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Doctoral thesis: *The works of Daniil Kharms: a study in the poetics of the body*

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## **Abstract**

The study contemplates the representation of the body in the works of the Russian poet Daniil Kharms (1905–1942). Kharms's poetry remained largely unknown during his short life, and many decades passed before its value became fully recognised. By now, Kharms's poems have gained popularity and become the subject of much critical interest. The poet has been linked to the theatre of the absurd and placed among the writers of nonsense poetry, while his works have been discussed in the context of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century developments in the arts and in philosophy. This study takes up the subject of the body and corporeality in Kharms's oeuvre and demonstrates the ways in which eroticism, violence and language combine to create the poet's unique voice.

The study opens with an introductory chapter, which briefly presents the main arguments developed in the dissertation. The chapter provides also the broader field of intellectual inspiration that laid down the foundations for the interpretative perspectives adopted throughout the work. The first analytical chapter of the study offers a biographical sketch of Daniil Kharms's life, as it is apt that a study exploring the body and physicality in his poetry should begin with a discussion of Kharms's own physical existence. The biographical information is also of consequence to the following analysis for two main reasons. In the first place, it provides the necessary context of the vibrant intellectual sociability of the 1920's, in which Kharms took an active part, and without which it would be difficult to understand and appreciate much of the reference to concrete objects and materiality in his work. Secondly, following Jean-Philippe Jaccard's periodisation of the poet's output, the events in Kharms's life determine the organisation of the dissertation, and thus the works produced before 1931 and Kharms's exile to Kursk are analysed in Chapter Two, and those subsequently produced until the poet's tragic death are the subject of the discussion in Chapter Three.

Paradoxically, the first chapter, which furnishes the more concrete and factual references to Kharms's life and times may appear farthest removed from the poetic material analysed in the chapters that follow. These analytical chapters offer close readings of the poems and explore in depth the represented worlds of Kharms's literary output. However, the reality of the poet's actual existence and that of his literary worlds come poignantly together at the moment of Kharms's tragic death of starvation in a Leningrad prison. The event serves as a reminder that the first and most important body of Kharms's to be mentioned must always be his own.

The second analytical chapter of the dissertation investigates the representation of the body in the poems written by Kharms in the 1920's. The analyses are organised around the relevant avant-garde concepts as reflected in the scrutinised works (for instance, the section "The Scission" employs the interpretational perspectives inspired by cubist art), or around the recurring themes in Kharms's poetry (for instance, the sections "Fighting" or "Eroticism and Procreation"). The readings offered in the chapter point to the freedom of the body as envisaged by Kharms: the bodies in the poems of the period appear to be in constant motion: they fly, leap and whirl. The freedom they enjoy seems truly total; they are bound by no constraints or rules, not even those governing avant-garde literature. They do indeed, as it is put in the chapter, "elude all commitment and obligation". The conclusions of the chapter propose to view the body in Kharms's early poems as epitomising the ultimate existential freedom "of bodies readying themselves for resurrection or resurrected already".

The third chapter notes the changes in the representation of the body in Kharms's poetry of the 1930's. As in the earlier chapter so here the analysis is structured around the key themes (for instance, "Aggression" or "Hunger") or abstract motifs recurring in the poems (for instance, the section "The Perspective and the Circle"). In many ways the subchapters form a response to the analyses presented in Chapter Two (for instance, the section "Rising" from Chapter Two has its counterpart in "The Fall" in Chapter Three). Such pairings demonstrate more clearly the differences in the treatment of the body between the poems written before and those produced after 1931.

The vision of the body which emerges in the later poems stands in sharp contrast indeed to the one suggested by the poems of the 1920's. The characters no longer realise the avant-garde dream of weightless flight; on the contrary, their bodies become heavy and gravitate downwards. The ethereal lightness has gone, and instead, the poems become peopled with figures that bump into

each other, push one another, stalk or spy on each other. The body has also become the source of discontent and frustration, which is often symbolised by hunger or emptiness, or which, at times, becomes expressed even more radically: when the suffering bodies cannot – even in suffering or death – find the ultimate relief. Thus, the conclusions of this chapter posit that in the portrayal of the body, Kharms's later poetry achieves the reversal of the effects achieved in his earlier poems. In the 1930's, the body for Kharms is no longer preparing for resurrection; it merely subsists, like a demon, somewhere between life and death. The hope for resurrection is no more.

The closing chapter presents the final conclusions, and aims to be in keeping with the finishing lines in Kharms's poems, which are often concise and may even appear somewhat abrupt. Thus, the last pages of the dissertation offer a brief reflection on the fundamental need of the body as it transpires in Daniil Kharms's poetry, the need so apparently difficult to attain: to be, live and die, away from politics.