherment for his later works, and I propose specifically that Kharms’s impersonations of Sherlock Holmes is relevant to understanding Kharms’s later works.

The importance of the Sherlock Holmes figure for Kharms can be seen in the various photographs and sketches of Kharms wearing the famous deerstalker and English tweed jackets, smoking a pipe. Kharms also mentions the famous English detective in his journals, but do these biographical facts have any impact on Kharms’s written work? If we consider that Kharms’s vestiary theatrics are not the first in Russian literary history, but rather, can be traced back to the Symbolists and through the Futurists with both of their interpretations of zhiznetvorchestvo or life-creation, then it stands to reason that Kharms’s costumed escapades might be more than just an absurdist distraction and that they should be looked at as a piece of his entire aesthetics that would have an impact on his written work. Comparing the world of the prose pieces of Sluchai to that of Arthur Conan Doyle’s detective, we can see that they have commonalities. It is also important to place these stories against the backdrop of Soviet Russia, where donning the Holmesian persona can be seen as not just an aesthetic choice, but a moral one as well. It is therefore my contention that, Sherlock Holmes plays a significant role in a valid interpretation of the later works of Daniil Kharms, and that by reading Sluchai through a Holmesian perspective, we gain a new and valid understanding of this work.

Sluchai, like “Starukha,” or anything in any genre that Kharms wrote, is a complex and bewildering work. Sluchai requires a text analysis on at least two levels. The first level of analysis is semantic and aims at uncovering “meaning” in each of the
thirty individual parts of this cycle (even though not all thirty items will be discussed here, such an interpretation of each piece has been performed for this thesis); the second level consists of defining the relationship of these pieces to each other. Since Sluchai can be viewed as a cycle or collection considering the inclusion of the thirty pieces under one inclusive title, there must be some theme or motif or other element that connects all of the individual pieces into a unified whole. To find this unity is a troublesome matter indeed. Stylistically, they all can be categorized as short, very short, prose works, but even this most basic attempt to find unity creates problems. Of the thirty pieces, twenty-two are written as purely narrative prose works of varying lengths from a few sentences, to several paragraphs, but the remaining eight pieces are written as dialogues in dramatic format with the exception of the 25th piece which is written as both pure narrative prose and dialogue. Although all thirty pieces are prose works then, the incongruent nature of two different genres would suggest separation, not unity.

If the pieces of Sluchai are not stylistically unified, then there should be a thematic unity that ties all of the pieces together. At first glance, the task to find such a unity seems unrealistic and even impossible. Disappearing redheads (piece one), plummeting old women (piece three), and stumbling founding-fathers of Russian literature (Aleksander Pushkin and Nikolai Gogol’ trip over each other in the seventh piece, doing absolutely nothing else) are all present in Sluchai and this kind of absurdity emerges from looking at only three of the miniatures in the cycle. Even applying a more inclusive motif that appears in a majority of the works, like violence, or death and murder (specifically the nineteenth piece “Vstrecha” acts as an integral
work considering it is only two sentences in length and is concerned with a man carrying sausage down the street), fails to unite all thirty incidences. It is perhaps best to consider another approach and in Kharmsian fashion, use a method that is atypical of traditional literary analysis and even “uncanny.”

I intend to use such an approach by suggesting that Sluchai is a collection of minimalist prose pieces united by ideas found in the world of Arthur Conan Doyle’s literary creation: the character of Sherlock Holmes. Using Doyle’s most famous protagonist as a key to understanding Sluchai may at first seem odd, but considering Kharms’s literary antecedents and the life-performance he fostered as a member of the OBERIU, it enters the realm of possibility that the Sluchai cycle is united by a Holmesian aesthetics and a Holmesian logic. The dark and violent worlds of both Doyle’s and Kharms’s work are similar in their acknowledgment of brutality and criminality as ineluctable aspects of existence. Kharms’s Stalinist Russia is a world where various forms of absurd evil reign, just as in Doyle’s – only in Kharms’s Russia it has been systematized and legitimized. Perhaps the notion that crime finds its punishment when a hero like Holmes appears was comforting to a writer who himself could not become such a champion of justice – except through the word. In any case, an understanding of how Daniil Kharms and Sluchai are related to Sherlock Holmes does open up the venue for new insights.

Before performing my intertextual analysis – one that, as I have already stated above in this Introduction, encompasses both the life-text and the verbal texts of Sluchai, it is important to recognize that Kharms’s theatrics are not uncommon in the history of Russian literature. Thus the Symbolists practiced a concept that has become
known as *zhiznetvorchestvo* or life-creation that attempted to fuse life and art in the tradition of Romanticism, but adding new complexities. Later the Futurists would also attempt similarly “creative” behavior, while championing different goals and pursuing different purposes. I will argue in this thesis that in some regards, Kharms is a fusion of these two separate aesthetic philosophies. Examining Kharms’s *zhiznetvorchestvo* begins to shed some light on the Holmesian element in his works.

I will first briefly describe the development of *zhiznetvorchestvo* from Symbolism to Kharms. After establishing Kharms’s place in this evolution and perhaps his reason behind choosing Sherlock Holmes, I will then look at some of Kharms’s other literary antecedents and sources to demonstrate the polygenetic nature of his work. Even though there already exists an exhaustive list of possible progenitors, the Doyle impact has not been fully appreciated for a fuller understanding of Kharms’s work in general and *Sluchai* in articular. At this point, I will apply the Holmesian aesthetics to his written works to show that though it does not answer all of the possible questions about *Sluchai*, it does posit a new avenue of study in Kharmsian scholarship.
CHAPTER 2

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ZHIZNETVORCHESTVO

Создал я в тайных мечтах
Мир идеальной природы, --
--В. Я. Брюсов

At first glance, Kharms's costume-wearing escapades may seem out of place considering the context of Soviet Russia in the 1920s and Stalinist 1930s. Kharms was known to wear the vestiary symbols of Sherlock Holmes in public, but he also developed other characters, including a long, lost brother. Possibly this brother too was part of the Holmes-game, though, since Sherlock Holmes also had a brother who made some fleeting appearances in the stories. As Stalinist society actively strived to achieve the collectivist ideals of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, an extreme individuality manifested in extravagant vestiary games would almost certainly be considered unwarranted and as a threat to collective progress. Kharms’s actions resemble those of the modernist movements that preceded him, namely the Symbolists and the Futurists -

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6 "I created in secret dreams/A world of an ideal nature.” V. Ia Briusov
7 In a recent Russian publication of Kharms material (Antologija Satiry i Iumora Rossii XX veka) there are pictures of Kharms as both Holmes and as his brother Ivan Ivanovich. The caption below the picture of Kharms's “brother” reads, “Mnoje znali ot D. Kharmsa o ego brate Ivane Ivanoviche, byvshem privat-dotsente Sankt-Peterburgskogo universiteta i lish’ nemnogie znali, chto nikakogo brata u Daniila Ivanovicha ne bylo, khotia on i pokazyval etu fotografiju, na kotoroi tak iskusno izobrazhal byvshego privat-dotsenta. Vchem zhe vyigrysh? V posygryshe.
and this too would be unwelcome. If one considers Kharms as a descendant of these schools in his theatricalized behavior, his actions can be seen more as a reflection of times past than an adaptation to contemporary Soviet norms, and, as such, as an individual choice for not keeping abreast with the times, thus assuming the character of a protest, as opposed to an individual, personal and to other public contexts unrelated event. The concepts of Symbolist and Futurist zhiznetvorchestvo, a word that carries several meanings including ‘life-art’ or ‘life-creation’, are highly relevant to understanding Kharms’s choice in “becoming” Sherlock Holmes. The Symbolists considered zhiznetvorchestvo a religious or mystic practice, which, ultimately, aimed at a person turning his own life and the world around him into art. If this person was an artist, he was a creator, indeed virtually a god, and therefore able to shape the material of trivial everyday life into new – and “divinizing” -- aesthetic forms and shapes.

By contrast, the Futurists would want nothing to do with these notions of metaphysical aesthetics. For them zhiznetvorchestvo and later zhiznestroitel’stvo (‘life-construction’ or ‘life-building’) was a bold political statement that meant crushing the Romantic ideas of the past by making the artist a walking pejorative scream of protest. An artist who fulfilled their criteria of validity embodied the desire to move into the future and break away from the past by distancing himself from the present day society in every conceivable way, including his mode of dress, or should we say “costume” designed for the futurist type of life performance. This vestiary game would evolve under the influence of political ideology – function as a kind of manifesto and propaganda in fact – eventually becoming a testament to the artist as
architect of the future society. The world of the future would bend to the blueprints of
the artists and their Word (Slovo), as it had been in biblical times, and the command
“be there” followed by immediate realization would become everyday reality. This
evolution of “life creation” trends synthesized in the 1930s in Kharms who
incorporated both aesthetics into one syncretized performance, the artistic-mystic and
yet utilitarian-pragmatic persona. For that matter, the Symbolists’ interest in science
and material progress should not be underestimated – it is enough to think of a
character such as Fedor Sologub’s Trirodov in Tvorimaia legenda (1907-1912), who is
a poet and chemist, builder of interplanetary spaceships and horticulturist, to mention
but a few of his activities, to realize that the might of science was not ignored by the
symbolists either.

As mentioned before, the concept of zhiznetvorchestvo is imbued with multiple
meanings and encompasses numerous possible translations. Some trace
zhiznetvorchestvo’s roots to Ovid and the myth of Pygmalion, found in his
Metamorphoses, but for the Russian Symbolists the immediate sources of inspiration
are also found in two important, religious philosophers: Nikolai Fedorov and Vladimir
Solov’ev. Other influences, like the starkly contrasting European-Decadent one of
Oscar Wilde and his lifestyle as a dandy, will be significant for the construction of the
Symbolist philosophy, but one can find the more relevant tenets of the
zhiznetvorchestvo philosophy in the religious-philosophical works of both Fedorov and
Solov’ev. Under the influence of these men, Andrei Belyi, Valerii Briusov and others
would begin to construct the foundations of the Symbolist aesthetic in concepts like
zhiznetvorchestvo.
The ascetic Fedorov used Orthodox Christianity as bedrock upon which he built a philosophy that included aspects of materialism and positivism. His philosophy acknowledged man as a creator, who emulated the divine creator. As Irina Paperno notes, "He [Fedorov] clearly associated divine and aesthetic creation: 'Man is not merely a product of nature; he is also a work or creation of art. The final act of divine creation was the first act of human art.'" With that, "The Creator of all that exists has put into his favorite creation – man – creative powers as well as creative ability…Of course a gulf separates divine creativity from human creativity…God creates out of nothing. Man has to have matter at his disposal—out of nothing he creates nothing. But having what God the Creator has created, man creates out of the already existing." Comparing the aesthetic competence of man with divine creation is the first step in elevating artists to the status of those who will alter and create realities through their work just as God did with the universe. This makes sense considering the fact that the dominant theme in Fedorov’s philosophy was how to resurrect the entire history of human existence. Christian resurrection was a gift bestowed upon the worthy by the divine creator, but in Fedorov’s philosophy it was a sine qua non that all, without exception should be resurrected which drastically deviates from Christian theology. Fedorov’s hope to bring back the dead reveals a desire to find people with the power to create and shape life – and even more importantly -- immortality. For these purposes an amalgam of science and art was believed capable of accomplishing such a task. Fedorov would also develop aesthetic principles in which the “art of likenesses”

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8 Grossman 6
9 Koehler 17
(iskusstvo podobii) would become the “art of real life” (iskusstvo deistvitel’nosti), i.e. an active, transformational art that would no longer “imitate” life, but rather construct and reconstruct life, giving birth to new forms.\textsuperscript{10}

Solov’ev’s contribution to Symbolist aesthetics stems from his theory of salvation, which is found in the creative potential of human beings. In art and love the spiritual and material become one, and the aesthetic and erotic become “vehicles of divine creation.”\textsuperscript{11} Putting aside the erotic tenets of Solov’ev’s theory to focus on the artistic tenets, art becomes theurgy, or creative action becomes analogous to divine action. Art for Solov’ev is a tool for changing reality much as it was for Fedorov, but Solov’ev’s ideas do not end here. Solov’ev would\textsuperscript{12} also talk of art in theological terms like incarnation and transfiguration, which correspond to two mechanisms of the artistic process “the materialization of the spirit and the spiritualization of matter.”\textsuperscript{13} Solov’ev uses the image of the transformation of coal into diamond to illustrate his concept of transfiguration. Though chemically identical in material substance, the diamond’s transfigured beauty stems from its ability to refract light uniting the substance (carbon in its crystallized form) and the light that passes through it (a spiritual or intangible substance), or as Solov’ev would write, “the transformation of physical life into its spiritual counterpart, which...is capable of internally transfiguring, spiritualizing matter or truly becoming embodied in it.”\textsuperscript{14} Essentially, matter in its

\textsuperscript{10} Grossman 7
\textsuperscript{11} Grossman 7
\textsuperscript{12} Grossman 13
\textsuperscript{13} Grossman 13
\textsuperscript{14} Grossman 14
“coal state” waits for the artist to craft it into a diamond; thus the artist gives coarse matter its new aesthetic value and a connection with the spiritual.

Inspired by these theories, Valerii Briusov and Andrei Belyi developed ideas as to how Symbolism would embody the principles of Fedorov and Solov’ev. Briusov believed that one of the main tasks of Symbolism was to merge life and art, making life into something that could be called ‘real art.’ Romanticism, which he believed, divided the world into only the two valid aesthetic spheres of beauty and the sublime, was, in his view, limiting, wherefore Briusov saw the value of a Realism, which attempted to capture thoroughly and honestly all aspects and nuances of life into a work of art. In this way both Symbolism and Realism embody art, but Symbolists turned their gaze inward hoping to see the inner truths as opposed to Realists who sought to expose the life outside them themselves. The ability of Realists to transform their subject, i.e. earthly reality, into art stood in a direct correlation to the Symbolists who would turn their subject, i.e. themselves, into art through the creative process. Paperno, quoting Briusov, writes, “From this it follows that the goal of the artist is to make life into an art form: ‘Let the poet create not his books, but his life.’”

Belyi (be consistent), along with Briusov, would argue for artistic creation’s divinity stating, “the artist should become his own artistic form: his natural ‘I’ should merge with his art; his life should become artistic. He himself is the word made flesh.” More important though is the application of these theories to “life practice”, and to what degree these philosophies became reality in the lives of the Symbolists.

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15 Grossman 19-20
16 Grossman 14
For Briusov, Belyi and Nina Petrovskaia the well-documented reality of their love triangle became myth in Briusov’s *The Fiery Angel* (1908), but more relevant to this paper is the myth of the Argonauts and how it became an all-encompassing part of Belyi’s life. Alexander Lavrov’s article details the history of the rise and fall of Argonautism as a group comprised of people with a “talent for living,” or a “talent for writing.”

The goals of the Argonauts became that “the anticipated common life must involve world-transforming goals,” and this philosophy would find supporters in writers like Belyi and Aleksandr Blok. Life and art merged as the Argonaut myth entered in all-pervasive fashion into Belyi’s actions, as well as themes in his poetry and symphonies. Lavrov writes that the Argonauts consistently were able “to perceive the world as a quasi-artistic phenomenon, to attribute to reality the qualities of a literary text” to the point that “human relations came in many ways to resemble artistic texts: they had their plot, their pragmatics, their system of stylistic definitions.”

In this myth, the sun became the destination for their “Argo” and for life, this meant that existence must transcend “earth;” the sun therefore became firmly entrenched as a constant motif in Belyi’s artistic creation while the separation of life and art became reduced to a minimal gap.

As Symbolism receded from its place in the forefront of the avant-garde movement in Russia, zhiznetvorchestvo evolved under different parameters. Khodasevich in his essay “The End of Renata” remarked that the Symbolists were

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17 Grossman 83
18 Grossman 87
19 Grossman 114
striving for a fusion of life and art but it ended in “a history of ruined lives.” 20 Out of the Symbolist decline two new schools, Acmeism and Futurism developed with starkly different ideas on art and its purpose in life. As previously mentioned, Futurism, wanted to abandon the “Romantic notions” of groups like the Symbolists, yet they found that zhiznetvorchestvo could suit purposes of their own in their planned reconstruction of society. As Irina Gutkin notes, “Indeed, a cursory comparison between eccentric futurist - irreverently mischievous and loudly insolent - and their predecessors, the Symbolists, those erudite mystics and refined aesthetes, is bound to evoke an image of striking dissimilarity that would seem to preclude further analogy,” 21 but, the concept of zhiznetvorchestvo does indeed bind the two schools together and deserves further investigation.

As modern technology began to shape European aesthetics, new ideas and ideologies violently clashed not only with each other, but also with the past. The Futurists took zhiznetvorchestvo as an opportunity to not just change the aesthetic aspect of existence but to reshape mankind for both shock value and utilitarian purposes. While the Symbolists largely strived for immortality and mystical transcendence, Futurists saw zhiznetvorchestvo as, above all, a tool to shape the immediate world around them for the better. This to some degree explains the change in venues for their performances. Futurist performances began at The Stray Dog Café, but they soon grew tired of the “predictable café audience” and they “took their ‘Futurism’ to the public: they walked the streets in outrageous attire, their faces

20 Grossman 2-3
21 Grossman 167
painted, sporting top hats, velvet jackets, earrings, and radishes or spoons in their button-holes." The futurists' decision to bring the spectacle to the people reflected "a consciously less arcane and esoteric way to dramatize their actual lives." Essentially this reflects the Futurists' desire to change humanity en masse, which goes against the Symbolist desire for individual transcendence. In, "Why We Paint Ourselves: A Futurist Manifesto," the Futurists declared that their self-painting was the first "speech to have unknown truths," and that "Art is not only a monarch, but also a newsman and a decorator. The synthesis of decoration and illustration is the basis of our self-painting. We decorate life and preach - that's why we paint ourselves." Irina Gutkin emphasizes that the Futurists saw their task as a utilitarian one, and that they "believed that art ought to shape life, including human behavior and psyche, in order to mold a 'new man,' transgressing in their experiments the borders between personal life and art." 

Maiakovskii was no less active in the shaping of the Futurist zhiznetvorchestvo-zhizhnestroitel'stvo than Belyi and Briusov were in the Symbolist manifestation of the attempt to fuse life and art. Maiakovskii's bumble bee suit (the zheltaia kofta found in his poem "Kofta fata") and face painting granted him notoriety, but, more importantly, he also became the subject and character of his own works. As a friend of Maiakovskii's, Roman Jakobson's monograph "On a Generation That Squandered Its Poets," reveals an understanding of Maiakovskii's life creation on an intimate level. Jakobson acknowledges that for Maiakovskii, everything from style of dress to

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22 Goldberg 32
23 Grossman 168
24 Goldberg 33
25 Grossman 170
conversations “should be determined by the whole of his poetic production. He understood very well the close connection between poetry and life.”

Jakobson’s belief that the work of Maiakovskii “from his first verses, in *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*, to his last lines is one and indivisible. It represents the dialectical development of a single theme.” Ultimately this theme is the mythology of the writer, the creation of Maiakovskii as a work of art through the medium of his poetry and dramas. Maiakovskii became the all-pervasive theme of Maiakovskii’s works and this is not to say his work is autobiographical, but rather that it shapes and creates the writer, much like Boris Tomashevskii’s work on the relationship between a poet’s art and life (taking Pushkin as an example) would soon suggest.

Certain parts of Jakobson’s essay read like a composite autobiography by Maiakovskii with Jakobson acting as the literary glue:

> “Empirical reality neither exhausts nor fully takes in the various shapes of the poet’s ego. Majakovskij passes before us in one of his ‘innumerable souls.’ ‘The unbending spirit of eternal rebellion’ has poured itself into the poet’s muscles, the irresponsible spirit without name or patronymic, ‘from future days, just a man.’ ‘And I feel that I am too small for myself. Someone obstinately bursts out of me.’”

This example fulfills two functions. Besides revealing the inadequacy of empirical reality for the forever dissatisfied poet, it acts as an example of Jakobson’s approach to his style, which in the case of this essay suggests the absolute and overarching theme

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26 Jakobson 234
27 Jakobson 212
28 Tomashevskii 57. Tomashevskii writes, “...poskol’ku tvorchestvo priznajetsia za "nedra dushi", postol’ku i ob’ekte inteksa stanovitsia eti "nedra dushi" skvoz’ tvorchestvo - i chitatel’ stremitsia samoe tvorchestvo interpretirovat’, kak put’ k poznaniiu lichnosti poeta.” In this regard, the autobiographical elements that appear in an author’s work become more readily accepted by readers as the true accounts of the poet’s life than actual biographies.
29 Jakobson 213-214
of Maiakovskii’s work. Jakobson, by connecting multiple parts of various poems, shows the thematic unity inherent in Maiakovskii’s oeuvre and life.

The concept of transcendence, a principle tenet of zhiznetvorchestvo, is for Maiakovskii -- overcoming ‘byt’. The gravity of this word is lost in translation, but it suggests a sense of mundane or banal existence that is soul-crushing. Jakobson writes, “It is the poet’s [Maiakovskii’s] primordial enemy, and he never tires of returning to this theme. ‘Motionless byt.’ ‘Everything stands as it has been for ages. Byt is like a horse that can’t be spurred and stands still.’ ‘Slits of byt are filled with fat and coagulate, quiet and wide.’ ‘The swamp of byt is covered over with slime and weeds…’”30 Again, splicing together the various occurrences of this word in Maiakovskii’s works reveals the pervasive nature of the topic, but it is only a facet of the whole. ‘Byt’ is Maiakovskii’s ultimate enemy, and to some degree it overpowers him. Suicide and death are also relevant and inescapable themes in Maiakovskii’s poetry, and as Jakobson notes, these themes are counterintuitive to the thematics of Futurism.31 The poetic theme eventually lost its “created” element and became tragic reality for Maiakovskii, and though other friends and contemporaries expressed their confusion and surprise as to how this could happen, Jakobson asks, “Could these men of letters have forgotten or so misunderstood All That Majakovskij Composed? Or was there a general conviction that all of it was only ‘composed,’ only invented?”32

Thorough examination of the themes in Maiakovskii’s work leaves no alternative

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30 Jakobson 215  
31 Jakobson 230  
32 Jakobson 233
ending for the poet’s life according to Jakobson, and surprised contemporaries should not have been so naïve.
CHAPTER 3

KHARMS’S PLACE IN THE HISTORY OF ZHIZNETVORCHESTVO

*Crime is common. Logic is rare.*
- *Sherlock Holmes*\(^{33}\)

Unfortunately, Kharms’s reasons for choosing Sherlock Holmes as the model for his impersonation must remain in the realm of speculation and inference. His journals and notebooks published to this point offer little in the way of insight, and his friends and contemporaries have commented on his bizarre antics, but not specifically on the development or interest in the Holmes persona. Probably this is so, because the creation of Sherlock-Holmes-Daniil Kharms was seen as simply a “prank” rather than serious life-creation, Holmes being a figure from youth literature. To my mind, this is a flawed perception and therefore I will be looking for possible thematic and stylistic indications of Kharms’s choice in his written work; those will be addressed later in the thesis. The immediate concern here rests upon Kharms’s legacy in the development and understanding of zhiznetvorchestvo as part of the culture of the Russian avant-garde. As mentioned earlier, Kharms combined the principle tenets of both Symbolist and Futurist interpretations of zhiznetvorchestvo. More than yet another response to

\(^{33}\) Doyle Vol. 1 377
the oppression of everyday byt, for Kharms, Holmes is a way to transcend the physical world and in a sense become self-made or self-created, thus “immortal” (Symbolist notion); but it also serves a utilitarian purpose in the reshaping of society as a detective (Futurist notion). In almost Hegelian fashion, zhiznetvorchestvo exists in thesis under the Symbolists, becomes an antithetic response under the Futurists, and finally is synthesized in Kharms. If this analysis holds true, Kharms’s theatricalities lose some of their incongruities as he becomes a participant in the heritage of Russian modernism as it developed into the avant-garde; thus it also offers yet another facet by which Kharms may be interpreted.

In regard to the Symbolist tradition, the Holmes creation meets some of the established paradigms of its interpretation of zhiznetvorchestvo. As Belyi and his Argonauts relied on the myths of Ancient Greece to construct their world, so Kharms too relied on an already constructed literary or artistic past, in this case a more immediate one. Using an already established character of such international notoriety diminishes the possibility of purely individual, or idiosyncratic, interpretation of what it means to be Sherlock Holmes. Just as the Argonauts would invoke notions of adventure and heroism (of podvig) to anyone with even a limited knowledge of the story, so Sherlock Holmes also exists as an already delineated symbol. Holmes can easily be seen as a symbol of justice and reason in a world sadly lacking in both, and therefore there is little need to explain the qualities that Kharms hoped to project or inspire in his “performance” of Holmes. If Kharms had dressed up and acted as Moriarty, it would presumably have pointed to his siding with ultimate evil or even
death.\textsuperscript{34} In Soviet reality, it might well have meant a justification of Stalinism. Choosing Holmes in essence is choosing a template that, as a result of Holmes’s popularity, offers a clear symbolic interpretation that most people would be able to recognize as one of the pursuit of justice and fairness and of the rejection of crime, violence and evil, whether state-sponsored, or not.

The mystical or religious element of the Symbolist zhiznetvorchestvo aesthetics can also be found in Kharms’s decision to become Holmes. As Solov’ev’s desire for man to become more Christ-like, that is a creature of both the spiritual and material worlds, developed in Symbolist manifestos and works, it is not out of the realm of possibility to see Holmes as a modern-day Christ figure.\textsuperscript{35} Holmes’s mission is altruistic, he has no private life, seems to be celibate, is often surrounded by children with whom he has a good understanding (the street urchins that help him), and he constantly seeks to aid truth and justice in everyday life. He spreads the word of his mission through his own teachings, but mostly it is disseminated through his disciple, Dr. Watson.\textsuperscript{36} Though Holmes writes various articles on subjects including those of the progress of modern science and cryptanalysis, his deeds and miracles are recorded in the gospels according to Watson, and thus become a “holy” tome of a man who is the embodiment of good. Kyle Freeman points out that, “It is not the law that he upholds, but his own conception of justice. Several times he substitutes this conception

\textsuperscript{34} The name Moriarty could be derived from the Latin \textit{mors} (genitive: mortis).
\textsuperscript{35} Considering Holmes’s narcissism and drug addictions, I am not trying to suggest that the detective is pursuing some sort of \textit{imitatio Christi}. I am merely suggesting that Holmes demonstrates some similarities that are worth pursuing.
\textsuperscript{36} Of the four novels and fifty-six short stories, only four of the works are not narrated by Watson. Two are narrated by Holmes, and two are narrated by an unknown narrator. This in essence resembles the fact that Christ does not actually take part in the writing of his life, he is only written about. The same holds true of another lofty historical personality (without claim to divinity) – Socrates.
for the letter of British law by letting someone go who is guilty of a crime. Several other times he violates the law himself in order to bring about some higher justice.”

Along with this, in the story “The Final Problem” Sherlock Holmes battles Professor Moriarty and ultimately both men apparently meet their ends; but due to public pressure, Doyle “resurrected” Holmes writing new stories about him. The stories that follow Holmes’s death take place earlier in Holmes’s life so as to avoid issues of continuity but regardless of this fact, Holmes did come back from the dead. Taking this into account, Kharms’s choice of the Holmesian persona reflects some of the tenets of Solov’ev’s philosophy that men should become Christ-like. Of course, self-transcendence was in the air at the times: Nietzsche’s “overman” offers another, more earthbound, model for self-transformation. The models do not exclude each other however – interestingly Solov’ev calls Christ the “true overman.”

Though Kharms’s “infantile” theatrics could be labeled as anything but utilitarian, Holmes as a scientist and detective does embody the Futurist hope to reshape society in accordance with utilitarian notions and principles. As each member of the proletariat in Russia would take part in the construction of the new future, the Futurists would praise the role of the worker and his implements. Science and technology would become the new blessed elements, and to some degree the logical, calculating and highly scientific Holmes could be a welcome icon in this future.

Watson’s list of Holmes’s attributes marks Holmes’s knowledge of chemistry as

37 Doyle Vol. II xx
38 Continuing on the theme of Moriarty as an embodiment of death, it stands to reason that Holmes’s battle with Moriarty could be interpreted as a battle to overcome death and offer life eternal.
“profound,” the highest rating he receives in nine fields.\textsuperscript{39} In the squalor of London, Holmes used his knowledge to spread light in the darkness and save the poverty-stricken people around him. Though he was not building hydroelectric dams or other functional institutions, Holmes knew that each person must take part in preparing for the future. He wrote scientific articles and tried to educate the world around him on issues of deduction. Just like many of the Futurists who through their art and actions tried to enlighten and ennable the Russian people (narod), Holmes would go as far as to recruit the masses in the form of the Baker Street irregulars, or he would act as an educator and protector of the people.\textsuperscript{40}

Holmes’s most important role was obviously that of detective and in this function he also could be seen as having compatible goals with the Futurist camp. As volatile as the Futurists became in response to those who harbored any romantic notions of the past, they did it as part of their duty in serving the people. They hoped to create an egalitarian society, and to do so meant rooting out the injustices of the old society. Holmes acted as a detective for multiple reasons, including his earnest desire to rid the world of evil. His final act as detective brought an end to the “Napoleon of Crime,” Professor Moriarty, though it cost him his life – their fall into the Reichenbach Waterfall could be seen as a “descent to hell” of sorts, a descent that, as already mentioned, Holmes reversed by returning to the world of the living in literature.

\textsuperscript{39} Doyle Vol. I p.15. Watson’s list reveals some inaccuracies. Watson errs on the side of underestimating Holmes, however, so his praise of his friend’s knowledge of the sciences should remain well-founded. It should also be stated in the context that Maiakovskii saw chemistry as the science that would overcome death. See his Pro Eto (1924) where a chemist is shown at work in his resurrection laboratory. This scene obviously echoes Fedorovian thought on the scientific conquest of death.

\textsuperscript{40} Freeman notes on page xx of his introduction to the second volume of Doyle’s works, “His [Holmes] judgments about people arise from the content of their characters, not from the color of their coats of arms.” This attitude marks Holmes as a man “above class prejudice.”
Though Holmes’s bourgeois nature might have brought him sneers from the Futurists, his selfless sacrifice to destroy Moriarty can be seen as the first step in overcoming the greed and power of old institutions, as well as death itself. Conquest over death belonged to the utopian futurists’ main goals.\(^{41}\)

Though, or because, neither the Symbolist nor Futurist aspects of Holmes’s persona grant him a definite place as a complete embodiment of either type of life creation, he may be seen as an enigmatic synthesis of these styles. For Kharms, his life creation could have been meant as homage to both modernism and the avant-garde that disappeared with the onset of communism; his attempt to resurrect zhiznetvorchestvo in a society that would have no place for it is, therefore, a podvig in its own right. The obereity were known for their “infantile” theatricalities and specifically for bringing their art to the public in a very “naive” way; though this feature does not resolve the reason why Kharms chose to become Holmes, it does point to another genetic link that facilitates an understanding of Kharms’s enigmatic oeuvre. What the obereity and he himself brought to zhiznetvorchestvo is the “infantilism” that Sherlock Holmes embodies as a hero of youth literature, as a Don Quixote of our times and beyond those “childish” images we may discern both the overman and the one Solov’ev called the true overman—Christ.

\(^{41}\) I have already discussed \textit{Pro eto}. To give one more clear example, Khlebnikov wrote a playlet titled \textit{Baryshnia Smert’} in which “stupid” and upperclass death (baryshnia) is overcome by a brave hero who dupes “her.”
CHAPTER 4

POLYGENETIC PALETTE: KHRAMS’S LITERARY ANTECEDENTS

"I am glad of all details, whether they seem to you to be relevant or not."
-Sherlock Holmes⁴²

Obviously this thesis does not claim Conan Doyle as Khrams’s only literary precursor—quite on the contrary, his artistic palette is polygenetic indeed. It is best to start with his Russian intertexts, as Khrams’s Russian antecedents are particularly numerous, even though they do not exhaust his literary background that is rich in foreign sources also. Adrian Wanner in his article on Khrams’s place in the history of Russian minimalist prose builds on Neil Cornwell’s list that includes Krylov, Dostoevskii, Turgenev, Garshin, Zamiatin, Olesha, and Zoshchenko.⁴³ Wanner adds to this list the futurist poet Vasilisk Gnedov, and the “decadent” Valerii Briusov⁴⁴ (Gnedov and Briusov are questionable sources according to Wanner because they wrote minimalist poetry, not prose), and — most importantly perhaps -- Fedor Sologub⁴⁵.

⁴² Doyle Vol. I 386
⁴³ Wanner, 452
⁴⁴ Wanner 458
⁴⁵ Wanner 461
Other possible authors that impacted Kharms in one way or another and should be mentioned in this context of Kharms’s Russian intertextuality are Gogol’, for his aesthetics of the grotesque, and Pushkin, specifically in regard to certain motifs (the connection between the Countess of “The Queen of Spades” and Kharms’s “Old Woman” is evident) and his being presented as a “character” in Kharms’s works.

Another relevant Russian intertextual link may be sought in Chekhov’s prose, likewise “minimalist” in its laconic nature. As Ellen Chances has shown, there are striking similarities in that both authors, in spite of their brevity, use “ostentatiously superfluous details, the use of zero endings, [and] repetition as a structural device.”

But Kharms never mentioned Chekhov in his diaries and journals, as Wanner points out. Kharms was also a Tolstoian pacifist. The Tolstoian connection bears no significance to Kharms aesthetically, except for the fact that the marked violence of Kharms’s works, including Sluchai, may be seen as the “reverse” of Tolstoi’s “non-resistance to evil.” Kharms demonstrates what ought to be by showing us what happens in reality.

In Wanner’s article, Sologub’s “skazochki” are shown to be crucial for understanding Kharms’s oeuvre, specifically the shorter prose pieces. The comparison of “Three Spittles” by Sologub to Kharms’s “Symphony No. 2” bears fruitful thematic and structural resemblances.

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46 Wanner 451
47 Wanner 468
48 According to Wanner these little fairy tales were published in two separate volumes in 1904 and 1905, with additional tales added to the complete works in 1913 and 1916 (469).
“Три плевка”

Шел человек и плонул трижды.  
Он ушел, плевки остались.  
И сказал один плевок:  
- Мы здесь, а человека нет.  
И другой сказал:  
- Он ушел.  
И третий:  
- Он только затем и приходил, чтобы нас посадить здесь. Мы - цель жизни человека. Он ушел, а мы остались.

“Three Spittles”

A man came and spat three times.  
He went away; the spittles remained.  
And one spittle said:  
-We are here, but the man is gone.  
And the other said:  
-He has left.  
And the third:  
-He only came to put us here. We are the goal of man’s life. He went away and we have remained.

It is worth juxtaposing the above Sologub prose piece with Kharms’s below:

“Синфо́ния Но. 2”

Антон Михайлович плонул, сказал «эх», опять плонул, опять сказал «эх»  
опять плонул, опять сказал «эх» и ушел. И Бог с ним. Расскажу лучше про Илью Павловича.

“Symphony No. 2”

Anton Mikhailovich spat, said “Ugh,” spat again, said “Ugh” again, spat again, said “Ugh” again, and went out. To hell with him. I’d better tell you about II’ia Pavlovich.49

Even with the remarkable similarities, there is also a disparate element between the works that demonstrates Kharms’s aesthetic independence. He is in dialogue with

49 Wanner 463
Sologub, not his imitator. The existential statement made by the three spittles in
Sologub’s piece, specifically the third, acts as a denouement, or a moral in Sologub’s
fairy tale. It tells us that perhaps man’s entire existence and all his strivings are nothing
more than spit and that God, or the “Spitter,” has abandoned his creatures, spitted out
by chance. This philosophical element is not as apparent in Kharms’s work, and it
begs us to look in other places to make sense of the piece. Looking for other authors
besides Sologub to aid a fuller understanding of Kharms is one way to help us make
sense of his apparent senselessness, but this task is not an easy one, in view of
Kharms’s wide knowledge of world literature. Understanding Kharms means, to some
dergree, that one must know everything he read which, is an arduous task for any
scholar.

Possibly a classification system of Kharmsian antecedents should be
established. The first group would consist of authors that Kharms either resembles
stylistically or references thematically but where there are no explicit references in his
notebooks and journals to these authors. Chekhov would fall into this category. The
second group would consist of writers and thinkers like Henri Bergson who are
invoked in Kharms’s writing and are also mentioned in his diaries, proving that
Kharms was indeed interested and influenced by their work. To some degree this is the
category under which Arthur Conan Doyle and his Sherlock Holmes should be
classified. The third group is perhaps the most peculiar, consisting of artists that are
explicitly referenced in his works, but where the link between their and Kharms’s
works is not in any way obvious, or where it has not as yet been demonstrated. The
mysterious epigraph by Knut Hamsun to Starukha is the most obvious choice for this
group. For the final group, the presence of the author does little to enlighten the
reader and the reference is in some regards a clever distraction.

50 George Gibian notes in the introduction to his translation of Kharms's and Vvedenskii's works, "His [Kharms's] favorite literary hero was Nagel in Knut Hamsun's Mystery (who spoke the words, "I am a stranger among my own people. Soon my hour will come.")" (Gibian p.7) Although the reference to Hamsun is there, I have yet to read anything that explains the relevance of the non-descript Hamsun epigraph for that story.
CHAPTER 5

HOLMES IN SLUCHAI

Есть только желающие верить и желающие не верить.
-Даниил Хармс

To turn now to the non-Russian pretexts that are important to understanding both Kharms's life- and word- texts, his life creation and oeuvre, as already mentioned, Arthur Conan Doyle's works fall into the second category of antecedents. The pseudonym 'Kharms' is the first link in connecting Daniil Iuvachev to Sherlock Holmes. Neil Cornwell writes that, "the predilection for the name 'Kharms' is thought to derive from an appreciation of the tension between the English words 'charms' and 'harms'...but may also owe something to the similarity in sound to Sherlock Holmes: in his final year at school, he was said to be engrossed in Conan Doyle." 52 Phonetically the two names are separated by only a slight sound difference, but the more relevant connection is the propensity Kharms's had for donning the famous deer stalker and pipe; as he wrote in his journal in 1937:

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51 "There are only those who want to believe, and those who don't want to believe." - Daniil Kharms from Starukha
52 Cornwell 4
Создай себе позу и имей характер выдержать её. Когда-то у меня была поза индейца, потом Шерлок Холмса, потом йога, а теперь раздражительного неврастеника. Последнюю позу я бы не хотел удерживать за собой. Надо выдумать новую позу.33

I create a pose for myself and I have the character to keep to it. At one time my pose was that of a Red Indian, then Sherlock Holmes, then a yogi and now an irritable neurotic. The latter pose I would not like to sustain for my own sake. I’ll have to think up a new pose.44

Along with this, Iakov Druskin, a friend of Kharms, wrote,

“At the end of the 1920s Vvedensky said that Kharms was no creating art, but was himself art. At the end of the 1930s, Kharms used to say that the most important thing for him had always been not art, but life: to make his life into art. This is not aestheticism since ‘making life into art’ was not an aesthetic category for Kharms, but, as we now say, an existential one.”55

Cornwell and Druskin bring to light two important factors in relation to the impact of Holmes on Kharms. The first quote acknowledges the high regard in which Kharms held the character of Sherlock Holmes as it is the only specific character to which he refers in his “list.” This quote also reveals that Holmes was in Kharms’s thoughts during the time Kharms wrote Sluchai and “Starukha.” The second gives credibility to the fact that Kharms had blurred the lines between the real world and the world created by artists, as is evidenced in his connection to zhiznetvorchestvo. What specifically is Holmesian in Kharms’s life and literature though?

Comparing Doyle’s works about Sherlock Holmes and Daniil Kharms’s Sluchai builds strong connections between the two. To start with setting, the London of Doyle’s imagination and Holmes’s reality is a dark and disturbing place. The only window into this world comes to us from the memoirs of Dr. John H. Watson,

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33 Kharms. Zapisnye knizhki 128
44 Cornwell 4
55 Quoted in Cornwell 22
Holmes's friend and colleague. Watson chooses to retell only the adventurous aspects of his time with Holmes, leaving any mundane details out of his writing. Watson's choice to recount the detective's cases – this term does seem to be reflected in the title *Sluchai* -- 56 and little else might suggest that this is a biased perspective showing only London's underworld, but it should be noted that this is the world in which Holmes chooses to live. And that this is a murky corner of London, otherwise very much the "capital of the world," emerges from the fact that even Watson, who has witnessed the horrors of war in Afghanistan, describes the quarters Holmes has chosen in London as exceptionally dark and gloomy; he writes, "I have seen death in many forms, but never has it appeared to me in a more fearsome aspect than in that dark, grimy apartment which looked out upon one of the main arteries of suburban London."57 The absurd and constant violence that one encounters in Holmes's world may seem incongruous and extreme for highly civilized London, but this is the London that Holmes is immersed in because of his line of work. Even the Baker Street Irregulars, a group of street urchins Holmes employs, are proof that the London of the various Holmesian tales is a seamier place than one might expect. But then it is these street urchins that Holmes perhaps is out to protect and bring into a better world. As we know well, Victorian London was a sharply divided and stratified world and Holmes's choice of the "dark side" and "underbelly" of the city seems to mark a very conscious ethical decision.

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56 The Russian word 'случай' and its plural 'случай' have several possible translations including the word(s) 'case(s)'. Some of Doyle's stories such as "The Greek Interpreter" and "The Priory School" have been translated as "Случай с переводчиком" and "Случай в интернате", respectively.

57 Doyle Vol. I 24
Kharms’s prose works are built on similar ideas of there being much vileness and baseness in humanity, of there being perpetrators of violence and victims of it, as evidenced in the Sluchai cycle. His setting is a murky and scary Leningrad where irrational evil is in abundance. Throughout the entire cycle, characters are killed and maimed without explanation and most shockingly without any reservations or horror expressed by the author.\(^{58}\) Actors vomit uncontrollably in “An Unsuccessful Show,” people are bludgeoned to death with cucumbers in “What They Sell in Shops These Days,” and in “Sonnet” the characters are distracted by a child who falls off of a park bench and breaks his jaw bone. Returning to the issue of violence and the lack of explanation, the crimes of Sherlock Holmes’s adventures all initially seem inexplicable -- random and unexplainable occurrences (sometimes even supernatural, as in the well known “Hound of the Baskervilles”) that baffle and confuse the police. As it is in “A Study in Scarlet” (1887) and many other tales, Holmes is sought out by another character, sometimes a victim, sometimes a baffled witness, or the police, for his expertise in observation and deduction. All categories come in hopes that he might be able to solve the inexplicable mysteries presented to him. Kyle Freeman writes, “Someone seeks out the detective at his Baker Street rooms to solve an unusual mystery. Holmes and Watson then set out to explore the scene of the mystery. The police are often involved, but of course they never have a clue. After an adventure or

\(^{58}\) The stark matter-of-factness of the narrator in the Kharms pieces is similar to Holmes’s own blunt nature, as narrated by Watson, but that will be addressed later.
two that builds suspense, Holmes solves the case in the most dramatic way."^59 And of course he invariably demonstrates that seeming irrationality was all too explicable.

The unexplainable and unusual nature of the crimes that Holmes grapples with and solves is what, in my view, gives some unity to the seemingly disconnected Sluchai cycle. One could argue that the events of Sluchai are merely half-stories, as opposed to Doyle's full plot stories. But there are similarities: although inexplicable at first glance, they, in a Holmesian fashion, have reasonable and concrete explanation when examined more closely. Furthermore, we, the readers, are like Watson, at first unable to see the common thread that ties all events together, wherefore we must wait for Holmes to 'finish' the story by revealing the logical explanations for every preposterous element. Kharms is not as accommodating, since he does not "serve up" the solution, just gives enough clues for us to do so on our own. Holmes (with Watson's help) too encourages the readers to follow his deduction, but as just stated, he also serves up the solution. "The Sign of the Four" is an appropriate example of Holmesian observation at work that we too -- we the readers -- are encouraged to develop. When Bartholomew Sholto is found dead by poisoned thorn in his study, which is locked from the inside, Holmes in a matter of moments before the police arrive begins to put the pieces together.

"Now to work! In the first place, how did these folk come and how did they go? The door has not been opened since last night. How of the window?...Window is nibbled on the inner side. Framework is solid. No hinges at the side. Let us open it. No water-pipe near. Roof quite out of reach. Yet a man has mounted by the window. It rained a little last night. Here is the print of a foot in mould

^59 Doyle Vol. I xxii
upon the sill. And here is a circular muddy mark, and here again upon the floor, and here again by the table."\textsuperscript{60}

From this, Holmes identifies in less than half an hour the members of the criminal party (a man with a peg leg\textsuperscript{61} left the circular mark, and his accomplice it turns out is a pygmy), their method of entry, and the poison used by the duo. When Watson is given a chance to analyze the situation he proves his ineptitude by assuming that the small footprints of the murderer are those of a child, -- he does not even consider a pygmy, in spite of the exotic murder weapon. Holmes’s deduction of course proves right in the end.

Applying this style of logic and observation to the cases in \textit{Sluchai} proves to be helpful in giving some of the pieces a meaning that was perhaps not clear before. The first two pieces in the cycle are commonly used to show how the Kharmsian absurd can be grounded in reality. In Robin Aizlewood’s article, “Towards an Interpretation of Kharms’s \textit{Sluchai},” he suggests that one can read “Blue Notebook no. 10” non-parodically. “Against the background of Stalin’s Russia the text can be interpreted as an account of someone who “bit by bit” becomes a non-person, and as an account that is defamiliarized and made funny by treating it absurdly literally (the realization of the metaphor), while the moral reads quite straightforwardly: such people are best not talked about.”\textsuperscript{62} This type of reading sets a tone that can be used to interpret the rest of the texts. Looking at the third and fourth pieces, “The Plummeting Old Women” and “Sonnet”, one cane make further inferences as to the ‘end’ of the story, or, how

\textsuperscript{60} Doyle Vol. I 125
\textsuperscript{61} This could be a possible source of the peg-legged man in “Starukha.” “Я смотрю из окна на улицу и вижу, как по панели идет человек на механической ноге. Он громко стучит своей ногой и палкой.” See discussion below.
\textsuperscript{62} Cornell 102
Holmes/Kharms might solve the "case" – although Kharms keeps his solution to himself. In his environment, a "disclosure" would be too dangerous for the author an aesthetically the lack of (dis)closure is more satisfying too.

"The Plummetering Old Women" is perhaps a tale of how the curious, or just inquisitive, or unsuspecting, meet their demise in Stalinist Russia. As the first woman falls out the window, every other woman who wants to know what happened to her meets the same fate; an accidental death, by "leaning too far out" of the window (read: wanting to know more than she should). If one then makes the same assumptions about this piece that were made in regards to "Blue Notebook no.10", it can be established that these deaths are not accidental, nor surprising as the narrator states, "By the time a sixth old woman had plummeted down, I was fed up watching them." These deaths of women sticking their necks out are just the consequences of being curious while living under a secretive, totalitarian state in the 1930s. In short, the riddles we are given to solve rely on verbal solutions like deciphering symbols and images, realizing the metaphor and seeing beyond the surface in other ways. The "case is solved" by reading the text for metaphorical clues.

Continuing on the theme of Soviet secrecy, "The Unsuccessful Performance" follows this Holmesian paradigm. Five separate people walk onto a stage and attempt to say something. Each character mutters a few words and then proceeds to vomit before finishing a sentence. The scene ends with a little girl informing the audience that the theater will close, as the entire company is sick. The events of this incident could be interpreted in two ways. This could be seen as rebellious avant-garde artists

63 Kharms. Incidences. 50
who are reluctant to perform the new Soviet plays and therefore they make their opinions of these plays known in a non-verbal manner. Another possible interpretation could be that the little girl is covering up for the sudden disposal of non-conformist artists and the disbanding of any radical theater groups who go against the prescribed government aesthetics. Regardless of the interpretation, the Soviet landscape of the Kharmsian world is again eerie and grotesque and demands investigation.

Most of the violent stories can easily be “solved” using the suggested reading by Aizlewood, but not all of the stories contain elements of violence or death. For example, how does one use the backdrop of Soviet Leningrad – a Russian version of Holmes’s infernal London -- to explain “Sonnet” or “Pushkin and Gogol”? “Elementary” as Holmes would say. “Sonnet” deals with the inability of the narrator and his compatriots to reconcile the sequential order of the numbers seven and eight. Perhaps this is a subtle reference to Stalin’s desire to rewrite history and make the truth fit his own needs. As books like The Commissar Vanishes documents, people and facts were included and excluded as needed, to fit those in power. Those who supported Trotsky or Bukharin would be subject to being right one day and wrong the next depending on the whims of Stalin. The cashier’s remark, “I should think seven comes after eight whenever eight comes after seven,”\textsuperscript{64} expresses the fear and reluctance to commit to either answer as committing could mean that you might be wrong and as Trotsky said, “No one is right against the Party.” As the core truths were rewritten during the 1930s, Kharms documented subtly and absurdly the confusion of the people who had to remember if seven came before eight, or eight after seven. And that fear

\textsuperscript{64} Kharms. Incidences. 51
would even apply to a discussion of a sonnet (as the title of the piece implies) – after all, if Stalin wanted to have the tercets start after line seven and not line eight of the second quatrain, sonnets would have to assume a different structure. Dante’s, Petrarca’s, Pushkin’s and all the world’s sonnets would have to be rewritten, yet kept intact too, in case the Leader changed his mind again.

“Pushkin and Gogol” and even “Anecdotes from the Life of Pushkin” (part of Sluchai) reveal yet another type of crime, one not only committed by Soviet critics and scholars, but critics and scholars in general. In “The Anti-World of Daniil Kharms,” Anthony Anemone notes that through ostranenie or defamiliarization, Kharms challenges our images of these pillars of Russian literature.\(^65\) He writes, “by rejecting all the usual associations with Pushkin and Gogol’, the text forces the reader to confront the clichés and received opinions which substitute for direct and personal knowledge of the authors and their works.”\(^66\) Again Kharms is forcing the reader to use more astute powers of observation and insight when dealing with the world around them. Much like Holmes’s articles on identifying various tobaccos by their ash in “A Study in Scarlet,” Sluchai act as a detective’s primer, forces the reader to examine and reexamine these simple stories until some meaning can be gained from it. To quote Holmes on two accounts, he tells Watson, “It is just in such details [knowing tobacco ash] that the skilled detective differs from the Gregson and Lestrade type [two detectives at Scotland Yard with whom Holmes competes],” and later, “You know a

\(^{65}\) Nor does Kharms hesitate to challenge the position of other sacrosanct figures, such as Ivan Susanin. This patriotic opera by Glinka had its libretto rewritten in the 1930s with Susanin becoming a Soviet positive hero. Kharms perhaps shows in his little piece that Susanin was really “shat upon” by these transformations. In the story this is what happens to Susanin when he goes to a restaurant.

\(^{66}\) Cornwell 79
conjurer gets no credit when once he has explained his trick; and if I show you too much of my method of working, you will come to the conclusion that I am a very ordinary individual after all.  

It could be argued that Kharms followed Holmes’s advice, not revealing his tricks, whereas the great detective could not resist doing so after all. Revelation, or not, noticing the minute details is one of the keys to successful riddle- and crime-case-solving and, most importantly in this “case,” for gleaning some sense from the cycle. The reference to the conjurer, an invocation of the ‘charms’ in the name Kharms, as noted earlier, explains to some degree why we are getting only ‘half’ of each mini-story. Revealing the whole would make Kharms “ordinary.”

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67 Doyle Vol I. 29
CHAPTER 6

THE HOLMES CHARACTER IN KHARMS’S CHARACTER

"It was not merely that Holmes changed his costume."
-Dr. John H. Watson\(^\text{68}\)

It is easy to see why the literary creation “Holmes” would have had such impact on the creation of “Kharms.” In many regards, Holmes is an artist and with that, a staunch individualist who holds himself in high regard. These and other qualities are present in Kharms’s own character (I am not claiming the same qualities for Iuvachev, since Iuvachev belongs to life, whereas Kharms belongs to the art of life creation). It could even be said that Kharms has a Watson and that it is his audience that plays this role. Watson is less heuristic as mentioned earlier (it must be remembered that Watson is not anything if not intelligent, he just is not as observant as Holmes), but Watson is also the one who memorializes Holmes through his memoirs. Without Watson, Holmes would have disappeared and been forgotten, and our role as the audience is similar; we keep Kharms alive by reading his works.

To say it again, Holmes is an artist, and one similar in some ways to Kharms. Throughout the collection of Doyle’s stories, Holmes proves himself to be an actor, musician, and a writer comparable to the greats of his time. Especially important in the

\(^{68}\) Doyle Vol. 1 199
Kharms context is Holmes’s ability to wear disguises and play various roles, in short engage in a kind of zhiznetvorchestvo. This is what Watson writes:

“He disappeared into his bedroom and returned in a few minutes in the character of an amiable and simple-minded Nonconformist clergyman. His broad black hat, his baggy trousers, his white tie, his sympathetic smile, and general look of peering and benevolent curiosity were such as Mr. John Hare alone could have equaled. It was not merely that Holmes changed his costume. His expression, his manner, his very soul seemed to vary with every fresh part that he assumed. The stage lost a fine actor... when he became a specialist in crime.”

As various biographers and Kharms himself have pointed out, Kharms often acted out different roles including the role of a fictitious brother (and Holmes too had a brother, Mycroft). Again this ties both Holmes and Kharms to the symbolists and futurists who practiced zhiznetvorchestvo.

Holmes is a musician also and characterized by Watson in these terms: [he] “took up his violin from the corner, [and] began to play some low, dreamy, melodious air – his own, no doubt, for he had a remarkable gift for improvisation.”

This ‘gift’ of improvisation is linked to Kharms in that his own gifts are based on creating new works, by developing associations received. Kharms talents as improver link him to the futurism which valued improvisation – Maiakovskii during his tours all over Russia would develop “themes” given to him by his audience in the form of (often provocative) questions.

More important to the analysis of Kharms-Holmes is Holmes’s work as a writer. Holmes is well versed in the classics of literature at times quoting or referring to Edgar Allan Poe, Émile Gaboriau, Nicolas Boileau-Despreaux, François, duc de La

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69 Doyle Vol. I 199.
70 Doyle Vol. I 148
Rocheoucauld, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Holmes writes prolifically on various analytical subjects, but of course he does not write any creative prose. The transition to this sentence is not clear to me. Anemone in his article about the 'anti-world' in Kharms writes that, "The crucial break between signifiers and signified is foregrounded in the semantic inversion of the anti-world in this text ['Comprehensive Research'], where 'doctor' means 'murderer', 'patient' equals 'victim', and there is no discernable difference between 'medicine' and 'poison'." 71 Though this story is not part of the Sluchai cycle, Anemone applies his theory to the bulk of Kharms's work, and in this case it can be applied to Kharms's life. Borrowing from this theory one could invert the roles of 'detective' (as one who observes) with 'writer' (as one who explains). Looking at Holmes and Kharms from this perspective we could write that Holmes is an independent 'writer' who does not work for the government (i.e. Scotland Yard). Unlike the other 'writers' who do work for the government and prove to be consistently inept and poor at their work, Holmes is always proving himself to be the best at what he does, and without 'writers' like him, many crimes and atrocities might have gone unnoticed. Again, using a backdrop of Soviet Russia in the 1930s, is this story drastically different from the fates that the avant-garde artists were subject to by the various artist Unions?

The above analysis offers but a brief application of the theory that Daniil Kharms was impacted by Sherlock Holmes in his life creation and by Doyle in his writings. Another text that testifies to such an impact is his longer prose piece Starukha (1939). Essentially, the tale can be read as a metaphysical murder mystery, where an

71 Cornwell 86
old woman’s corpse, found dead under unknown circumstances, forces a guilt-stricken narrator to act as a murderer and hide the body he did not kill. Proclaiming innocence, he yet tries to dispose of the victim out of fear of being unable to prove he was not responsible for her demise – after all in the state he lives in there are no innocents who cannot be turned into a criminal in the flash of a moment. This issue of guilt and innocence is complicated by several factors, including the protagonist’s friend’s, Sakerdon Mikhailovich’s role in the novel as spiritual guidance. The discussion of faith between Sakerdon and the narrator redefines the world into groups of those who believe versus those who do not believe. The narrator suggests that the world is divided into those who want to believe and those who do not want to believe, and he adds that this means that those who do not want to believe already know that there is a faith in which they should believe. The final prayer of the narrator stresses the issue of his own faith, and we, the readers, must ask if he believes or wants to believe. Perhaps in this “case,” there is no all-conclusive solution to the problem.

The unresolved ending again harkens to the Holmesian element of Kharms’s fiction. Is the narrator like Watson who is unable to solve the mystery of the old woman? Does Sakerdon Mikhailovich possess Holmes’s keen observation when he suggests to the narrator that one should not kick the dead, even though the narrator has already done so? Has Sakerdon seen the kick by some barely perceptible dint on the narrator’s boot? In essence, Starukha remains an unsolved case, and in a world without a Sherlock Holmes, the innocent will stand accused of crimes they did not commit and most likely they will suffer punishment for it. Perhaps this story is a call to people to take after Kharms, and use their powers of observation in order to save the
innocents who cannot defend themselves. Or is Sakerdon a Holmes who represents
genuine law – the law of justice – as opposed to the irrational law of the all-pervasive
state evil?

Many more stories could offer further insight into understanding Sluchai and
“Starukha,” but for the purpose of this paper it is best to end here and make one final
connection between the two “characters.” Holmes once stated,

“I cannot live without brainwork. What else is there to live for? Stand at the
window here. Was ever such a dreary, dismal, unprofitable world? See how
the yellow fog swirls down the Street and drifts across the dun-coloured houses.
What could be more hopelessly prosaic and material? What is the use of
having powers, Doctor, when one has no field upon which to exert them?
Crime is commonplace, and no qualities save those which are commonplace
have any function upon earth.”

This quote could have come from the lips of Kharms himself in response to the Soviet
society that surrounded him and strived to impose state regulated equality, i.e.
conformity. As genius and creativity were stifled at every step, the avant-garde artists
like Kharms tried to use their “powers” and make the world more than
“commonplace.”

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72 Doyle Vol. 1, 104.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Стоит ли жить в этой тьме заблуждений, 
Стоит ли жить, если правда мертва?

-B. C. Соловьев

Arthur Conan Doyle's detective had no minor impact on Daniil Kharms. Though it has only been recognized as a marginal footnote in Kharms's life and work, I hope that this paper has proven to some degree that even the marginal can be a source of broad and clear insight into Kharms's complexities. Though Sluchai has numerous possible thematic, genre and stylistic antecedents, it still continues to perplex readers in their attempts to find a unifying message. The Holmesian element does offer a key to finding such a unifying theme in the cycle, but, naturally, it is only one possible lens through which the work should be viewed. Ultimately, Kharms's works require the attention to any detail, no matter how insignificant, as it may offer "leads" to the complete work. Neil Cornwell's initial observation of the phonetic relation of the name Holmes to Kharms and his subsequent reference to Holmes in Kharms's notebooks have acted as a catalyst for opening new vistas in Kharms research.

73 "Is it worth living in this delusional fog, / Is it worth living if the truth is dead?" - V.S. Solov'ev
personally hope to continue research along the Holmes-Kharms-line even beyond the present findings of my thesis.\textsuperscript{74}

To end on a humorous note, Sherlock Holmes has become an oddity in the world of literature, transcending the boundaries of art and in essence becoming a real person. Freeman writes that, “It has become a good-humored convention for Holmes scholars to treat the stories as historical events and the protagonists as real figures.” Not only have several biographies been written about Holmes, but perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Holmes’s zhiznetvorchestvo reversal is his being awarded an Honorary Fellowship by the Royal Society of Chemistry.\textsuperscript{75} Kharms would most likely appreciate the irony of this induction, since he too made a serious contribution to making the verbal creation of Holmes into “real flesh,” offering his own body and guises as artistic means for this transformation.

\textsuperscript{74} I appreciate Irene Masing-Delic’s pointing me to the importance of the concept of life creation in Kharms’s works.

\textsuperscript{75} Doyle Vol. II xxii-xxiii. Apparently he was their first and only fictional inductee
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