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Belief in the Unbelievable:
Yakov Druskin and *Chinari* Metaphysics

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Oberlin College, April 2021

Abstract

This project focuses on the philosophy of Yakov Druskin and its applicability as a lens through which to examine the metaphysical and religious elements of *chinari* literature. Formed in Leningrad at the dawn of the Soviet Union, the group of authors and philosophers known as the *chinari* has long been recognized as an important component of the Russian avant-garde. However, the role of religion and spirituality in their works remains under-examined, despite the fact that the group featured a prolific religious philosopher, Yakov Druskin. By exploring a selection of Druskin's philosophical concepts and applying them to major *chinari* texts—Daniil Kharms' "The Old Woman" and Alexander Vvedensky's "God May be All Around"—I argue that Druskin helps us look beyond the grotesque and comic aspects of the group to uncover deeper themes of faith, selfhood, and transcendence. The project adds to our understanding of the *chinari* and works to fill a gap in Slavic studies, as Druskin has received very little scholarly attention in the field. This research also points to new directions for further study, prompting us to examine more closely the influence of theology and European existentialism on the Soviet literature of the absurd.

Keywords: Russian, absurdism, Russian literature, religion, metaphysics, Soviet, chinari, Kharms, Druskin, Vvedensky

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A Note on Translation and Transliteration

Throughout this work, I have used the simplified ALA-LC transliteration system. Where relevant, names have been transliterated as they most commonly are in translated works, even when that transliteration deviates somewhat from the transliteration rules. For example, I use Alexander Vvedensky rather than Aleksandr Vvedenskii, Yakov Druskin rather than Iakov Druskin, and so forth. These transliterations come from the most recent major translators of *chinari* works, Eugene Ostashevsky and Matvei Yankelevich.¹

Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations of works cited in Russian are mine.

¹ Eugene Ostashevsky, ed. *OBERIU: An Anthology of Russian Absurdism* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2006).

Alexander Vvedensky, *An Invitation for me to Think*, ed. and trans. Eugene Ostashevsky and Matvei Yankelevich (New York: New York Review Books, 2013).

Introduction

In 2018, during my second year at Oberlin College, I was introduced to the *chinari*—a literary and artistic collective formed in Leningrad at the dawn of the Soviet Union and the dusk of Russian modernism.² The two most well-known authors from the group, Daniil Kharms (1905-1942) and Alexander Ivanovich Vvedensky (1904-1941), produced plays, poetry, and prose which reveled in nonsense, grotesque humor, and literary distortions. For a brief period from 1927 to 1931, the group existed as a formal collective called “OBERIU,” or “The Association for Real Art.”³ Even after this formal group’s dissolution, the authors continued to write to and with each other as *chinari*. For their gleeful rejection of order and comprehensibility, their style has been termed “Russian absurdism.” As I read more of and about the *chinari*, I quickly learned what scholars in the West have been discovering since Kharms and Vvedensky first appeared in English in 1971⁴—that the *chinari* have a literary depth far beyond the grotesque slapstick one first encounters in their works. As I studied further, the most enduring question I faced was that of religion. Kharms and Vvedensky mention God frequently, and there are moments in their work when these references seem disarmingly sincere. However, the opacity of their writings made it almost impossible to understand exactly what they thought of Him or how religion and spirituality function in their artistic world. I became convinced that there was some metaphysical, spiritual significance to the *chinari* project, but what was it? It was in pursuit of an answer to this question that I came across Yakov Druskin.

² The name *chinari* comes from the word *chin*, meaning “rank” as in Peter the Great’s table of ranks, used for centuries in the Russian Empire to stratify the levels of government service. One member of the group is a *chinar*, and the plural form is *chinari*.

³ *Ob’edinenie real’nogo iskusstva*

⁴ See George Gibian, ed., trans, *Russia’s Lost Literature of the Absurd: Selected Works of Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedensky* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1971).

Yakov Semenovich Druskin's (1902-1980) connection to the *chinari* goes all the way back to his childhood, when he studied as a schoolchild in St. Petersburg (then Petrograd) alongside Vvedensky and another future *chinari*, Leonid Savelevich Lipavsky (1904-1941). Druskin remained close with the group throughout their lives and was a core member of their intellectual circle. Unlike the other *chinari*, Druskin methodically avoided the limelight. He didn't publish anything until late in his life, and shunned both artistic and academic renown despite having advanced training as a mathematician, philosopher, and pianist. Rather, Druskin worked as a schoolteacher, writing prolifically in private.⁵

In most studies of the *chinari*, Druskin is primarily remembered not for his work, but for outliving his friends and saving their manuscripts. By 1942, Kharms, Vvedensky, Lipavsky, and Oleinikov had all suffered tragic and early deaths,⁶ leaving Druskin, rather suddenly, as the last *chinari*. In the midst of the siege of Leningrad, Druskin saved a suitcase full of *chinari* manuscripts from Kharms' apartment, saving the group from historical extinction. Druskin wrote often about his friends and their work, and in the last decade of his life he produced some of the first scholarly analyses and histories of the group and their poetics.

In his own right, Druskin is a fascinating and eclectic thinker. He wrote on a wide range of subjects from metaphysics to literary analysis to musicology both during and after the lifetimes of the other *chinari*, and God remains a central theme throughout his *oeuvre*. His works combine the convoluted style of the *chinari* with the metaphysical weight of existentialist

⁵ A. L. Dmitrenko and V. N. Sazhin, "Kratkaya istoriya 'chinarei'" in "...Sborishche druzei, ostavlennykh sud'boiu:" "*Chinari*" v tekstakh, dokumentakh, i issledovaniyakh v 2 tomakh, vol. 1, Ed. V. N. Sazhin, (Moscow: Ladimir, 1998), 6. Throughout the rest of this thesis, this anthology will be cited as simply "*Sborishche Druzei*," following whichever particular author and essay is being cited.

⁶ Kharms and Vvedensky were both arrested in 1941 for political crimes and died within months of each other: Vvedensky in December 1941 on a prison train from Kharkov to Kazan, Kharms in February 1942, in a prison psychiatric ward. Lipavsky joined the war and was killed in battle outside Leningrad in 1941.

philosophy, a deep-seeded spirituality, and the intimacy of a man writing—especially after 1942—to and for himself. Unfortunately, relatively little attention has been paid to Druskin’s work itself, or its implications for our understanding of the *chinari* project more broadly.

Of course, there are some scholars who have dedicated serious energy to Druskin’s work, and they bear mentioning here. Both Neil Carrick⁷ and Neil Cornwell⁸ mention the possibility of Druskin’s philosophical work as a meaningful influence on Daniil Kharm’s, but neither pursue this idea in depth. A number of Russian scholars—including Andrei Avdeenkov, Aleksei Slobozhanin, and Kirill Drozdov, among others—have taken Druskin on his own terms, recognizing his efforts to find and create deeper meaning within the *chinari* project and the potential connections between Druskin and the broader category of existentialism.⁹ Druskin’s writings on Johann Sebastian Bach—which will be discussed here further in chapters one and three—have drawn the attention of some in the musicological community, including Marina Lupishko. Lupishko’s paper on Druskin and Bach was of great use in researching this thesis and represents, in my opinion, one of the finest English-language resources on Druskin available.¹⁰ Finally, in his fantastic book, *Daniil Kharm’s and the End of the Russian Avant-Garde*, Jean-Philippe Jaccard comes closest of all to my intentions with this thesis, connecting Druskin and Kharm’s on a conceptual level and using Druskin’s philosophy to elucidate Kharm’s work.¹¹

⁷ Neil Carrick, *Daniil Kharm’s, Theologian of the Absurd* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Central Printing Services, 1998), 71.

⁸ Neil Cornwell, “Introduction: Daniil Kharm’s, Black Miniaturist,” in *Daniil Kharm’s and the Poetics of the Absurd: Essays and Materials*, ed. Neil Cornwell (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), 3-22.

⁹ Andrei Nikolaevich Avdeenkov, “‘Nekotoroe ravnovesie s nebol’shoi pogreshnost’iu:’ ekzistentsial’naia filosofia Ia. S. Druskina,” *Vestnik Permskogo Universiteta* 23, no. 3 (2015): 65-74.

Kirill Valer’evich Drozdov, “Lipavskii i Druskin: Chinari v poiskakh smysla,” *Vestnik RGGU, Seria: Literaturovedenie. Iazykoznanie. Kul’turologiia*, No. 10 (2007): 141-153.

Aleksei Viacheslavovich Slobozhanin “Gnoseologicheskie problemy v ekzistentsial’noi filosofii Ya.S. Druskina” *Gumanitarnye vedomosti TGPU im. L.N. Tolstogo*, no. 4, (2015): 41-49.

¹⁰ Marina Lupishko, “In Search of Hieroglyphs: Iakov Druskin’s Back ‘Lexicon’ in the Aesthetic Context of the Russian and Soviet Avant-garde,” *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 97, No. 4 (2019): 629-675.

¹¹ Jean-Philippe Jaccard, *Daniil Kharm’s i konets russkogo avangarda*, trans. F. A. Perovskaya (St. Petersburg, Gummanitarnoe agentstvo “Akademicheskii proekt,” 1995).

Jaccard's work in this area is discussed further in chapter two.

In the present project I hope to build upon the work of these scholars, further exploring the power of Druskin to help us understand and interpret the *chinari* project. The thesis is divided into three chapters: the first outlines some key elements of Druskin's thought, while the second two chapters apply these Druskinian concepts to the work of Kharms and Vvedensky respectively. In the first chapter, I choose to incorporate works from across Druskin's life, including those written long after the death of Kharms and Vvedensky. This reflects my belief that it is not only Druskin's direct influence on his friends during their lifetime which holds value. I suggest that we should also see value in using Druskin's thought—in all its stages of development—as a lens through which to read the metaphysical and spiritual aspects of the *chinari*. In the second two chapters, I choose depth over breadth, focusing on just one piece by each of the two authors. Across the work, I argue that Druskin's philosophy helps us connect absurdity and divinity in new ways, revealing a *chinari* metaphysics concerned not only with destroying rationality, but with transcending it, searching beyond for something sacred and divine.

Chapter 1: Yakov Druskin and The Divine Absurd

Introduction

This chapter aims to construct a brief overview of some key elements in Druskin's philosophical thought, which will be further developed and connected to individual *chinari* works in the following chapters. Druskin's long and prolific life leaves the modern student with a vast, relatively unstructured body of work, which cannot be comprehensively reviewed in the space available here. As such, I have had to be selective in which concepts I choose to cover, and which of Druskin's work I choose to cite. The chapter is not chronological, nor is it comprehensive. Rather, the chapter has been broken into three sections, each corresponding to Druskin's treatment of themes which are also highly visible in Kharms and Vvedensky. First, we dive into Druskin's writings on faith itself, to glean more about what he actually thought about faith, beyond the mere fact that he was religious. In doing so, we set the stage for fruitful interpretations of the myriad mentions of God in other *chinari* works. Second, the chapter reviews Druskin's thinking on selfhood and free will. This is not only an area of common interest between Druskin and his peers, but it is where Druskin makes some of his most unique contributions to existential philosophy writ large. Finally, the chapter ends with a brief overview of Druskin's views on time, specifically as they relate to transcendence and divinity. Throughout the chapter, I attempt to show that these themes are united by the overarching idea that in order to return to God, humans must transcend all facets of rationality, which are ultimately only barriers between us and divine absurdity.

Throughout this chapter, and throughout the work as a whole, I describe things as "absurd" and refer to "the absurd" as a generic category. While a comprehensive discussion of

what exactly constitutes absurdism in literature is beyond the scope of this project, it is worth giving some explanation of that to which I am referring. I see two meanings of “absurdity” within the texts analyzed in this project. The first pertains to events which are utterly nonsensical or illogical and contrary to sense or reason, often to a laughable, comic extent. While we will certainly encounter and contend with this absurdity throughout this and the following chapters, we must also understand absurdity from a more philosophical perspective. Existentially, the absurd carries significance beyond humor and sense-destructing play. Ultimately, the whole realm of things which lay outside of human understanding—as above, “utterly nonsensical or illogical” —qualifies as absurd. Anything is absurd that is contrary to “normal” human understanding, or, even more simply, beyond humanity. In this light, we can describe the mystery of God, too, as absurd. Absurdity is mysterious, pervasive, and—as we will see—intertwined with divinity.

Faith and the Divine

The Basis of Faith

Throughout Druskin’s literary career, across disciplines and decades, God, faith, and the concept of divinity play a central role. While God and spirituality are too intertwined and fundamental to Druskin’s thinking to be fully understood in isolation from his other works, direct treatment of the topic is essential for any understanding of Druskin and his influence on the other *chinari*. That Yakov Druskin’s thought would be so intensely centered around Christian theology was never a given. Druskin, like Kharms and other *chinari*, was Jewish, although not brought up in strict practice of the faith. Druskin came to faith as an adult, through the music of Bach, after a 1928 performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* triggered within him a profound religious and

spiritual awakening.¹² This awakening seems to have propelled Druskin's writing—his first diaries date back to that same year, 1928. Thus, we can come to two preliminary conclusions which we ought to keep in mind while reading and thinking about Druskin. First, the origins of Druskin's faith lie in the creative arts, particularly music. Second, faith is more than just a theme in his writing. Rather, it is one of the key motivating factors that drove him to write in the first place. This is especially relevant, given the lack of monetary or professional incentive for Druskin to write or publish anything officially.¹³

Druskin's religiosity, along with his philosophy as a whole, is deeply personal—he often states that his judgements “are applicable only to himself.”¹⁴ Although it takes an unmistakably Christian form, his religious thinking is much more concerned with a mystical—and, as I argue, absurdist—type of personal faith than with ethical debates, normative teachings, or any association with organized religion and church institutions. This lack of institutional affiliation is due, in part, to the political climate in which Druskin lived. To be a Christian philosopher in the early Soviet Union was, after all, no simple task. However, this position was not purely one of forced circumstance, but of conscious choice. In his diaries, Druskin claims that his decision to forego formal baptism came from a fear of losing the “purity” of his faith.¹⁵ Here already we are faced with a contradiction: if Druskin considers baptism, which would normally be considered the ultimate *confirmation* of faith, to be a potentially dangerous distraction from faith's purity, what exactly does faith *mean* to him?

¹² Lupishko, “In Search of Hieroglyphs,” 630.

¹³ Avdeenkov, “Nekotoroe revnovesie s nebol'shoi pogreshnost'iu,” 73.

¹⁴ Mikhail Epstein, “Yakov Druskin, 1902-1980” in *Filosofia, An Encyclopedia of Russian Thought*, 2018, <http://filosofia.dickinson.edu/encyclopedia/druskin-yakov/>.

¹⁵ Yakov Semenovich Druskin, *Dnevnik*, (St. Petersburg: Gummanitarnoe agentstvo “Akademicheskiiy proekt,” 1999), 126-127.

The Nature of Faith

Perhaps the most fascinating and revelatory insights into Druskin's actual, procedural understanding of faith comes to us from the aptly titled essay "On Faith" (*O vere*).¹⁶ Right away, Druskin makes clear his position that God cannot be comprehended logically, and that we must reach for something far beyond human reason in order to find faith. He writes,

God is not in knowledge and certainty, but rather in ignorance, uncertainty, and faith. Kierkegaard: Paganism is belief in the believable. Christianity is belief in the unbelievable... nothing justifies faith. Faith itself justifies. But even this can turn into temptation: Only God justifies.¹⁷

This insistence on the incomprehensible nature of God and faith is at the core of Druskin's belief system, which, in turn, is at the core of his other thought. To believe is, itself, an absurd act. Moreover, any move to rationalize or justify faith renders faith itself impossible. Here, it is worthwhile to briefly note the influence on Druskin of the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. Druskin references Kierkegaard a number of times throughout his works and diaries, and there is definite room for parallels to be drawn between Druskin and Kierkegaard in terms of faith and its connection with the absurd or transrational. While a full exploration of Druskin and his connection to Kierkegaard and European existentialism is promising, it is far beyond the scope of this study. For now, the most important thing Druskin's reference to Kierkegaard tells us is that his thoughts did not develop in a vacuum, and that he had at least some access to such philosophy.

Towards the end of "On Faith," Druskin goes on to describe the process of attaining all-consuming faith as "opening your eyes"—a process which is at once extremely easy, since the

¹⁶ The exact date of this essay is unknown, but it appears in conjunction with another essay, "On Will" (*o vole*), which dates from 1956. The style and content of "On Faith" support the hypothesis that it was written around that same time.

¹⁷ Yakov Semenovich Druskin, *Vblizi Vestnikov*, (Washington: Frager, 1998), 87.

only thing stopping one from doing it is one's self, and extremely difficult, since to independently overcome the self is impossible. Druskin dwells in this contradiction, describing how impossible this task is, and yet how it may be done anyway through God. When Druskin does "open [his] eyes," he finds himself in blissful harmony with both the physical and metaphysical worlds.¹⁸ For Druskin, it is not only God that cannot be understood directly through human calculation, but faith as well:

It is hard to say what faith is... once, in times of temptation and despair (*iskusheniia i unyniia*), I wrote: 'strictly speaking, I cannot say that I believe. I don't disbelieve.' By intuitive logic it follows, then, that I believe... If there is not indifference or bitterness towards faith, then 'I don't disbelieve,' but if there exists an endless interest in God, then this is already the desire for faith; that is, faith.¹⁹

It seems here that all things divine and metaphysical are at once vitally important and impossible to define, existing as moving targets, impossible to pin down. Druskin implies that the only thing really necessary for belief is the *desire* to believe. This position is important to keep in mind, as it is reflected in Kharm's "The Old Woman."

In a short tract from 1930 titled "On a nonbelieving person" (*o neveruiushchem cheloveke*), a younger Druskin develops similar lines of thought on the nature of faith to those we have seen in "On Faith." Druskin claims that he "must write a study on a nonbelieving person. But a nonbelieving person does not exist. Thus, I wanted to write a study of a person who *became* a nonbeliever." Druskin describes four different hypothetical people, each with their own reason for becoming nonbelievers. The first becomes a nonbeliever "by relying on his own mind," the second because "his feelings were divided." Druskin describes his third person as an "unlucky creation of God" who is crushed and becomes a nonbeliever because he is left with "no

¹⁸ Druskin, *Vblizi Vestnikov*, 92.

¹⁹ Druskin, 88.

opinions or judgement.” Finally, the fourth person becomes a nonbeliever through his love of “decorations” (*ukrasheniia*). Each person proclaims, “there is no God,” and promptly ceases to exist. Druskin then turns on himself, claiming that he has made a mistake: the second person, he claims, didn’t actually become a nonbeliever, because he still had “feeling” (*chuvstvo*). The fourth person also didn’t stop believing, he just “had good taste,” and the third still had desire, which, as we have already discovered, is synonymous with faith for Druskin. Only the first person, who came to nonbelief through his own mind and reason, can really be called a nonbeliever. Druskin concludes that the mind is the only reason for nonbelief, and that while the human mind can seem at first like a gift, like something that gives, it turns out to be an ultimately self-destructive force that gives nothing.²⁰

The mind, as it stands for reason and rationality, is a dangerous and destructive object for Druskin. It is a cage, a barrier, and in fact the only thing standing between us and faith. In light of this understanding, absurdity as the path to faith makes perfect sense. If rational sense is the only thing standing in our way, it must be transcended. This act of transcendence, by its very definition, flies in the face of all that is rational; all that our mind can comprehend. To have faith, then, is a fundamentally absurd act.

Revelation: a certain equilibrium with a small error

While faith and God will feature heavily beyond this section, there is one more important aspect of Druskin’s religious thinking to cover here: the moment of revelation. For Druskin, divine revelation takes place in the moment at the intersection of opposing concepts, or in the small error that destabilizes an otherwise unified system. Here, we turn to one of our key

²⁰ Druskin, “O neveruiushchem cheloveke” in “*Sborishche druzei*,” 735.

Druskinian concepts, “a certain equilibrium with a small error” (*nekotoroe ravnovesie s nebol'shoi pogreshnost'iu*). The concept, as a motif appearing throughout Druskin’s *oeuvre*, is difficult to pin down. The idea appears in Druskin’s diaries as early as 1933, in the context of finding one’s place in space and time. In the relevant passage, he writes,

In the certain equilibrium of the order of events which pertain to me, there is also a small error. When I drop a habit, for example, there is a duration of time for which I feel a large deficiency. But since a new equilibrium, not deferring from the first, is eventually reestablished, it follows to think of this gap as a small error.²¹

Fleeting as the mention of equilibrium and error may have been in 1933, the idea stuck with Druskin, and he returned to it with more attention later in his life. By the 1960s, Druskin seems to have realized a much deeper significance to the concept, prompting him to write, in 1966,

...I found a certain error in the order of events which pertain to me. This error is the beginning of all philosophizing, the catalyst of all of human action and life. It is this error, and not ambition, which drives creativity: the desire to define one’s place in life... not empirically, but transcendently.²²

This connection between the “small error” as a feature of time as experienced by humans with its greater importance for human life and creativity allows for the concept’s meaning and applicability to expand. In art, as in life, equilibrium may be boring in its perfection, leading to stagnation. It is only in a moment of imperfection that we are driven to be more conscious, more thoughtful; more active and creative. Here we already see something sacred about the small error. The small rift in the fabric of ordered equilibrium, in effect, opens the door to transcendence.

The implications of “a certain equilibrium with a small error” on creativity and the arts is not merely abstract for Druskin. In his musicological book, *On Rhetorical Principles in the*

²¹ Druskin, *Dnevnik*, 52.

²² Druskin, 498.

Music of J. S. Bach, Druskin brings the concept to bear on Bach's music.

In Bach there is rarely full symmetry in the construction of themes, even under zero amplitude. More often, he deviates from it. This, too, is a certain allegory. Perfect equilibrium is maintained, despite the small error in it. Not only in Bach's themes, but in his work as a whole ... One feels an allegorical equilibrium in the structure of the whole—a certain equilibrium with a small error.²³

A small error within equilibrium—that *is* the spiritual revelation Druskin found in Bach. For Druskin, the “small error” is sacred. Not only is it, as Jean-Phillipe Jaccard writes, that which “makes the world exist, or better that which makes it real for us,”²⁴ but it is that which allows us to access the equilibrium in the first place. “A certain equilibrium” is divine, and thus inaccessible, impossible to understand in its pure form via human reason. However, in the moment of its violation—in the form of a small error—humans can gain knowledge of that certain equilibrium. That is, humans can achieve revelation. At the highest level, we can step back and imagine God's spirit as the ultimate *ravnovesie*: perfect, divine, and incomprehensible. In order to reveal himself to the masses, God had to send His son, who is fundamentally removed from the Holy Spirit, made imperfect through his mortality. In Jesus, God created a dent, a crease in the flat plane of His divinity—that is, a small error. With this in mind, the revelatory power of a “small error” can be traced back to the fact that the term is an allusion to Jesus Christ himself. Thus, Bach's subtle violations of his own order are not just beautiful, but *divine*, recreating in miniature the process of divine revelation through Jesus Christ.²⁵

²³ Yakov Semenovich Druskin, *O ritoricheskikh priemakh v muzyke I. S. Bakha* (St. Petersburg, Severnyi Olen' 1995), 125.

²⁴ Jaccard, 142.

²⁵ Interestingly, Kharms takes up a similar idea in his expansions on another Druskinian concept, “this and that” (*eto i to*). Kharms posits that in between “this” and “that,” there exists a third thing, which he calls an “obstacle” (*prepiatstvie*). Kharms goes on to draw this graphically, showing a horizontal line labeled “this” on the left and “that” on the right, intersected by a vertical line *II* representing the “obstacle.” He then shows how this diagram transposes into a cross, implying that this dynamic carries the same symbolic weight as the cross, which for Kharms is the “symbolic sign of the law of existence and life.” (Jaccard, 138-139).

Faith requires that we access a divine equilibrium that is, by definition, inaccessible to us. That is, it demands the absolute absurd of the human mind, which yearns for reason. It is only with the help of a wrinkle in this unvarnished unity—a small error—that we can achieve revelation. Druskin finds this revelatory quality—a certain equilibrium with a small error—in literature as well as in music. As chapter three shows, further exploration of this concept is immensely helpful as we try to understand metaphysical significance in the structure of *chinari* texts.

Selfhood and Free Will

In Druskin's exploration of religion, as we have seen, he quickly turns to faith and the means of achieving it. As such, it follows naturally that his interest in the relationship between the self and God should lead to an interest in the nature of selfhood. In a broad sense, almost all of Druskin's work has some relation to "the self," as he mostly writes in the first person. In the absence of a publisher—and without an audience after the death of the other *chinari*—his work is also directed largely at the self, written often in a private, almost intimate register. As such, there are many interpretations one could make, and many aspects of "selfhood" that could be fruitfully examined. However, for our purposes, the most important writings on selfhood and free will come from the book, *The Vision of Blindness (Videnie nevideniia)* (1995),²⁶ as well as from the essay "You and I: Noumenal relationship" (*Ia i ty, noumenal'noe otnoshenie*) (1964). In these pieces, Druskin distills and systematizes ideas which appear as themes throughout his

²⁶ Both *The Vision of Blindness* and *On Rhetorical Principles in the Music of J. S. Bach* were published in 1995, after ownership of Druskin's writings had passed to his sister, Lidia.

earlier work as well as in the works of the other *chinari*, including the fundamental absurdity of selfhood, the constraining energy of free will, and the ultimate necessity to renounce the rational mind.

The Absurdity of Selfhood

In the beginning of *The Vision of Blindness*, Druskin describes the simple but profound phenomenon of catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror and becoming frightened, and it is from this feeling of surprised fright that he launches into the rest of the book. From this estranging moment of self-perception, Druskin immediately spins out a stream-of-consciousness analysis in nine points, identifying a multitude of selves that become real through their perception, objectification, and alienation. This attempt at self-knowledge results in a deep despair—Druskin writes,

I ask, ‘who am I?’ and already the answer ‘I am I myself’ is self-objectifying. In my reflection and self-objectification, I do not *find* myself: I stray ever further from myself, until I lose myself in the abomination of desolation (*merzost’ zapusteniia*) in the fires of hell.²⁷

Here, we see the central absurdity of selfhood for Druskin: that any attempt at self-location or self-perception triggers an infinite feedback loop that accomplishes the exact opposite of its goal, serving only to further alienate you from yourself. However, this is only one side of the absurdity of selfhood. While it manifests itself in lived experience as a downwards spiral of self-objectification and alienization, Druskin finds a more theoretical side of the same phenomenon through the following train of thought: God creates humans in his image, but He also bestows them with limited knowledge and powers. In doing so, according to Druskin, He bestows upon humankind an “endless responsibility.” This “responsibility,” as Druskin describes it, is to “open

²⁷ Yakov Semenovich Druskin, *Videnie nevideniia*, (St. Petersburg, Al’manakh *Zazerkal’e*, 1995), 8.

my eyes ... and become blessed, as He is blessed.” Here, Druskin’s imagery of “opening the eyes” reminds us that this is the same revelation described in the previously discussed essay, “On Faith: “Then my eyes open, and in every stone, in every tree stump, I see the earth and the heavens, the whole world, and every hardship and every misery becomes not a hardship and not a misery, but a blessing.”²⁸ Moreover, it leads Druskin to what he calls his “existential contradiction: I cannot take this endless responsibility upon myself, as it is beyond my strength; I can’t *not* accept this endless responsibility upon myself, as He has already bestowed it upon me.”²⁹ Despite being guiltless and perfect in the moment of creation, humans are simultaneously unable to carry out their primary responsibility to God, and are instantly rendered guilty, imperfect. In fact, Druskin goes so far as to call this inability to comprehend and carry out this responsibility his “original sin.”³⁰

In this analysis of sin and the self, we have an application of Druskin’s term, “A certain equilibrium with a small error.” Here, the “certain unity” is God’s image, in which we are created. However, within that harmonious equilibrium, there is a small error: the fundamental sin which comes from a human’s inability to comprehend and carry out our responsibility to God. Druskin makes this idea explicit in his later essay, “You and I, Noumenal Relationship:” “Only [man] is created directly in God’s image and likeness. But in sin, man violates this likeness: he becomes a **self**. ‘Selfness’ separates man from God.”³¹ Andrei Nikolayevich Avdeenkov reaches a similar conclusion: “To understand [the equilibrium of the universe], one must venture beyond the bounds of stable equilibrium, introducing into it an element of error, inaccuracy. Humankind

²⁸ Druskin, *Vblizi vestnikov*, 92.

²⁹ Druskin, *Videnie nevideniia*, 10.

³⁰ Druskin, *Videnie nevideniia*, 10.

³¹ Druskin, *Vblizi vstnikov*, 171.

violates natural equilibrium through its existence.”³² That is to say, sin is the *only* thing separating us from God, and all of selfhood—everything we can hope to know and experience through our senses and reason—exists within that “small error.” Avdeenkov’s conclusion also points us towards the broader allegorical significance of the term outlined earlier: if the human condition is necessarily a violation of “natural equilibrium,” Jesus’ humanity makes sense as a “small error” within the natural equilibrium of the Holy Spirit.

Druskin sees selfhood and godliness as being at odds with each other, yet another indication of the absurdity of selfhood. “The contradiction of man is that he himself sets himself apart from God, and at the same time he himself must renounce himself in order to return to God.”³³ The self is not an ideal, but rather a barrier, separating us from the divine. The answer, then, is to return to God, to overcome the rational mind, to embrace and embody the absurd. This is no simple task, but Druskin nonetheless offers a path forward. In this path to self-transcendence, Druskin adds an important additional layer: that of free will.

Free Will as a Prison

Singling out free will in Druskin’s work is important not only because he has interesting things to say on the subject (although this is very much the case), but also because the issue is very relevant to the other authors whose works we will examine. In many of the works of Kharms and Vvedensky, free will is convoluted, if not denied altogether. Characters make strange choices, things appear to happen for no apparent reason, and the general link between choice and consequence is distorted. Here, again, Druskin provides a useful contextual underpinning for our understanding of the *chinari*.

³² Avdeenkov, “Nekotoroe ravnovesie s nebol’shoi pogreshnost’iu,” 72.

³³ Avdeenkov, 72.

Essentially, Druskin sees “free will” as a deception on two fronts. First, in the fact of free choice itself, Druskin sees a negative side: If our lives are subject to our choice at every given moment, then we are *forced* to choose in every moment. Even the lack of choice is, in fact, a choice (the choice to do nothing), and in this sense we are imprisoned, rather than being free. We are obligated to constantly choose one of an infinite number of possibilities, and are thus limiting ourselves, closing doors. As Mikhail Epstein writes in his analysis of Druskin’s philosophy, “freedom, in practice, becomes a chain of necessary limitations.”³⁴ Both Epstein and Avdeenkov, writing on Druskin’s views on free will, note the comparison here to Jean-Paul Sartre, who expresses a similar sentiment in “Existentialism is a Humanism” (1946): “In one sense, choice is possible; what is impossible is not to choose. I can always choose, but I must also realize that, if I decide not to choose, that still constitutes a choice.”³⁵ This similarity, however, exists only on the surface. Although the idea of being “condemned to choose” appears similarly in both Druskin and Sartre, we must remember that Sartre and Druskin come from starkly different sides of the existential debate. Sartre’s statement comes from the viewpoint of *atheistic* existentialism. He stresses the impact and importance of individual choice, and his ultimate conclusion is closer to the cliché “life is what you make it” than anything else. Druskin, on the other hand, is operating from a firmly religious standpoint, and his conclusions are rather different. Druskin overlaps with Sartre in the method he uses to undermine “freedom” in free choice, but Druskin goes further. For Druskin, free will carries actively negative connotations.

In order to understand this, we must remember the role that the rational mind plays in Druskin’s thinking. As was made clear in the discussion on the nature of faith, the rational mind

³⁴ Epstein, “Yakov Druskin,” 2018.

³⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 44.

is the ultimate barrier between us and divinity. From these two foundational beliefs—that divinity exists and is worth striving towards, and that the rational mind is the main thing holding us back—Druskin’s rejection of free will becomes clear: Free will is the *self* at work, and the self is, in a word, self-interested. It can only act within its limited abilities and cannot transcend itself. Druskin describes this as humankind’s “natural attitude” (*estestvennaia ustanovka*).³⁶

Humankind, in its natural attitude, has a subversive motive: “Man, by his very nature—consciously or unconsciously—strives to replace God with himself, to take His place, make himself God.”³⁷ Thus, “free will” is really a prison, another barrier to revelation, another human facet which ends up being primarily a limitation; something to overcome.

You and I

Having seen selfhood in all of its absurdity, and having exposed the sinister nature of free will, what is to be done? Druskin seems to have given the human soul a great deal to “transcend.” How can it be done? While the *chinari* seem generally unconcerned with answers, preferring to complicate, contradict, and bewilder, Druskin actually attempts to answer the question in “You and I: Noumenal Relationship.” His answer is relatively simple, and surprisingly sweet: We need a companion.

More precisely, the *I* needs to be in a “noumenal relationship”³⁸ with a *you*. For Druskin, the vast majority of love, even the strongest sort, is “natural” rather than noumenal.³⁹ Since it

³⁶ For more on this term, which Druskin borrows from Edmund Husserl, see Sebastian Luft, “Husserl’s Notion of the Natural Attitude and the Shift to Transcendental Phenomenology,” *Analecta Husserliana*, Vol. 80 (2002): 225-229.

³⁷ Druskin, *Vblizi Vestnikov*, 169.

³⁸ “Noumenal” here can be taken to mean, roughly, “higher, transcendental, and inaccessible to human reason.” For more on the term, see: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/noumenon>.

³⁹ As was the case with its connection to Kierkegaard, a full exploration of Druskin’s conception of noumena and phenomena is fascinating, but beyond the scope of this work.

ultimately relates back to the self, this love and these relationships boil down to egoism. Druskin uses a mother and her child as an example: “The love of a mother to her child, especially an infant, is natural, tribal egoism...because an infant child is not yet an *I*, and for the mother is not yet a *you* either, but rather her own natural continuation. However, if the mother sees in her child a future *you*, created in the image and likeness of God, then her love is noumenal, and not just natural.” To be noumenal, then, for Druskin, is to be in reference not to the self, but to God. Thus, “the relationship between *you* and *I* is noumenal if between *you* and *I* there stands God.”⁴⁰

This *you*, the special other with whom you have a noumenal bond, Druskin calls a “co-responsible assistant” (*sootvetstvenniy pomoshchnik*).⁴¹ When a person achieves this sort of relationship, they become able to overcome the abject spiral involved in trying to independently locate and understand the self. Through each other and the relationship between them, their burden—their endless responsibility—becomes shared, and lightened. Through noumenal companionship, we touch God.

However, Druskin ends his essay with a caveat: There is a second path to God, without a companion. It is also possible, despite its difficulty, to have a noumenal relationship with oneself.

By refusing a sentimental or prideful relationship with myself—that is, by humbling myself—I find a new order for my life in the past, I find a kind of unnatural permanence within the natural state of change. I truly feel a kind of common leadership in my life, despite the vast number of mistakes for which I now so deeply repent... This is the path of penance, humility, and prayer.⁴²

If coming to God through a companion involves overcoming the self through effectively melding

⁴⁰ Druskin, *Vblizi Vestnikov*, 171-177.

⁴¹ Druskin claims that God created Eve in order to be this sort of companion for Adam, but that by tasting the forbidden fruit she ceased to fulfill her duty. This sets Druskin in line with the long line of men who have warped the gospels in order to place the blame of human sin on womankind.

⁴² Druskin, *Vblizi Vestnikov*, 178.

identities with someone else, this path involves a more intense self-denial which, in turn, gets more directly at God.

Thus, we have the broad strokes of the self and free will according to Druskin: The absurdity of selfhood, free will as a prison, and a path forward through noumenal companionship or mystical self-transcendence. However, this is not the end of what we can say about Druskin. In “On Faith,” Druskin writes, “God is now—the eternal now.” This cryptic statement points us to the final major theme we must cover before we understand the concepts which we are to see in Kharms and Vvedensky: Time.

Time and Death

Even early in his life, Druskin had already identified the core elements of his views on time. In a fragment dated to the second half of the 1920s, he lays out a “new theory of time,” which, as he claims, had been revealed to him by God. The theory, in its entirety, is as follows: “When something *was*, then it *was not*, just like that which *will be*, but it is *now*. And the reverse: when something *is now*, that which *was* before *was not* before, just like that which *will be* later.”⁴³

Straight away, we run into the aforementioned interpretative challenge: while Druskin was attempting to systematize *chinari* thought, he was a *chinari* himself, and utilized many of the same stylistic conventions as his friends—that is to say, he often wrote in the most convoluted way imaginable. Nonetheless, the thrust of the theory can be clarified: The past, present, and future cannot be considered separately from one another. Each has an impact on the others, and all three are somehow bound together in a mysterious, overarching unity.

⁴³ Druskin, “Proiskhozhdenie vtorogo mira v sviazi s novoi teoriei vremeni,” in “*Sborishche druzei*,” 662.

Additionally, the connection between time and God was already firmly established, as was Druskin's insistence on the limits of his own knowledge. He stresses, before delivering the "theory," that he himself didn't know what he was saying, and that he was only repeating what God had given him. Thus, we can already say that much like the self and divinity, time is another concept that exists beyond the powers of the rational mind.

As the *chinari* pushed forth into the 1930s, past the end of the OBERIU era, Druskin's father suddenly died. This propelled him into a deep, prolonged personal crisis, and produced a beautiful, haunting essay entitled "Death."⁴⁴ While, as I have already stated, all of Druskin's writing is strikingly personal, this is especially true of "Death." In it, Druskin is wrestling directly with his father's passing—the first of many deaths with which he would be forced to reckon—and in doing so, he lays out an evolved conception of time that would persevere long after the passing of his father. Druskin begins the discussion of time with a starkly pessimistic observation: "The whole is not comprehensible within time. Time bears death." Time, as a directional force, has a destination, which for Druskin is death and decay. He sees this as, in fact, the *only* function of time, separating "time" as a directional process from "moments." He writes:

One can say what is not in time, but how can one say what time is? Not any of the words that apply to things that exist can be applied to time; we may even say that it does not exist. But this nonexistent thing is the most frightening of powers and you feel best when you don't feel it. Nor do I understand when they say that something exists in time. Something exists in the moment, whereas in time it is destroyed and ceases to exist.⁴⁵

With the death of his father, Druskin feels the weight of time squarely upon his shoulders, and the existential dread that comes with the promise of aging and eventual death. But this is not simply Druskin wallowing in his sadness. He means what he says here, and he comes

⁴⁴ This is one of the very few pieces of Druskin's to have been published in translation. It appears alongside two other short pieces in Eugene Ostashevsky's anthology, *OBERIU: An Anthology of Russian Absurdism*, 219-236.

⁴⁵ Druskin, "Death" in *OBERIU: An Anthology of Russian Absurdism*, 225.

to important conclusions. First, a conclusion about the moment: “The moment is the only reality. Then there are also memory, imagination, and reason. All of them can be united under the name of ideas. They are the signs of moments. They put a stop to duration, they divide it. When I find the right sign, I name the moment, and motion and duration halt, they cease to exist, they become what they are, that is: nothing. For they do not exist in the moment, and nothing exists apart from the moment.” Second, a conclusion about God: “If God sees my whole life, he sees it at once, that is to say not in time. God does not see time, whereas I experience time as a certain defect ... I do apprehend myself, but only in the moment.”⁴⁶ From these quotes, we see the “moment” as both more real and more important than linear time whereas God exists beyond time, in what could be described as a never-ending moment, an eternal *now*.

This connection between the end of time and transcendence is a theme in the *chinari*'s creative *oeuvre*. The connection between Druskin and Vvedensky will be discussed in greater depth in chapter three, but we can already see how Druskin's philosophy helps bring meaning to the final lines of Vvedensky's “God May be All Around” (*Krugom vozmozhno Bog*), which initially seem like absurdist nonsense: “In runs a dead man / and silently erases time.”⁴⁷ If we understand time in Druskin's terms—that is, as a defect, a harbinger of death, a reflection of humankind's limited ability to comprehend the true nature of things—we can then understand the erasure or destruction of time as a transcendent act. This adds metaphysical weight to the passage and works against the tendency to interpret absurdism as a postmodern process by which meaning is simply contorted to the point of nonexistence.

⁴⁶Druskin, 224-226

⁴⁷ Alexander Ivanovich Vvedensky, “Krugom vozmozhno Bog” in his, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh, Tom I. Proizvedeniia 1926-1937*, ed. Mikhail Meilakh, (Ann Arbor, Ardis, 1980), 178.

Conclusion

In the course of this chapter, we have seen how Druskin relates the self, free will, and linear time to each other as obstacles; agents of the rational mind which must be overcome in order to find God. We have seen the metaphysical importance of absurdity for Druskin, as overcoming rationality and embracing the absurd is the *only* way to access the divine. Divinity is absurd, and absurdity is divine: the two define each other. In the next chapter, we will see how Druskin's work on faith and free will helps uncover deeper meanings in the prose of Daniil Kharms.

We have also discovered the role of creative art in the process of revelation. Beyond the fact that Druskin's religious revelation is rooted in the aesthetic experience of Bach's music, the concept of "a certain equilibrium with a small error" helps us see religious allegory in artistic asymmetry. While Druskin found this asymmetry in Bach, we know that he saw the same significance in the works of the other *chinari*. In chapter three, "a certain equilibrium with a small error" will become an invaluable tool to help us understand how the structure of a work of art—not just its content or context—can perform a divine task.

Thus, understanding Druskin's key concepts reveals a new depth of metaphysical sincerity and nuance to the greater *chinari* project, shedding a new light on particular aspects of the poetics of the group's central figures: Kharms and Vvedensky.

Chapter 2: Searching for Faith in Kharms' "The Old Woman"

Introduction

Daniil Ivanovich Kharms, born as Daniil Ivanovich Yuvachev in Saint Petersburg in 1905, has become the best-known of the *chinari* by a wide margin. Scholarship around Kharms is much more robust than around any other *chinari* or around the group in general, but surprisingly little attention has been given to the relationship between him and Druskin. One scholar who has recognized Druskin's importance to understanding Kharms is Jean-Philippe Jaccard. In his book, *Daniil Kharms and the End of the Russian Avant-Garde*,⁴⁸ Jaccard focuses his study primarily on Druskin's writings from the late 1920s and early 1930s—the period of the OBERIU in which he had the most “intense relationship”⁴⁹ with Kharms. Jaccard succeeds in establishing the direct influence of Druskin on Kharms, particularly through his exploration of “this and that” (*eto i to*)—a recurring motif in the work of Druskin and Lipavsky seen in their writings as early as the 1920s—and its connection with Kharms' 1930 poem “Notnow” (*neteper*).⁵⁰

In this chapter I have taken a different—and necessarily narrower—approach, incorporating some of the later philosophical works discussed in chapter one and using Druskin's thought as a prism through which to view just one of Kharms' stories, “The Old Woman” (*Starukha*). Written in 1939, “The Old Woman” is among Kharms' latest, longest, and most well-known pieces. The story follows a writer who meets an old woman one day by chance. The woman appears in his apartment later on and seems to wield a dominant power over the narrator before suddenly dropping dead. The narrator intends to get rid of the body immediately, but ends

⁴⁸ Jaccard, *Daniil Kharms i konets russkogo avangarda*, 123-154.

⁴⁹ Jaccard, 123.

⁵⁰ Jaccard, 138-140.

up meeting his friend, Sakerdon Mikhailovich, and an unnamed woman. He talks with them both about God and other existential matters before finally boarding a train bound for Lisy Nos with the old woman's corpse stuffed in a suitcase. On the train, however, the suitcase vanishes. The story ends with a fascinating, nebulous final scene: the narrator arrives at Lisy Nos, walks into the woods, and says a prayer: "In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, now and forever and ever, amen."⁵¹ Unlike many of the short poems and prose fragments from earlier works, "The Old Woman" has a definite plot and a comprehensible (although still bizarre) structure. It also has a notable philosophical and metaphysical weight. The characters deal directly, albeit strangely, with the question of God, making "The Old Woman" an excellent example for analysis here.

While my analysis of "The Old Woman" is aimed at metaphysical questions and the connections between Kharms and Druskin, I must briefly address the socio-political context in which the story came to be. As scholars routinely point out, the often-cruel absurdity of Kharms' work can be seen, in part, as a reflection of the era of Stalinist repression through which he lived. While I believe that we must be careful not to rely too heavily on this comparison to explain away all of Kharms' artistic intentions, it is certainly important to keep in mind. In fact, I see it as especially relevant for this story. By the time it was written, this political system had begun to have real consequences for Kharms and people around him. Kharms himself had not yet suffered greatly, although he was blacklisted briefly in 1937 after political allegory was found in one of his children's poems. However, some more peripheral members of the literary circle were not so lucky. Nikolai Zabolotsky, despite having estranged himself from the *chinari* in favor of writing

⁵¹ Daniil Ivanovich Kharms, "Starukha," in *D. Kharms: polnoe sobranie sochinenii, tom 2: proza i stsenki, dramaticheskie proizvedenia*, ed. Valerii Nikolaevich Sazhin (St. Petersburg: Gumanitarnoe agentstvo "Akademicheskii proekt," 1997), 161-188.

government-approved verse, was accused of affiliation with a “group of terrorist writers” and sent to a labor camp that same year, 1937. Most brutally, the year before, Nikolai Oleinikov was executed after being forced to admit to participation in a Trotskyist plot.⁵² By late 1938 and early 1939, social and political issues were coming to a dangerous and chaotic boil, both in broader Europe and among the Russian literary avant-garde.⁵³

While socio-political interpretations of this text are certainly valuable, my aim here, is not to focus on the political context of “The Old Woman,” but to use it as a case study, to demonstrate how the philosophical ideas of Yakov Druskin can give rise to new readings and interpretations of Kharms’ work. In this chapter, I will present two insights into the “The Old Woman,” both of which become possible by reading Kharms through a Druskinian lens. First, I will examine the central role time plays within the story, using Druskin’s writings on time to propose that anxieties around aging are a central part of the narrator’s struggle. Second, I will turn to the question of faith in the story, engaging with two earlier analyses to present a new interpretation of the story as a parable of the narrator’s coming to faith, grounded in Druskin’s writings on faith and free will.

Time and Aging

The first insight into “The Old Woman” that Druskin helps uncover is centered around time. Time is clearly a major theme in the story, but its significance is hard to tease out. Using Druskin’s 1935 essay, “Death” as a lens, I argue that the old woman can be seen to act as a

⁵² Ostashevsky, *OBERIU: An Anthology of Russian Absurdism*, xix-xx

⁵³ For one analysis of “The Old Woman” which spends more time on the impacts of contemporary socio-political conditions, see Ellen B. Chances, “Daniil Charms’ ‘Old Woman’ Climbs her Family Tree: ‘Starucha’ and the Russian Literary Past,” in *Russian Literature* XVII (1985): 353-366.

personification of time itself, against which the narrator wrestles as he struggles with aging and bodily decay.

From the very beginning of the story, the narrator is set at odds with time. He approaches an old woman holding a clock on the street to ask for the time⁵⁴ and is surprised when the woman's clock has no hands. Somehow, however, the woman is still able to tell the narrator what time it is. This immediate plunge into the situationally absurd can be seen from a formalist perspective as a device to destabilize all forms of order in the story, but it lays the metaphysical framework for the story as well. If we remember the significance for Druskin of transcending linear time, the clock with no hands can be taken as a symbolic hint at the strange, divine nature of things to come. Of course, the narrator is bound to the imperfect, human understanding of sequential time, and is forced to ask the old woman to tell him the time in the conventional sense. Nonetheless, he feels a vague sense of the underlying truth of the handless clock: "I keep remembering the old woman with the clock whom I saw today in the yard, and it seems pleasant to me that her clock had no hands. Recently in a secondhand shop I saw a repulsive kitchen clock on which the hands were made to look like a knife and fork."⁵⁵ The contrast between the old woman's handless clock and the kitschy kitchen clock reflects Druskinian conceptions of time. Something about the handless clock feels correct, pure, "pleasant," while the hands of a clock can be seen as dissecting tools, cutting a whole into strange chunks that are simultaneously artificial as well as completely necessary in order for us to make even an attempt at self-location. In addition, this quote helps illustrate the double-sided nature of the *chinari* absurd: the mundane and the metaphysical. The clock from the secondhand shop is comic, tacky, and vulgar. The old

⁵⁴ To ask for the time is an existentially loaded question itself, implying the narrator's inability to ground himself in time, and, more directly, his desire for more of it.

⁵⁵ Kharms, "Starukha," 162.

woman's clock, while equally absurd, has a spiritual weight to it that becomes visible through the prism of Druskin.

As the story goes on, the narrator's relationship with time is strained, impatient, and uncomfortable. In multiple instances, he sets out to do something for a certain amount of time but ends up spending far too much or too little time on each task. He tries to take a long nap but can't sleep. He wants to write for 18 hours straight but can't get past a single sentence. When he wants something to take a long time, he can't make it happen. Conversely, when he wants to hurry, he wastes time: "Quickly, quickly to work. Away with all dreams and laziness.... It's only five o'clock. I have all day before me, the evening and the whole night... I stand in the middle of the room. What am I thinking about? It's already twenty to six. I've got to write."⁵⁶ More broadly, the narrator runs into a litany of time-based problems throughout the story: The bread line is too long, the old woman is decomposing because the narrator took too long to get home, the house superintendent won't be in until the following day—just to name a few examples.

These temporal obstacles and anxieties pervade "The Old Woman." But what larger theme could they point to? And how can Druskin help us find it? In his 1935 essay, "Death," Druskin spells out the difference between "time" as an ultimately deceptive linear process and "moments" as the actual temporal units of reality as perceived by humans. He writes, "Time brings death... Nor do I understand when they say that something exists in time. Something exists in the moment, whereas in time it is destroyed and ceases to exist."⁵⁷ From a divine perspective, time is an unbroken whole—a clock with no hands. From the human perspective, however, time is the process of approaching death, which we do through a series of moments. With this connection between time and death established, we can see in the old woman more

⁵⁶ Kharms, 163.

⁵⁷ Druskin, "Death," in *OBERIU: An Anthology of Russian Absurdism*, 225.

than a metaphor for death, or a character with a strong connection to time. Rather, she herself becomes a personification of time in the Druskinian sense—that is, a haunting force that brings death. If the old woman represents time, other temporal aspects of the story “click” into place, and a new central theme of the story emerges: The narrator’s anxieties around growing old.

In her brief time spent alive⁵⁸ in the story, the old woman commands and manhandles the narrator easily into submission. Both the woman’s actions and the narrator’s reactions take on new significance when we interpret the old woman’s character as a personification of time:

‘Kneel down,’ says the old woman. I kneel down. But now I begin to feel the full absurdity of my position. Why am I kneeling in front of some old woman? Why is this old woman in my room, sitting in my favorite chair? Why didn’t I throw the old woman out? ... Pain in my shoulder and in my right hip bone forces me to change my position...All my limbs are numb and don’t bend easily.⁵⁹

On one hand, the old woman behaves much like time: She barges in uninvited, directs us according to her will, and renders us full of aches and pains. In this scene, it is as if the narrator undergoes the entire aging process in miniature, so accelerated that it feels more like acute torture. Simultaneously, the narrator’s reaction to his treatment at the hands of the old woman coincides with Druskinian notions of time. As we have already established, the narrator’s appreciation of the handless clock shows that he already has some inkling, however vague, of the true nature of time. Thus, when faced with the demands of the old woman, he is able to understand the absurdity of his position despite remaining unable to resist.

I see this struggle with time as tied in with the main character’s anxieties around aging. The first hint at this comes even before the old woman enters the apartment, when the narrator claims that his friend Sakerdon Mikhailovich believes he is “no longer capable of writing a work

⁵⁸ Although, I suppose, one could argue that she was never really alive, or never really dead, or that she’s somewhere in between the two states, rendering both meaningless.

⁵⁹ Kharms, “Starukha,” 164-165.

of genius.”⁶⁰ From the beginning, then, our narrator is wrestling with the idea that he may be past his prime. The same anxiety is reflected in the two interactions he has with the would-be love interest, referred to as the “nice lady.” While no age difference between the two is explicitly spelled out, an age difference is implied in the way time twice prevents him from being with her. In their first encounter, this interference is somewhat indirect: right before bringing her to his apartment, he remembers that the old woman is lying dead on his floor. The second encounter is even more blatant: While carrying the suitcase containing the woman’s corpse, he sees the nice lady but is unable to run quickly enough to catch up to her. He attributes this to the weight of the suitcase, which, in our working metaphor, becomes the weight of time—that is, his age. For good measure, two young boys even stop to make fun of him after he tries unsuccessfully to chase the nice lady down. For our purposes, this can be read as time, in the form of the narrator’s age, literally weighing him down and preventing him from any sort of successful social (let alone romantic) interaction. The old woman stands between him and the young woman. If the old woman represents this bleak version of time, it follows that a central concern of the narrator is growing old.

This conclusion helps us understand another one of the recurring motifs of “The Old Woman”: disease and bodily decline. Perhaps the clearest example here is the group of young boys who pop up at the beginning and end of the story. These boys don’t do anything particularly out of the ordinary, but their noisy playfulness is enraging to the narrator, who daydreams about inflicting them with tetanus. The explanation here is pretty simple: he’s a grumpy old man! This is even clearer the second time the young boys appear, since this time they’re laughing directly at him after he fails to catch up to the nice lady. This is not a ridicule of bodily decline so much as

⁶⁰ Kharms, 163.

it is a reflection of the narrator's own anxieties. He feels attacked by the boys' youthful energy, and spitefully dreams about their slow and gruesome death. A similar story plays out with another recurring minor character, the man with an artificial leg. Here, instead of the narrator himself hating the cripple, the narrator observes the ridicule of society. The man with the artificial leg makes three appearances in the story. First, he is simply observed by the narrator, with no commentary or context, other than the fact that "he is making a loud noise with his leg and a stick."⁶¹ The second and third times, the narrator observes the man being pursued and laughed at, first by the six young boys, and then by adults.⁶² While the interactions with the young boys reveal the narrator's spite, his observations of the crippled man underline his fear. He sees society laugh at his misfortune and feels the weight of the old woman of time pushing him towards that same laughable state of grotesque bodily decay.

How, then, in this reading, are we to interpret the mysterious final scenes of "The Old Woman," in which the dead woman disappears and the narrator ventures into the woods to pray? In his book, *Daniil Kharms, Theologian of the Absurd*, Neil Carrick finds a useful starting point in considering the old woman's disappearance as a misinterpreted miracle. He points out that earlier in the story, the narrator essentially asks for a miracle, imagining that the old woman has magically disappeared from his room. As Carrick writes, "The absence of any miracle soon becomes apparent when he discovers the Old Woman is still there. Miracles, the narrator learns, are not available on demand, even in extreme circumstances."⁶³ Thus, when the old woman really *does* miraculously disappear on the train, the narrator mistakenly attributes it to human causes rather than to God.

⁶¹ Kharms, 163.

⁶² Kharms, 177, 184.

⁶³ Neil Carrick, *Daniil Kharms: Theologian of the Absurd*, 68.

Keeping this analysis in mind and layering Druskin's understanding of time on top of it, these events take on even deeper significance. The real miracle is not just that God has relieved the narrator of the unpleasant task of dealing with a dead body, but that God has lifted from the narrator the burden of time itself. As we have seen in our discussions of Druskin, this is a key element of transcendence. Humans are trapped in their perception of linear time, while God exists in the eternal *now*. Humans experience time as a "certain defect," leaving time as another obstacle to be transcended in order to access the divine. This is perhaps paralleled by the narrator's physical setting as he moves from the confined, manmade, unidirectional enclosure of the train to the vast, still, natural setting of the woods. Thus, the miraculous disappearance of the old woman from the train is the closest we can get to a "rational" explanation for why the narrator goes into the woods to pray. By removing his temporal anxieties, the narrator is a step closer to divinity, to the noumenal world in which time exists as a single moment. The burden of time, which a human could never independently escape, has been lifted from his shoulders, revealing God.

Faith and Free Will

The readings of "The Old Woman" that jump out most immediately revolve around the story's plethora of references to—and parodies of—classic works of Russian literature. Framed by the landmarks of St. Petersburg (Nevsky and Liteyny Prospekts, Lakhta, and so forth) and centered around a young man's killing of an old woman, the story clearly plays with such classics as Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), Pushkin's *Queen of Spades* (1834), and Gogol's *Petersburg Tales* (1835-1842).⁶⁴ Many scholars have pointed to these aspects of parody

⁶⁴ For example, the old woman's self-propelling dentures hint at Gogol's "The Nose."

and satire in “The Old Woman,”⁶⁵ and not without reason. The literary connections are effective in placing the story in cultural context and highlighting the clever and comic aspects of the work. However, the existential aspects of the story are equally important. Some inroads have been made in this direction, including studies by Neil Carrick and Alice Stone Nakhimovsky that explicitly highlight the text’s religious dimensions. While both Carrick and Nakhimovsky deal with religion in the context of “The Old Woman,” neither make use of the potential framework provided by Druskin. If we read the story with Druskin’s theories on faith and free will in mind, “The Old Woman” becomes almost a parable; a story of the narrator’s struggle to find faith.

Interestingly, Nakhimovsky does allude to Druskin briefly in her discussion of “The Old Woman.” She writes,

The line of development that leads to Starukha involves two ideas: a belief in God closely integrated with the details of everyday life and the expectation of a miracle. Both of these ideas can be found in Kharm’s work dating from the early thirties. They are also present in the philosophical writings of Ia. S. Druskin, a close friend of Kharm’s and, like him, a member of Lipavskii’s circle. Druskin’s philosophy—in particular, the idea that through prayer one can glimpse the transcendent state that lies just beyond the surface of ordinary life—seems especially relevant to Starukha.⁶⁶

Despite noting that it may be relevant to “The Old Woman,” that is the last we hear of Druskin in Nakhimovsky’s chapter on the story. Instead, she focuses on the relationship between faith and

⁶⁵ Ellen B. Chances, “Daniil Charms’ ‘Old Woman’ Climbs her Family Tree: ‘Starucha’ and the Russian Literary Past,” in *Russian Literature* XVII (1985): 353-366.

Steven Cassidy, “Daniil Kharm’s Parody of Dostoevskii: Anti-Tragedy as Political Comment,” *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 18.3 (1984): 268-84.

Neil Carrick, “A Familiar Story: Insurgent Narratives and Generic Refugees in Daniil Kharm’s ‘The Old Woman,’” *The Modern Language Review*, 90.3 (1995): 707-721.

⁶⁶ Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, *Laughter in the Void: An Introduction to the Writings of Daniil Kharm and Aleksandr Vvedenskii* (Vienna, Wiener Slawistischer Almanach, 1982), 87.

the comic grotesque, asserting that the first arises through the second in Kharm's story.⁶⁷

However, the idea that she hints at in her introduction is correct, and worth further exploration.

Druskin lays out the idea referenced by Nakhimovsky—that the realm of divinity is visible through prayer—across his work, but it features prominently in an essay discussed thoroughly in Chapter 1: “You and I, Noumenal Relationship.”⁶⁸ Although Druskin had not written “You and I: Noumenal Relationship” by the time Kharm's wrote “The Old Woman,” Druskin's essay provides an interesting structure for the process Kharm's narrator goes through in the story.

In “You and I,” Druskin is centrally concerned with companionship. He believes that relationships between two people can reach a special level of closeness which goes beyond the normal range of emotion and allows people to understand each other's essences on a deeper, mystical level. Through this active love, infused with love for God, a relationship can become “noumenal.” These noumenal relationships, in turn, become the means through which humans can access the divine. When an isolated individual attempts to locate their self or access a state of transcendence and divinity, they are inevitably met with failure and despair, crushed by the infinite and impossible responsibility to transcend the material realm that God lays upon His subjects.⁶⁹ However, with the help of a true companion (a “co-responsible assistant” in Druskin's terminology), the burden is lightened, and the impossible becomes possible. Thus, a central part of the greater search for faith is the search for a noumenal companion. However, the mystical

⁶⁷ This is already similar to Druskin's views on faith, as expressed throughout his work. Here, the “comic grotesque” can be thought of as one element of the absurdity of everyday life, that is, one particular strain of the absurd. While the two are not identical—Nakhimovsky refers to the comic grotesque as a literary device while Druskin refers to the absurd as a condition of our real world—the two are closely linked. In order to create the comic grotesque, Kharm's describes and makes light of the strange, senseless, and cruel events that occur in the world which are impossible to understand logically. That is, he describes the absurd.

⁶⁸ Druskin, *Vblizi Vestnikov*, 178.

⁶⁹ See Druskin, *Videnie Nevedeniia*, 5-14.

quality of Druskin's concept makes it difficult to imagine how a real person could actually achieve a noumenal relationship, or what form it should take. Druskin stresses that these relationships are created "not by free will, but beyond willpower," and that they, being noumenal, exist partially in a world which is necessarily beyond the grasp of the human mind.⁷⁰ Thus, we can imagine that the actual process of searching for this sort of relationship could be fraught and ultimately unsuccessful. In fact, this concept, as well as its practical shortcomings, are played out in Kharms' "The Old Woman."

When the old woman appears, she acts as a harbinger of the absurd, bringing the narrator into an acute and painful state of existential awareness, comparable to what the German existential philosopher Karl Jaspers refers to as "boundary situation."⁷¹ To put it in the words of Kharms' narrator, he suddenly becomes conscious of "the absurdity of [his] position."⁷² This heightened state of existential awareness, in turn, prompts the narrator to search for faith.

This search for faith is connected to companionship not only by Druskin's philosophy, but by Kharms' story itself. The search for faith and companionship plays out in "The Old Woman" through conversations with both the younger lady and with Sakerdon Mikhailovich. In both cases, he asks his interlocutor whether or not they believe in God. While the young lady seems taken aback, she agrees that, of course, she does. While she may believe rather passively and unthinkingly, the narrator remains interested in her, and tries to pursue her (albeit thwarted by the old woman). In their conversation, the lady clearly expects the narrator's question to be an invitation to his apartment rather than a questioning of her faith. In fact, the narrator follows up his question about faith with the expected invitation, implying that her answer to his first

⁷⁰ Druskin, *Vblizi Vestnikov*, 173-174.

⁷¹ For more on boundary situations, see Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume 2*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

⁷² Kharms, "Starukha," 164.

question may have been a condition, a prerequisite to his invitation. Connecting the discussion back to Druskin, it seems that by confirming her belief in God, she has identified herself as a potential companion for the narrator, prompting him to remain interested in her.⁷³ Ultimately, she is unable to become his companion, as their relationship is consistently thwarted by the looming presence of the old woman, time.

In contrast, the narrator's conversation with Sakerdon Mikhailovich is less promising. When asked about his belief in God, Sakerdon takes offense, refusing to answer and describing the question as inappropriate (*neprilichnyi*). In response, the narrator seemingly retreated, backpedaling his question and making an excuse to leave. In other words, Sakerdon has demonstrated his unwillingness to be a true and noumenal companion.⁷⁴ Thus, consciously or unconsciously, the narrator tries twice to establish a noumenal relationship and find God through a "co-responsible" companion. Both times, we see the narrator wrestling with the vagueness of what such a relationship might actually look like — knowing that he needs a companion, but not knowing exactly how to look for or create that noumenal bond.

In this stage of the narrator's struggle with faith, Kharms touches upon another religious idea that will be familiar to the reader from chapter 1: that of the relationship between belief and the desire to believe. After Sakerdon refuses to answer the narrator's question, he states that "there are no believing and nonbelieving people, only those who wish to believe and those who wish not to believe." Sakerdon responds, "in that case, those who wish not to believe already believe in something ... and those who wish to believe don't already believe in anything."⁷⁵ This dialogue rests squarely in the shadow of Druskin's philosophical musings. Through the

⁷³ Kharms, 171.

⁷⁴ Kharms, 175-176.

⁷⁵ Kharms, 176.

dialogue of his characters, Kharms plays with ideas discussed by Druskin in both “On Faith” and “On a nonbelieving person.” In “On a nonbelieving person,” Druskin describes how, despite faith supposedly requiring so much from humans,⁷⁶ it is actually very difficult to describe or locate a person who *does not believe* in God. This paradoxical situation in which the nonbelieving person ceases to exist when placed under examination⁷⁷ is reflected in Kharms’ conversation: By desiring not to believe, the nonbeliever must tacitly admit to the existence of that which they hope to deny. In order for this to be true, of course, we must accept as fact that the desire to believe or not is the same as actual belief (or lack thereof). This idea mirrors the one expressed by Druskin in “On Faith:”

Strictly speaking, I cannot say: ‘I believe.’ I *don’t not* believe. By intuitive logic it does not necessarily follow that I believe. But is this applicable to faith? If there is not indifference or ill will towards faith, then ‘I don’t not believe,’ but if there is an endless fascination with God, then this is already the desire to believe, that is, belief.⁷⁸

As the conversation continues, it becomes clear that the narrator is struggling with the elusive nature of faith. When Sakerdon points out that those who desire not to believe must already believe, the narrator responds that it may be so, that he doesn’t know. Annoyed, Sakerdon reiterates: “Well, what is it that they do or don’t believe? God?” Again, the narrator struggles to pin down exactly what faith can mean. “No,” he says, “In immortality.”⁷⁹ The narrator feels the beginnings of faith, the old woman has prompted him to wrestle with it, and yet he remains unable to pin it down semantically, unable to define it. To refer again back to Druskin, this is an example of how the divine is absurd—that is, incomprehensible to logic and

⁷⁶ I. e. the overcoming and transcendence of the mind described in *Vision of Blindness*, “You and I: Noumenal Relationship,” and numerous other works. Or, as Druskin himself writes in “On Faith,” “*eto ochen’ trudno i ochen’ legko*” (it is very difficult and very easy).

⁷⁷ Druskin, “O neveruyushchem cheloveke,” in “*Sborishche druzei*”, 735.

⁷⁸ Druskin, *Vblizi vestnikov*, 88.

⁷⁹ Kharms, “Starukha,” 176.

rationality.

When the narrator returns to his apartment, he faces a critical moment. He must attempt to re-enter the apartment, and somehow deal with the old woman. Here, he enters into a crisis, trying desperately to force himself to rush in and smash the woman's skull. His fear and uncertainty whirl around him, culminating in a vision of the woman crawling towards him on all fours before he eventually talks himself down and makes it back into his room. In this scene, I see the beginnings of another crucial stage in the process of coming to faith: The struggle with free will. From *Vision of Blindness* and "You and I: Noumenal Relationship," we know the importance of free will as a topic of Druskin's thought. In the previous chapter, we showed how Druskin considers free will both an illusion and a prison, a manifestation of the rational mind's ambition to usurp God, that must be overcome in order to access divinity.

Standing outside his apartment door, the narrator is set at odds with his thoughts. He freezes in the hallway, and despite telling himself over and over, "I can't stand here like this," he remains rooted to the spot, unable to move. In the immediate moment, he is powerless, unable to will himself to action. In addition to this immediate crisis of willpower, he faces a simultaneous crisis of free choice. As he describes, "Something terrible had happened, but it fell to me to do something perhaps even more terrible. My thoughts spun round like a tornado, and I saw only the eyes of the dead old woman as she crawled toward me slowly on all fours."⁸⁰ In this moment, Kharms shows us an extreme example of what Druskin would call the "prison of free will," or the constraining "situation of choice." The old woman has entered his apartment and died, but now her corpse must be dealt with. To leave the corpse alone is a practical impossibility, but anything he might do to deal with the dead body seems just as awful, if not more awful, than the

⁸⁰ Kharms, 178-179.

fact of her death itself. As it stands, the dead old woman exists in a sort of limbo state, in between the real and the surreal. Any action he might take to touch the body or recognize its existence to another person or authority would be an affirmation of her real existence, which is terrifying for the narrator. Even more to the point, he has to *choose* what to do. Whatever happens next will be his conscious choice, bringing consequences which will land squarely on his shoulders.

Eventually, the narrator wrestles his thoughts into submission, at least enough to get back into his room and start packing the old woman into his suitcase. However, throughout the process, he is fully consumed by the project of maintaining willful control of himself. The narrator's constant struggle with himself—ordering himself around and arguing with his own thoughts—reminds us that the boundary between rationality and insanity, sense and senselessness, normality and absurdity, are frayed to a near-breaking point. The abject absurdity and desperation of the narrator's situation is overwhelming, and his mind has to work overtime to keep up the illusion of order and control. In more Druskinian terms, his will is straining to hold on, but he is nearing transcendence, nevertheless.

The final stage of the narrator's journey to faith is his literal journey to Lisy Nos, where he ultimately says the prayer that ends the story. In their analyses, both Carrick and Nakhimovsky describe the moment of the old woman's disappearance as a burden being lifted. For Carrick, the disappearance of the old woman "liberates the narrator from the 'sin' for which, as a character in a surrogate Dostoevskian narrative, he needs to atone. The narrator does not require God's intercession to relieve him of the Old Woman: She has already left him. Thus, when the narrator prays, his action is made more dramatic by the fact that it occurs without

warning or obvious need.”⁸¹ For Nakhimovsky, the old woman’s disappearance signifies the replacement of one burden with another: “The physical burden of the old woman has been lifted, leaving in its stead a spiritual burden, fear and guilt, that is all the more intense. Leaving the train, the narrator goes to the woods behind the station. His attention is captivated by a caterpillar; he gets down on his knees just as he did before the old woman.”⁸²

Reading the story through a Druskinian lens, a third interpretation arises: If, as I have argued above, the dilemma of what to do with the old woman represents the prison of free will, then her disappearance sets the narrator free. Since the old woman has miraculously disappeared, the narrator has been relieved of the necessity to choose. Druskin sees this as a crucial step towards the divine. As he makes clear in “You and I: Noumenal Relationship,” “The slavery of ‘free choice’ can be overcome not through the denial of any particular [possible choice,] but through the denial of the very situation of choice.”⁸³ Thus, the old woman’s disappearance can be seen as the weight and shackles of free will being lifted from the narrator’s shoulders, opening the doors to the divine for him to walk through. We can also see the final scene of the story through the lens of this quote from Druskin’s “On Faith:” “God is not in knowledge or certainty, but in ignorance and uncertainty. Kierkegaard: Paganism is belief in the believable. Christianity is belief in the unbelievable.”⁸⁴ There is no tangible revelation of knowledge that leads the narrator to accept God. No miracle occurs in the traditional sense, and there is no life-affirming dialogue or monologue a-la Dostoevsky that would rationally *explain* why he goes into the woods and prays. Complete removal from the situation of choice has somehow, mystically, allowed the narrator to accept the uncertainty, even absurdity, of recent events. It is not that he

⁸¹ Carrick, *Daniil Kharms: Theologian of the Absurd*, 67.

⁸² Nakhimovsky, *Laughter in the Void*, 102.

⁸³ Druskin, *Vblizi Vestnikov*, 69.

⁸⁴ Druskin, 87.

finds God and thus, prays. Rather, it is in the moment of prayer itself, which arises in a vague sort of mystery, that the narrator finally accesses God.

Conclusion

There is no single correct way to read Kharms' "The Old Woman." In fact, I think that to rely too heavily on any one interpretation is a mistake. "The Old Woman" is so fascinating precisely because it contains so much of Kharms—the comic, the ludic, the existential, the spiritual—all working with, against, and in parallel to each other. This chapter is far from a full unraveling of everything interesting this story has to offer. However, I hope to have shown here that by grounding Kharms' story in the context of Druskin's philosophy, new lines of interpretation arise. Through Druskin, we have cracked open two new aspects of "The Old Woman," understanding the woman herself as an allegory for time and reading the broader plot of the story in conjunction with Druskin's essay "You and I: Noumenal Relationship" to connect the narrator's journey and his reckoning with faith. These interpretations allow us to go deeper into the metaphysical, existential side of the *chinari* absurd, bringing new richness and depth to the text. Elements of Druskin's work can be applied in similar ways to the other *chinari* authors with equally fruitful results, and the following chapter will explore some of what Druskin has to teach us about a very different text by the other most well-known *chinar*, Alexander Vvedensky.

Chapter 3: Equilibrium, Error, and Divinity in Vvedensky's "God May be All Around"

Introduction

Alexander Vvedensky, born in St. Petersburg in 1904—just one year before Kharms and two after Druskin—stands alongside Kharms as the other best-known *chinar*. While Vvedensky remains, especially in the West, significantly lesser-known and less well-researched than Kharms,⁸⁵ he was equally/no less central to the group's work. Druskin seems to have had a particular affinity for Vvedensky: the two were childhood friends, having studied together as schoolboys along with another future *chinar*, Leonid Lipavsky. Druskin also wrote more as a critic about Vvedensky than Kharms, including a study of Vvedensky's work completed in 1973 called "The Star of Nonsense" (*Zvezda bessmyslitsy*), which stretches nearly 95 pages long.⁸⁶ In addition to being the most widely known members of their circle, Vvedensky and Kharms had similar trajectories in life. Like Kharms, Vvedensky wrote a mix of prose, poetry, and drama, but was known in his lifetime as a children's author, publishing primarily in the Soviet children's journals *Chizh* and *Yozh*. Although Vvedensky parted ways physically with the other *chinari*, moving to Kharkiv in 1936, he maintained active correspondence with the others in St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) and continued to write both for children's publications and for himself. Despite the physical distance between them at this point, Vvedensky and Kharms met their tragic fates only months apart. Arrested by Nazi forces in September 1941 for refusing to

⁸⁵ A piece of very anecdotal evidence: a search on JSTOR for Kharms returns around 350 results, while a search with the same filters for Vvedensky returns just over 100.

⁸⁶ Yakov Druskin, "Zvezda bessmyslitsy," in "*Sborishche Druzei*," 549-642.

evacuate Kharkiv, Vvedensky died that December on a prison train to Kazan.⁸⁷

While the previous chapter explored one of Kharms' most structurally "normal" works, this chapter will deal with Vvedensky at his most challenging, focusing on his generically confounding 1931 poem/play⁸⁸ "God May be All Around" (*Krugom vozmozhno Bog*). This work follows a character who is first called "Ef," through what appears to be his own execution. After his apparent death, Ef (now Fomin) finds himself in a series of strange conversations with various unexplained characters. Eventually, the piece takes a markedly eschatological turn, with a depiction of the end of the world:

Остроносков:

Все останавливается.

Все пылает.

Фомин:

Мир накаляется Богом,

что нам делать.

Ostronosov:

Everything halts.

Everything is burning.

Fomin:

God is heating up the world,

*what are we to do?*⁸⁹

At the very end of the work, we are met with a fascinating and mysterious poem-within-a-poem in which Vvedensky reinforces the idea of the end of the world and turns the ambiguous title on its head, claiming not that God "may be all around," but that *only* God is possible (*Быть может только Бог*).⁹⁰

While many of Vvedensky's works could be fruitfully analyzed through the lens of

⁸⁷ Meilakh, Mikhail, "dver' v poeziyu otkryto in *Alexander Ivanovich Vvedensky, Sobranie sochinenii*, 10-33.

⁸⁸ The work contains names and dialogue as if it were a play but lacks consistent stage direction and is often interspersed with poetry beyond the dialogue. This play in form is typical for Vvedensky.

⁸⁹ Alexander Vvedensky, "Krugom Vozmozhno Bog" in *Alexander Ivanovich Vvedensky, Sobranie sochinenii*, 150.

⁹⁰ Vvedensky, 152.

Druskin, “God May be All Around” stood out as an appropriate piece to use for this chapter for a few reasons. First, the work’s content revolves clearly around religious-or at least spiritual themes: death, the afterlife, the end of the world, and the idea of God. Second, while Druskin never wrote extensively about this particular piece, its final lines contain the term that Druskin would later use as a title for his analysis of Vvedensky: the star of nonsense: «горит бессмыслицы звезда / она одна без дна» (*The star of nonsense burns / it alone is bottomless*).⁹¹ Finally, the text is absurd on two levels: content and form. While some *chinari* works (like, for example, Kharms’ “Old Woman”) contain a relatively conventional structure in which absurd things occur, others are also absurd on the structural level: Sentences lack structural integrity, words frequently do not fit logically together, and grammatical conventions are routinely broken. Sentences are disjointed, and there is little in the way of logical narrative flow.⁹² Druskin himself identified this combination of structural and situational/content-based absurdity as specifically typical of Vvedensky’s work.⁹³ All of these factors culminate in a text which can be productively connected with both Druskin the philosopher and Druskin the critic.

In my analysis of “God May be All Around” I will engage not only with Druskin’s philosophy, but with his criticism, using the analytical studies he wrote in the last decade of his life to help unravel this challenging text. Beyond analyzing the thematic motifs of Vvedensky’s work, this chapter finds that far from being an obstacle in our search for existential significance in *chinari* texts, the semantic/structural absurd is a rich and important subject. By revisiting Druskin’s concept of “a certain equilibrium with a small error” (*nekotoroe ravnovesie s nebol’shoi pogreshnost’iu*) and understanding how he uses it in his analyses of Bach and

⁹¹ Vvedensky, 152.

⁹² Iuliia Melisovna Valieva, *Igra v bessmyslitsu: poeticheskii mir Aleksandra Vvedenskogo* (St. Petersburg: Dmitriy Bulanin, 2007), 48-49.

⁹³ Yakov Druskin, “Chinari,” in “*Sborishche družei*,” 50.

Vvedensky, I use the concept as a lens through which to find meaning in the midst of the text's chaotic structure, positing that there is a spiritual, even transcendent quality to the structure itself—that the absurd text can be thought of as a path to God.

Reading Musically

As we saw in chapter one, throughout his life Druskin's religiosity was closely tied with music—particularly with the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. According to his sister, Lidia, it was Bach's "St. Matthew Passion" that affirmed his belief in God, affecting him so deeply that Lidia refers to it as a "second birth."⁹⁴ From Druskin's diaries, which he kept from 1928 (shortly after this revelatory musical experience) until nearly the end of his life, it is clear that Bach continued to play a major role in Druskin's thought. Druskin's interest in Bach culminated in a book, *O ritoricheskikh priemakh v muzyke I.S. Bakha* (On Rhetorical Principles in the Music of J.S. Bach), which was published in Ukrainian in 1972 and then again in Russian in 1995. While this book did not find its way into print until late in Druskin's life, his diaries show us that he was using Bach to draw structural and aesthetic comparisons between music and literature as early as the 1930s. Already in 1936, he wrote that "in research there must be a number of beginnings and endings, that is, there must be pauses and stops. The same is true in art, for example, in the allemandes of Bach."⁹⁵ As Marina Lupishko writes, Druskin's musicological research in *On Rhetorical Principles* is remarkably detailed and granular. Druskin pulls apart Bach's work, identifying motifs and figures—usually only a few notes long—which he then uses

⁹⁴ Lupishko, "In Search of Hieroglyphs," 630.

⁹⁵ Druskin, *Dnevnik*, 77.

to analyze Bach’s music more broadly. He isolates a basic, fundamental component of music, analyzing it in great depth before stepping back to examine how it works with other figures in the overall structure of the work. Much like the diaries, Druskin’s book is conscious of the analogy between music and language. Druskin even mentions that his choice of motifs to study relied partially on the fact that “precisely due to the simplicity of their construction, [they are the] easiest to compare with the morphology of the word.”⁹⁶

The traits of Druskin’s long standing musical analysis—attention to detail, atomization, focus on structure and motifs—seem to have influenced the literary analyses of Kharms and Vvedensky which Druskin wrote in his later years. Chief among these works is “The Star of Nonsense” (*Zvezda bessmyslitsy*), written in 1973 and dedicated to the study of Vvedensky’s work, especially the cycle “A Certain Quantity of Conversations” (1936-1937). While it is beyond the scope of this project to discuss “The Star of Nonsense” in great depth, I want to stress its importance as the first real piece of Vvedensky scholarship. Important too is the analytical approach Druskin takes in the work, which resembles that of *On Rhetorical Principles*.

Druskin insists that his goal is strictly structural, and strictly expositional. That is, he claims not to attempt to explain anything. Rather, he sets out to

draw out, in his words, “the connections, alignments, parallels, oppositions, and implications” he

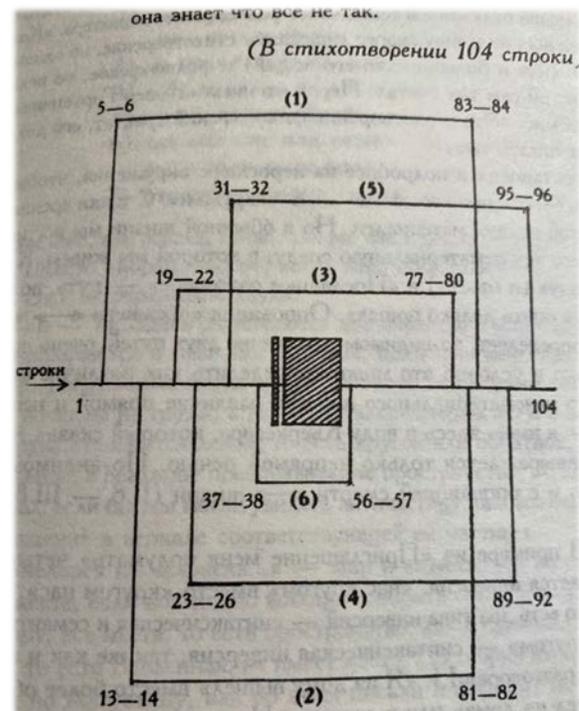


Figure 1: Diagram of Rug/Hydrangea (*Kover gortenziya*) (1934) in *Sborishche Druzei*, 569

⁹⁶ Druskin, *O ritoricheskikh priemakh v muzyke I.S. Bakha*, 73.

finds in Vvedensky's works. Like *On Rhetorical Principles*, this work is granular and structural. Druskin provides a number of diagrams⁹⁷ that lay out Vvedensky's pieces in various visual forms. While Druskin may claim not to explain anything, he still goes to a great deal of effort to clarify the structure of Vvedensky's gnarled works, untangling the mess of words to find some concept, word, or pattern that he can use to create something approaching structural clarity. Druskin reads literature musically, using the same analytical tools on both forms of art.⁹⁸

In both *On Rhetorical Principles* and "The Star of Nonsense," Druskin incorporates a term which is already familiar to us from the first chapter: "a certain equilibrium with a small error." In these critical works, Druskin expands the concept's application, seeing equilibrium and error as created through artistic structure:

[it is] precisely the shifting centers of equilibriums, that is, the asymmetry of Bach's phrases, which create the ideal equilibrium ... The perfect balance is maintained... There is an allegorical equilibrium in the structure of the whole—a certain equilibrium with a small error.⁹⁹

"Shifting centers of equilibrium" form the basis of equilibrium and error for Druskin in his analysis of Vvedensky as well. Describing the scheme of repeated motifs outlined in figure 1, Druskin notes that, "these brackets, their movement from left to right, and their exact and inexact repetition create the feeling of a certain equilibrium with a small error."¹⁰⁰ With this in mind, it becomes clear that the search for repetitions and musical motifs carries with it all the allegorical weight of "a certain equilibrium with a small error:" the search for selfhood, the separation of humanity from the divine, and "catalyst for all of human action and life."¹⁰¹ To search and

⁹⁷ See figure 1.

⁹⁸ In addition to employing similar methods in literary and musicological analyses, Druskin reads literature "musically" in a more direct sense, describing the dynamics of Vvedensky's text and metatext in the musical terms *forte*, *piano*, *mezzo forte*, and *mezzo piano*. (Druskin, "Zvezda bessmyslitsy," 604).

⁹⁹ Druskin, *O ritoricheskikh priemakh*, 124-125.

¹⁰⁰ Druskin, "Zvezda bessmyslitsy," 569.

¹⁰¹ Druskin, *Dnevnik*, 498.

examine the text's structural patterns is to undertake a task with markedly spiritual undertones.

Druskin's diaries show that he read "God May be All Around" in this manner. The entry for August 26, 1943, is as follows: "These days I enjoy reading Vvedenky's poetry like I used to play Bach—unraveling hieroglyphs." This is followed by a list of the "hieroglyphs in "God May Be All Around," arranged chronologically:

1. Ef and girl, motion.
2. Conversation about life, time.
3. Punishment of Ef—Fomin

Dead Man
4. The Feast at Stirkobreev's. Duel.
5. Forest. Beggar
6. Conversation of Hours
7. Venus

Dead man (4 times).

Fomin and Venus. Is there light?

Dead man.
8. Fomin and woman.

Nosov, woman, and Fomin

Dormir, Nosov, dormir.
9. Fomin and the People
10. Fomin's speech to the ancestors about transformation.
11. Fomin and Ostronosov—transformation. The world is being heated up by God
12. The corpse of the earth.

Dead Man¹⁰²

Druskin declines, as he often does in his diaries, to provide any analysis for this sketch.

However, we do not need his analysis to see this outline as an invitation to create our own musical sketch of the poem, reading Vvedensky's structural strangeness musically in search of elucidating themes and motifs. Using Druskin as an example, we can break down "God May Be Around" into five "acts," complete with a prelude, intermission, and finale.

¹⁰² Druskin, *Dnevnik*, 169-170.

- Prelude: The sacred flight of flowers
 - «Солнце светит в беспорядке, / и цветы летят на грядке...» (*The sun shines in disorder / and the flowers fly to the garden bed*)¹⁰³
- Act I: Ef and the girl, leading to the punishment of Ef and his transformation into Fomin
 - «Нету тебя Фомин, / умер ты, понимаешь? / Фомин: / нет я не понимаю. / Я жив.» (*You don't exist, Fomin, / you're dead, don't you understand? / Fomin: / No, I don't understand. I am alive.*)¹⁰⁴
- Act II: the feast at Stirkobreev's, culminating in his duel with Fomin and the transformation of the hall into a forest
 - «Дуэль превращается в знаменитый лес. / Порхают призраки птичек. / У девушек затянулась переписка» (*The duel transforms into a famous forest. / The ghosts of birds flutter about. / A long correspondence plays out among the women.*)¹⁰⁵
- Interlude: The conversation of the hours
 - Including, among many other quips, «Пятый час говорит шестому: / мы опоздали» (*The fifth hour says to the sixth: / we're late.*)¹⁰⁶
- Act III: Fomin's series of conversations. Despite no described motion, Fomin undergoes a series of encounters with characters who challenge, embrace, and guide him.
 - Among a rotating host of unIntroduced, mysterious characters, one called Nosov proclaims: «Фомина надо лечить. Он сумасшедший, как ты думаешь?» (*Fomin must be cured. He's insane, don't you think?*)¹⁰⁷
- Act IV: Fomin and the People, culminating in his speech
 - «Господа, господа, / глядите вся земля вода» (*Gentlemen, gentlemen, / observe, the whole earth is water.*)¹⁰⁸
- Act V: Fomin and Ostronosov, the transformation (burning) of the world, the arrival of God.
 - «мир накаляется Богом» (*God is heating up the world*)¹⁰⁹
- Finale: The Star of Nonsense
 - «Горит бессмыслицы звезда, / она одна без дна. / Вбегает мертвый господин / и молча удаляет время.» (*The star of nonsense burns, / it alone is bottomless. / In runs a dead man / and silently erases time.*)¹¹⁰

¹⁰³ Vvedensky, "Krugom vozmozhno Bog," 127.

¹⁰⁴ Vvedensky, 132.

¹⁰⁵ Vvedensky, 137.

¹⁰⁶ Vvedensky, 139.

¹⁰⁷ Vvedensky, 146.

¹⁰⁸ Vvedensky, 149.

¹⁰⁹ Vvedensky, 150.

¹¹⁰ Vvedensky, 152.

Looking at both our sketch and the one provided by Druskin, a few elements become clear. First, from our sketch, we see transformation (*prevrashenie*) arising as a thematic through line. In almost every act, something or someone undergoes a transformation. These transformations build up throughout the work, gaining momentum through their repetition and through their scale, beginning with an individual (Ef—Fomin), followed by a location (Hall—forest), leading up to the finale, in which the whole world is transformed in fire, replaced by God and the Star of Nonsense. The spiritual implications of this theme are fairly straightforward. We already see an eschatological bent to “God May be All Around” in its final act, as Ostronosov and Fomin realize that “all is burning. God is heating up the world.” By the end of the poem, the apocalypse completes itself, ending in the death of the world, the deletion of time, and the existence only of divinity. While the end of the world does not appear as a strong theme in the preceding acts, the repetition of the theme of transformation (and, for that matter, death) gives the work a sense of continuity. The repeated transformations weave throughout the work, and while they do not bring the whole piece *unity*—transitions are still abrupt and destabilizing by traditional narrative standards—they tie everything together just enough so that it can still be considered a whole. Thus, transformation is a theme, but it is also a motif, the repetition of which strengthens the concept’s thematic impact in the absence of traditional plot structure or narrative development.

Another key repetitive motif which Druskin notes throughout the acts is the phrase “In runs a dead man.” Often, this line comes as an interruption of the poem, and is not logically connected to surrounding lines until the very end: “In runs a dead man / and silently erases time”

(*Вбегает мертвый господи / и молча удаляет время*).¹¹¹ As is often the case in *chinari* texts, it is difficult (and somewhat counter to the absurdist spirit) to look for an exact metaphorical significance to the character. Perhaps, in keeping with the eschatological theme, the dead men represent all the Dead of the world, raised up before the Last Judgement. Perhaps the paradoxical state of a dead man who can still take action is a reflection of Fomin, implying the existence of many such subjects, trapped in between the worlds of the living and the dead. Despite the inability to pin down his precise allegorical significance, we can view his reappearance throughout the story as meaningful in itself. Much like the dynamic we saw with the larger theme of transformation, the repetitions of “in runs a dead man” build up to its final iteration. When we see the dead man run in on the second-to-last line of the poem, finally ready to silently erase time, we are already conditioned to pay attention. Up until those final lines, the dead man remains ambiguous, and his mystery grows greater with each of his six unexplained appearances. This lends greater finality to the moment when he reveals to the reader his role in the poem by erasing time. One can even see the dead man’s destruction of time subtly reflected in his repeated appearances throughout the piece: He seems to poke holes in the narrative, further destabilizing the already-tenuous fabric of time. The dead man and his actions are given importance not through description, but through repetition.

Thus, we have seen how thematic repetition builds momentum in “God May be All Around,” preparing the reader and leading them towards the finale, when the world has burned up, the star of nonsense shines, and “only God is possible.”¹¹² However, there is still more to say about the creation and violation of structural equilibrium in “God May be All Around.” This same idea of applying “a certain equilibrium with a small error” to textual analysis also functions

¹¹¹ Vvedensky, 152.

¹¹² Vvedensky, 152.

well on a more granular level.

Rhyme and Meter

Across individual lines and stanzas, structural integrity is constantly being created and broken in Vvedensky's work. The poem has a definite meter and rhyme scheme, but no one pattern lasts more than a few lines. Vvedensky creates a structure and sets expectations for the reader, only to break them suddenly by changing some combination of meter, rhyme, line length, and other poetic elements. As an example, consider the poem's first ten lines of dialogue, as Ef addresses the imaginary girl:¹¹³

Здравствуй, девушка движенье,
ты даёшь мне наслажденье
своим баснословным полётом
и размахом ног.
Да, у ног твоих прекрасный размах,
когда ты пышная сверкаешь и носишься над
болотом,
где шипит вода, —
тебе не надо никаких дорог,
тебе чужд человеческий страх.

*Hello lady motion,
you bring me such pleasure
with your fabulous flight
and the size of your legs.
Yes, your legs are of fantastic size,
when you, luxurious, sparkle and run across
the swamp,
where the water hisses
you need no roads,*

¹¹³ Vvedensky, 138.

human fear is alien to you.

Vvedensky begins with a neat couplet in trochaic tetrameter, which he immediately undermines in the next line. This third line can be read as anapestic tetrameter with a slight irregularity at the beginning, although this irregularity smooths out somewhat if we take the final –‘e syllable of the preceding line as the first syllable of the third line. In the middle section, the meter continues to vary, with alternating between trochees and iambs and various line lengths. The final two lines share the same first word, giving them a certain visual symmetry. However, as they do not rhyme and do not share the same number of syllables, they are far from a couplet. Looking at the rhyme scheme reveals a similar pattern: After the initial couplet, the rhyme scheme is highly irregular. Lines 3, 4, and 5 do not rhyme with each other, but they do rhyme with later lines— 3 with 7, 4 with 9, and 5 with 10. Even here, Vvedensky refuses us the satisfaction of a pattern, leaving a four-line gap between line 3 and its rhyme while lines 4 and 5 are five lines away from their rhymes. Lines 6 and 8 remain rhymeless altogether. On the most granular level, then, Vvedensky repeatedly creates just enough of a system to make readers think they know what will come next, only to undermine that system in one way or another.

I find it helpful here to follow Druskin’s lead, creating a visual sketch of the repetitions. Once we do so, we reveal a clear similarity to figure 1 and render visible the certain equilibrium with a small error. As was the case in Druskin’s analysis, our analysis of rhyme scheme presents with enough repetition to create centers, but enough irregularity for those centers to shift dramatically. Moreover, this is just the rhyme scheme for one stanza. Other stanzas have different line lengths

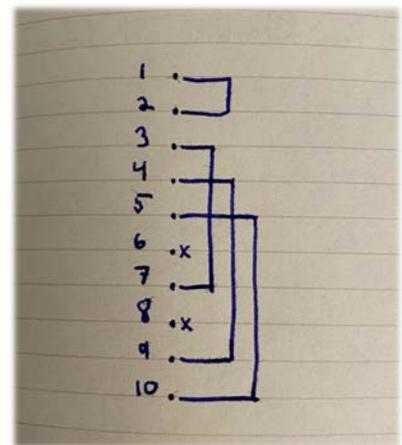


Figure 2: visualization of "God May be All Around" rhyme scheme.

and different rhyme schemes, denying repetition once again. However, the same basic principle holds true throughout the piece: Vvedensky creates a certain equilibrium through recognizable poetic conventions which are then pulled apart and distorted. It is worth noting here the importance of a *small* error. Conventions are violated and stretched, but not completely beyond recognition. The “certain equilibrium with a small error” only works if the equilibrium remains visible through the error rather than being annihilated altogether.

We have already seen some of the allegorical power of “a certain equilibrium with a small error” in Chapter 1, in our discussion of the essay “You and I, Noumenal Relationship.” In this case, Druskin the philosopher, writing a decade before *On Rhetorical Principles* and *The Star of Nonsense*, thinks of the equilibrium as the perfect image of God in which humankind is created while sin is the error, an error through which humans separate themselves from God and access the whole range of human experience. The small error connects two planes of existence which exist otherwise out of reach from one another. The equilibrium of divinity would be unreachable, except for a small error which humans can cling to. As Avdeenkov concludes,

The small error reveals that element which makes the whole world of things real for us. The universe, the cosmos, and the earth present themselves as a certain equilibrium, stable and constant. The laws of nature are unchanging, and they function in all places at all times. However, the universe does not recognize itself, does not understand its realness and stability. To understand this one must venture beyond the bounds of stable equilibrium, introducing into it an element of error, inaccuracy. Humankind violates natural equilibrium through his existence.”¹¹⁴

As argued in Chapter 1, this points us towards a broader allegory which the equilibrium of the Holy Spirit is violated by Jesus, who, in his humanity and mortality, represents a small error within that equilibrium. In all these cases, the small error seems to reach down from divine

¹¹⁴ Avdeenkov, “Nekotoroe ravnovesie s nebol’shoi pogreshnost’iu,” 72.

equilibrium to the imperfect world of human experience, allowing us to attain some measure of revelation and transcendence. We can go on to say that any time the term is invoked, a connection is formed all the way back to that ultimate allegorical significance of divine revelation. In fact, Druskin the critic bears this out in practice by connecting the philosophical term to his readings of artistic works. The structures, motifs, and repetitions in art—be it Bach or Vvedensky—are so important to Druskin not *just* because they help see through the noise of complex structures and identify themes. Rather, each creation and violation of structural forms or patterns—“a certain equilibrium with a small error”—becomes a reflection or miniature recreation of the larger equilibriums and errors of the universe. Even these small equilibriums and errors contain some transcendent, divine quality.

Thus, through Druskin, we see that the Absurd text itself, in both form and content, leads us to God. Our musical reading of “God May be All Around” reveals the prevalence of transformation—ultimately eschatological transformation—as a clear theme and helped us find allegorical significance of the “in ran a dead man” motif. Perhaps more importantly, we can now see spiritual weight in the text. In the very act of reading Vvedensky, we create something sacred, re-enacting divine revelation in miniature. It is worth a note here that Druskin saw reading as an active and relatively creative process. In his diaries, he compares reading Vvedensky to *playing* Bach, not just listening to it.¹¹⁵ In this context, the Star of Nonsense itself comes to fill a religious-allegorical role, becoming the guiding star of Bethlehem, leading the magi to Christ—the mortal, human God whose existence allows humankind to access the absurd God which exists, in Vvedensky’s words, “all around.”

¹¹⁵ Druskin, *Dnevnik*, 169.

Conclusion

This discussion of “God May be All Around” brings to the fore new lines of analysis that hold interesting implications for other *chinari* texts and literature more broadly. On the surface, it would seem that Bach and Vvedensky are completely different from one another—indeed, that Bach is everything that Vvedensky is not. Where Vvedensky stands at the cutting edge of the avant-garde, Bach stands in the center of musical tradition,¹¹⁶ the foundation of the canon.¹¹⁷ If their works of art both contain the divinity of “a certain equilibrium with a small error,” what makes the absurdist style of the *chinari* important? Why did Druskin associate himself with the *chinari* and consider Vvedensky the greatest author of the 20th century, as opposed to someone whose style more closely aligns with Bach and the baroque tradition? While the true answer is impossible to pin down, the question leads to two interesting conclusions. First, in an effort to find something that makes the absurd text stand out, it helps to look at equilibrium and error in terms of levels: at the most granular level, we might have relationships that can play out over the course of just a few sentences or lines of text, like the poetic meter and rhyme scheme we explored earlier. At the very top, we would have the relationship described in Chapter 1, with the Holy Spirit as equilibrium and the mortal Christ as its small error. In between these two extremes lay all the equilibriums and errors we can imagine in art: all the plots and plot twists, patterns

¹¹⁶ At conservatories like Oberlin, from where I am writing this, Bach’s music is still used as the foundation for introductory music theory courses.

¹¹⁷ Of course, this was not always the case. During and immediately following his lifetime, Bach’s work was subject to plenty of controversy and criticism. For more on Bach’s reception, see Martin Geck, *Bach*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Haus, 2003) and Russell Stinson, *Bach’s Legacy: The Music as Heard by Later Masters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

and variations, artistic rules and their violations.

Perhaps, then, we can think of the absurd text not just as something that contains equilibrium and error, but as the “small error” itself, within the larger rules—or “equilibrium”—of rationalism, therefore existing on a higher level than other art. Perhaps, part of the absurd text’s significance is that its very existence cuts a gap in the plane of realism, allowing us to imagine something beyond it. Regardless of whether or not the *chinari* style is actually “higher” than other styles, Druskin’s ability to see the same pattern as a crucial function in both Bach and Vvedensky points to the potential for “a certain equilibrium with a small error” to be applied to other *chinari* texts and even to art in general. Perhaps we can take any piece of art and look for spiritual significance in its asymmetries, seeing the very artistic process—the act of creating and undermining symmetry—as sacred.

Conclusion

From everything covered in the previous three chapters, I hope to make two broad points particularly clear. First, that there is a vast metaphysical and spiritual richness to be explored beneath the surface of the *chinari* texts, and second, that the work of Yakov Druskin is an invaluable lens through which to examine this richness. By understanding some core components of Druskin's thought, we gain access to the philosophical ideas simmering beneath the surface of the *chinari*. By using those ideas to analyze *chinari* texts, we bring them to the fore, giving way to new readings and showing old texts in a new light: Seeing a search for faith in the narrator's disjointed wanderings in "The Old Woman," and using "God May be All Around" in conjunction with Druskin's concept of "a certain equilibrium with a small error" to uncover the sacred, transcendental quality of the text's structure.

From all of this, what can we now say in summation about the role of God in the *chinari* movement? Unsurprisingly, things remain somewhat mysterious. In a literary movement so defined by its rejection of absolutes and satisfying conclusions, to produce a single answer is beside the point. However, throughout the works analyzed here, we see a common existential thread. Through Druskin, we see the *chinari* wrestling with the impossibility of reaching a divinity which is already known to be far outside the bounds of knowledge, attempting to embrace the absurd conditions of life and find something sacred within and beyond them. In Druskin's words, *chinari* metaphysics can be seen to revolve around "the desire to define one's place in life ... not empirically, but transcendently."¹¹⁸

Beyond its interpretations and analyses, this project raises questions and connections which demand further research. The idea of "a certain equilibrium with a small error" appears

¹¹⁸ Druskin, *Dnevnik*, 498.

particularly fruitful as a concept and as an analytical tool, and I see potential for it to be further examined as a stand-alone philosophical concept or applied to other *chinari* texts. The parallels between Druskin's thought and the concepts of European existentialists like Kierkegaard, Husserl, Sartre, Jaspers, and others is also fascinating. Further examination of these comparisons promises to be fruitful, and could help us connect Kharms, Vvedensky, and the other *chinari* with the European existentialist movement more than they have been in the past. Finally, this project has revealed to me the true scope of Druskin's work. While I have made every effort in the course of my research to read and cover relevant concepts for my analyses of Kharms and Vvedensky, hundreds of pages and countless ideas remain unanalyzed. There remains a serious dearth of scholarship focused directly on Druskin, and even then, almost none of it is in English. A larger work on Druskin's remarkable life and fascinating works, along with more English translations of his writings—would be of great value both on its own and as a component of our understanding of the *chinari*.

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