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# THE EROTIC OF SELF-HARM(S): A CATASTROPHIC BODY IN DANIIL KHARMS AND YAKOV DRUSKIN

Masha Semashyna

*Central European University, Budapest, Hungary*

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## Abstract

This article addresses the biopolitics of writing and the construction of the writing body as catastrophic in the notebooks of Daniil Kharms (1905–1942) and the essays by his friend philosopher Yakov Druskin (1902–1980) from the late 1920s and 1930s. I aim to show how their personal writings work as an auto-aggressive text, an act of textual self-harm and a form of freedom in a situation where resistance is felt to be unavailable. The close reading focuses on the two tendencies in which the biological comes to be understood as political: the articulation of a social/political difference as physiological, and the centrality of sexuality to a project of self-knowledge that diary-writing offers. Narrating social exclusion in the language of ailments, this writing appears almost literally biopolitical: biologising political difference and inviting a political reading of the origins of the illness. By tracing these instances, the article shows how the failing body becomes a language in which the sense of alienation and fear can be expressed, and spiritual insights experienced.

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*E-mail address:* [semashyna\\_mariia@phd.ceu.edu](mailto:semashyna_mariia@phd.ceu.edu).

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## Introduction

As a Ukrainian researcher working on Russian literature, and a Crimean who has last been home nine years ago, I was conflicted about publishing in an academic journal whose contributors tend to be predominantly Russian. If there was any doubt before February 24<sup>th</sup>, the usual nice words about the healing power of intellectual dialogue ring decidedly hollow after the atrocities of Bucha, Irpin', Mariupol', and many other towns and villages occupied and attacked in Russia's invasion. One of the reasons I decided to not withdraw had to do with how much the texts analysed in this article echoed what could be called an aesthetic of self-harm that one could observe on Russian oppositional social media and that, while often understandable in its own context, in its obvious futility appeared so bizarre to a Ukrainian observer. I am talking here about the expressions of disagreement, from posts on Facebook to stickers and graffiti in public places (on the range of these forms see, e.g., Warner and Arkhipova, 2022, and Arkhipova, no date), that, while threatening the protester with retaliation from the state, remained largely symbolic and did not aim to materially harm the oppressor nor directly help the affected – in contrast to the Ukrainian context, where material forms of harm and help, like donations to the military and distribution of humanitarian aid to affected communities, occupied a significant place in public discourse. This tendency of the Russian protest (while being, of course, not the only form of resistance present) contributed to the overall impression that active resistance is understood as self-harm, auto-aggression, and a performance of difference from the oppressor. In the texts discussed below, one can see a very similar mechanism play out almost a hundred years ago. Given this, my goal with this article is not to perform dialogue, but rather to make a step towards undoing at least some of the romanticisation of (Soviet) Russian intellectual resistance and subversion in Western scholarship, which, in turn, relies on the underlying assumption that resistance is the most ethically correct choice, and the subsequent discomfort at acknowledging instances where it is lacking (see Krylova, 2000). A detailed comparison between these two contexts a hundred years apart would need its own extended research and would not have been possible within the scope of this article.<sup>1</sup> I am treating them rather as echoes of each other: the one from the past helpful in understanding the present; the one from the present informing some of my reading of the texts from the past.

These texts are diary notes of Daniil Kharms (1905–1942) and essays by philosopher Yakov Druskin (1902–1980), written in the late 1920s and

throughout the 1930s. The two were close friends from 1925, and in the 1930s, as Kharms's literary group OBERIU (Association for the Real Art) was forced to dissolve, formed the core of the informal circle that came to be conventionally referred to in scholarship as *chinari* (a neologism some of them used to refer to themselves), and included Leonid Lipavsky and his wife Tamara Meier, Aleksandr Vvedensky, Nikolai Oleinikov, and Nikolai Zabolotsky (Roberts, 1997, pp. 1–6; on the question of naming, see Meilakh, 2006b, pp. 360–363, Ostashevsky, 2013, pp. 28–29). After Kharms's second arrest in 1941 and death from starvation in a psychiatric prison hospital in early 1942, Druskin, together with Kharms's widow Marina Malich, saved his texts and notebooks from their empty flat. He carried them with him into evacuation and preserved them in the following years, and was central in reintroducing them to the public in the 1960s.

Kharms and Druskin wrote in a dialogue, responding to each other's ideas. In this article, I would like to focus on one of the aspects that their texts have in common: the construction of one's body as failing, ailing, and catastrophic. By catastrophic embodiment I mean here the vision of the body that, in writing, falls apart dramatically and performatively, in the Austinian sense: in falling apart, it separates itself from its environment and thus ultimately constitutes itself through this performative disintegration. While in Kharms's case, this vision of the body can be read as a response to the worsening political and personal situation, Druskin's example, coming from a person in a similar political position but without direct experience of state violence, speaks rather to how this experience of one's body as catastrophic was part of a more general shared feeling. Documenting this failing body becomes a way to express their difference from their environment, an experience of alienation and powerlessness, in physiological terms. "Documenting" in this case is especially close to "imagining," and the excessive detail in which bodily troubles are recorded creates an impression of an auto-aggressive rather than a merely hypochondriac text. Kharms's focus on sexuality and Druskin's characteristically weird eroticism underscore the vulnerability of this body, while also signaling the contradictory pleasure found in the performance of difference that these texts accomplish.

An instructive lighter example can be found as early as 1928, when Kharms records in one of his notebooks a list entitled 'What to tell the doctor':

Что доктору сказать:

1. Боли в левой кисти, ладони.
2. Душит за шею, как бы на шее повязаны штаны с медными пуговицами.
3. Синяки на правых и левых ногах.

5 [sic]. Тошнит как при виде нечистоплотной бороды.

6. Блохи кусают (Kharms, 2002, p. 1:259).

(What to tell the doctor:

1. Pain in left wrist, in palm.

2. Strangling sensation, as if pants with brass buttons had been attached to my neck.

3. Black and blue marks on right and left legs.

4 [sic]. Feel really nauseous [as when] I see an uncleanly beard.<sup>2</sup>

5. I'm being bitten by fleas (Kharms, 2013, p. 210).)

From this playful list the reader gets the impression of a body that is unwell in multiple ways, disorderly (and many-legged), and troubled by its environment. The ridiculous body that is constructed in such excessive detail itself becomes excessive, just as it focuses on its own lack, and produces through this excess a comic effect. Kharms's horrified notes from after his arrest and during a time of extreme hardship in 1937–1938 would curiously replicate the structure of this excessive bodily complaint, thus preserving some of the peculiarly uncomfortable ridiculous quality from the earlier, happier time.

The early Soviet culture politicised embodiment in a number of ways. Among them were its efforts to educate large segments of the population in appropriate hygienic practices, and the popularity of the rational Taylorist organisation of labour (Starks, 2008, p. 5; see also Vinokour, 2016, which traces the influence of these discourses on Kharms). Just as the utopian ideal had been biologised in this way, anxieties over its feasibility came to be expressed in the frequent tropes of dismemberment and decay of the collective body (Naiman, 1997), and a particular kind of suffering and disabled masculinity (Kaganovsky, 2008). While decidedly anti-Soviet in his political views (Klebanov, 2017; Morev and Shubinskii, 2014; on Kharms's relationship to anarchism, see Burenina, 2006; Aizman, 2019, p. 46), Kharms fits into this general trend where politics and individual, as well as collective, biology become closely entangled. The body played a prominent part in the earlier strands of the Russian avant-garde (e.g. in the work of Aleksei Kruchenykh and Vladimir Maiakovsky), where the author's moving body became an intrinsic component in a work of art both as a part of a potentially scandalising performance, and as a vessel of primal and chaotic creativity (Bobrinskaia, 1998, pp. 49, 52). The victorious grandiosity and the dreams of the efficient mechanised collective body that characterised, for instance, the poetry of Aleksei Gastev (Naiman, 1997, pp. 65–66) give way to the bodies variously falling apart in Kharms's prose (see, e.g., Iampolski, 1998, p. 41; Jakovljevic, 2009, pp. 226–227). Addressing Kharms's political non-belonging in the Soviet con-

text, I am interested in how “the importance of being ‘other’” (Klebanov, 2017, p. 47) manifests itself first and foremost in the way he writes about his own body, thus presenting his difference as a physiological one.

In this reading, I am following Irina Sandomirskaja’s (2013) work on the biopolitics of language under Stalinism, which traces down how writing followed the logic of biopolitical control. In her analysis of the OBERIU poet Nikolai Zabolotsky’s late work, Sandomirskaja reads writing *as* a body marked by the expectation of future violence and testifying in this way to the violence that has already been done to its subject. She foregrounds the role of sight and visibility (clarity, straightforwardness, “smoothness”) in the biopolitical control of language under Stalinism, and various strategies of sightlessness and touch, including the imperative of touching with naked eyes proclaimed in the OBERIU Declaration of 1928, as alternative ways to access reality and hold on to meaning in the economy of language which increasingly produces “empty” speech (Sandomirskaja, 2013, pp. 192–208, 340–400). In Kharms and Druskin’s personal texts, they manage to produce instances of a similarly idiosyncratic, unsmoothed and unpolished individual language and meaning. Here, too, the body plays a crucial part, yet it is rather the body-as-text, not text-as-a-body. The embodiment they document (imagine) is a radically unstable one: where Zabolotsky’s text marks itself in its expectation of external violence, as if caving in or denting (Sandomirskaja, 2013, p. 352), Kharms and Druskin offer visions of the body that preventatively falls apart.

There is a relatively obvious level on which biopolitics, understood as a situation in which biological life becomes the site of political intervention and management in modernity, and as a critical approach devoted to the study of this situation, applies to the lives and writings of Kharms and Druskin: it includes Kharms’s arrests and exile, his everyday hunger and fear in the late 1930s, his death of starvation in a psychiatric prison hospital in the Siege in 1942, and Druskin’s survival in the Siege. This level is relatively known and has been addressed in scholarship (see, e.g., Jakovljevic, 2005). What I am interested in is slightly different: the way the writing interacts with the politicised understanding of biology in the privacy of the writers’ lives, outside of the usual biopolitical settings of the prison, the hospital, or the camp.

A notable precedent for a biopolitical approach to Kharms is set by Brookes (2017), who reads Kharms’s prose as staging acts of resistance against the oppressive centripetal disciplinary power of the state, where the Bakhtinian grotesque body, spilling out of its confines, works as the primary site of resistance. In this reading, the focus falls on “centripetal” “discipline, grounded in the distribution of individuals by means of enclosure and surveillance” (Brookes, 2017, p. 57). In this way, while Brookes’ approach aims “to decentre the terror” (2017, p. 58), it proves difficult to pull away from the repressive

model of power. This approach assumes the largely unproblematic opposition between repressive disciplinary power and resistance located in the body, which is thus imagined to be if not entirely outside of the power's reach in the form of violence then at least fairly independent of its workings, and able to respond with "grotesque resistance" (Brookes, 2017, p. 60) in writing. Building on these insights, I would like to ask how Kharms's diary notes, with their elusive, protean quality, oscillating between document and fiction, can help illuminate a relationship between state power, the body, and subjectivity understood in a more complex Foucauldian way. Kharms and Druskin's examples show how documenting the troubles of the body becomes the language for expressing worry, fear, and powerlessness to which their predicament as unwilling Soviet citizens contributes, but which cannot be explained by this predicament entirely. At the same time, the very logic of physiological difference that Kharms employs follows the biopolitical rhetoric of the time, where politically "alien elements" come to be thought of as biologically alien. This may allow for contextualising Kharms and Druskin in their time without using the violence of Stalinism as the all-powerful "universal signifier" to which everything in the text ultimately points. For this reason, I am interested in the biopolitics of writing as it came to be articulated already before the Great Terror and the Siege of Leningrad. To foreground these earlier examples of failing bodies in writing, I am excluding from the present study Druskin's diaries written in the 1940s during the Siege, and focusing instead on the texts from the late 1920s and the early 1930s.<sup>3</sup>

The main two biopolitical tendencies at work in the analysed texts are the understanding of the political/social difference as a biological one (related to what Foucault defines as state racism), and the centrality of sexuality to the disciplinary techniques of the self (in this case, to diary-writing). As one is dealing with a poet and a philosopher, they are far from passively reflecting these general tendencies, but offer instead a form of engagement with them. In this case, one's biological difference is expressed through images of a failing, ailing body that is dramatically falling apart, which, in turn, creates the effect of an auto-aggressive text that performs political difference and dissent as textual self-harm to the writing body, with sexuality as the space of its increased vulnerability.

### **"I Do Not Fit the Group Physiologically": The Alien in the Social Body**

Biopolitics is a term proposed by Michel Foucault to address a particular kind of governance that emerged and developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It consisted in the turn to ruling by means of fostering life of the citizens (rather than threatening them with death), and included two

closely connected routes of application: the anatomo-power, or disciplinary power, which refers to the production and disciplining of individual subjects, and bio-power, concerned with the management of the population as a whole (Foucault, 1997, p. 242). However, it is not, in fact, the whole population that the state is often committed to foster and protect, but a part of it, with the other part understood as *biologically* different and thus, potentially, posing a danger to the biological well-being of the former. This mechanism is what Foucault (1997, p. 255) calls state racism: the construction of the other as biologically “abnormal”. Since this type of governance set itself the goal to “maximise” the life, health, and productivity of certain kinds of citizens, there is a tendency in scholarship following Foucault to assume the link between failure and subversion, “to locate in failure and its representation agents of resistance and potentially radical tactics” (Katsouraki and Watt, 2013, p. 2), and to read it as generating “an alternative embodied territory” (Katsouraki and Watt, 2013, p. 3). In general terms, this form of governance meant the gradual expansion of the field of politics to include the biological life, physical survival, and well-being of a state’s citizens, and the gradual prioritisation of such life as its main concern (Agamben, 1998, p. 4). In literature, this turn in modernity has manifested itself in “a semioticization of the body which is matched by a somatisation of story: a claim that the body must be a source and a locus of meanings” (Brooks, 1993, p. xii).

In his notebooks, Kharms often complains about his feeling of alienation from others, which is presented as logical and almost necessary, and nonetheless painful. While he also uses this alienation to consistently assert his own uniqueness (Meilakh, 2006a), the complaints nonetheless appear sincere. In 1925, writing about his expulsion from technical school, young Kharms jots down three accusations against him, the third of which is “Я не подхожу к классу физиологически” (Kharms, 2002, p. 1:33; “I don’t fit into the class physiologically” Kharms, 2013, p. 69). Social difference is thus reimagined as a physiological, biological one, and in this way naturalised. This “somatisation” of difference might account for the piercing feeling of powerlessness and resignation that often accompanies such diary entries. From the perspective of politics, scholars have remarked on how Kharms “was resolutely and unre-servedly anti-Soviet and anti-Communist” (Klebanov, 2017, p. 42) throughout his life. In this paper, I would like to focus more on *how* Kharms narrates this sense of alienation, and how he uses a language of biological, rather than merely political or cultural, difference to express it. These instances are all the more curious in that they follow the general tendency of the early Soviet political rhetoric to paint its “others” as biologically different (see, e.g. Naiman, 1997, p. 137), this time applying it to himself.



The interrogation files from January 1932, after Kharms had been arrested as part of a group of children's writers for alleged counter-revolutionary activities, narrate the difference between Kharms and his group of colleagues, on the one hand, and their Soviet contemporaries, on the other, in a language which feels like an uneasy cross between Kharms's genuine views and what had been dictated to him. The main difference is said to lie, predictably, in ideological differences: between an "idealistic philosophy" and mysticism versus the materialistic philosophy of communism and practically applied science (Sazhin, 2000, pp. 2:530–531). However, the language of physiological, rather than philosophical difference comes up in a statement that Kharms's friend and poet Aleksandr Vvedensky, who had also been arrested as part of the same group of children's writers, gives in his confession, most likely for the public trial which was being planned but never happened (Shubinskii, 2008, p. 325): "Я помню свои жалобы Хармсу на то, что у нас воздух советский, что я отравляюсь этим воздухом. И к счастью для меня, я наконец этим 'воздухом' отравился." (Sazhin, 2000, p. 548; "I remember my complaining to Kharms that our very air is Soviet, that I am poisoned by this air. And luckily for me, finally I was poisoned by this 'air'.") Turning into a loyal Soviet citizen is presented as a form of poisoning by alien air, taking the theme of physiological difference to its extreme in this *War of the Worlds*-like scenario.

### Hungerhorror: The Body as a Language for Fear

In June 1937, Kharms was refused further commissions and money after his poem 'Из дома вышел человек' (A Man Had Left His Home One Day) had been rejected for the associations it raised with people disappearing without trace in real life (Klein Tumanov, 1999, p. 142). The cessation of commissions and publications meant poverty and hunger, especially due to the debts he had accumulated before that (Glotsner, 2000, p. 88; Shubinsky, 2008, pp. 418, 439). In August, he noted down the deterioration of his physical and mental state:

Сейчас я пал, как никогда. Я ни о чём не могу думать. Совершенно задёрган зайчиками. Ощущение полного развала. Тело дряблое, живот торчит. Желудок расстроен, голос хриплый. Страшная рассеянность и невращения. Ничто меня не интересует. Мыслей никаких нет, либо, если и промелькнёт какая ни будь мысль, то вялая, грязная или трусливая. Нужно работать, а я ничего не делаю, совершенно ничего. И не могу ничего делать. (Kharms, 2002, p. 2:193)

(Now I've fallen lower than ever. I can't think about anything. Utterly tormented by the reflections of sunbeams.<sup>4</sup> A feeling of complete collapse.

Body sluggish, stomach swollen. Digestion unsettled, voice hoarse. Terrible absent-mindedness and neurasthenia. Nothing interests me. No thoughts at all, or if a thought should flash through my mind, it's feeble, filthy or cowardly. I need to work but I do nothing, absolutely nothing. And there's nothing I can do (Kharms, 2013, p. 488.)

Alienation is thus biologised even further, as its effects are showing on the surface of the body. As it crumbles and falls apart in the face of hunger, falling out of the social fabric appears synonymous with falling out of life.

Kharms documents his hunger and horror in diary notes and poems, in such a way that fear remains a vividly embodied experience. The political situation, which has devolved into wide-scale terror, is reaching Kharms through the arrest of his friend Nikolai Oleinikov, but also in this more immediate physical way. He continues documenting constant hunger and debilitating worry over the course of the fall 1937 and winter 1938: “Боже, какая ужасная жизнь и какое ужасное у меня состояние. Ничего делать не могу. Всё время хочется спать, как Обломову. Никаких надежд нет. Сегодня обедали в последний раз. Марина больна у неё постоянно температура от 37–37,5°. У меня нет энергии” (Kharms, 2002, p. 2:197; “O God, what a horrible life, and what a horrible state I'm in. There's nothing I can do. I feel like sleeping all the time, like Oblomov. No hope left. We ate for the last time today. Marina is ill with a constant low-grade fever. I have no energy” Kharms, 2013, p. 496). Their situation further deteriorates in the following months (Kharms, 2002, pp. 2:197–198; Kharms, 2013, pp. 497–498).

Kharms used the language of bodily unwellness back in 1932, after his first arrest as part of a case against children's writers that was being fabricated at the time, and during his subsequent exile in Kursk. In his accounts of his sickness, exacerbated (or for the most part provoked) by hypochondria, fear appears as an intensely embodied experience manifested in the failure of the organism to function properly and the failure of the mind to adequately assess and address it: “[...] Я долго не мог заснуть. Казалось схожу с ума. И душа не имела опоры Мне давила в затылок чья-то рука и мысли дрожали как сердце [...] Определил свою болезнь как аппендицит” (Kharms, 2002, p. 1:416; “[...] I couldn't fall asleep for a long time. Thought I was losing my mind. And my soul had nothing to sustain it. Someone's hand was pressing on the back of my head and my thoughts fluttered like my heart. [...] Determined that my disease is appendicitis,” Kharms, 2013, p. 315). Other symptoms and self-diagnoses from that same period include high temperature, consumption, a heart attack, a cold, constant fear, and weakness (Kharms, 2002, pp. 1:416–418). Tuberculosis was apparently an especially ominous threat, as, Shubinskii (2008, p. 333) explains, it had taken the lives of Kharms's mother and a fellow *oberiut*

Yuri Vladimirov (1909–1931). The other serious conditions on the list suggest sudden and swift illness that can prove fatal in the absence of prompt medical intervention, and this fear of a sudden death may explain the notable absence of cancer among these self-diagnoses.

In these incessant lists, the body itself is mapped and marked, its parts simultaneously registered and disconnected from each other by waves of heat and cold:

Сначала я чувствовал себя хорошо, но едва пошевелился, как по спине прошёл едва заметный холодок, в ногах же, в икрах, наоборот, появилось тепло, и рукам стало жарко, на плечи опустилась испарина и ладони вспотели. Во лбу и в голове появилась тяжесть. И появился страх (Kharms, 2002, p. 1:417).

(At first I felt ok, but no sooner had I moved than a barely perceptible chill [ran] down my spine. In my legs, my calves, just the opposite, they felt warm, and my arms started to burn, perspiration covered my shoulders and the palms of my hands began to sweat. I felt a heaviness in my forehead and head. And then fear appeared (Kharms, 2013, p. 324).)

These notes give a map of the body from head to toe in precise detail, noting in particular the contradictory feelings of hot and cold overcoming different body parts and the characteristic heaviness, as if of an iron grip, on the back of the head. Fear features consistently as part of these descriptions, a symptom among others, as in a short prose text from 1932, where Kharms questions the relationship between fear and the seemingly purely physical symptoms:

Но почему болит поясница, почему неделю держится температура, чем я болен и что мне надо делать? Я думаю об этом, прислушиваюсь к своему телу и начинаю пугаться. От страха сердце начинает дрожать, ноги холодеют и страх хватает меня за затылок. [...] И вдруг мелькает мысль: а что, если это не от страха, а страх от этого. Тогда становится еще страшнее (Kharms, 1997, pp. 2:35–36).

(But why does my back ache, why hasn't the temperature gone down in a week, what is ailing me, and what should I do? I think about this, listen to my body and begin to be afraid. My heart begins to quake from fear, my legs get cold, and fear grabs me by the back of my head. [...] And suddenly a thought flashes in my mind: and what if this isn't coming from the fear, but the fear's coming from this? Then it gets even more frightening (Kharms, 2013, p. 315).)

The problem that Kharms identifies in his predicament, the inability to decide what the cause and what the effect are, is reflected in the uncertainty facing the reader. Was the source of this intense fear political in nature, a kind of a psychosomatic translation of the fear of repression into the language of the body? Kharms's biographer Valerii Shubinskii (2008, pp. 333–337) suggests that the root of the problem lay instead in general psychological unwellness, which had more to do with isolation from friends and family in exile, boredom in the absence of work, and fear of tuberculosis. In addition to these considerations, the critical tendency to find the ultimate source of every psychological or physical symptom in the context of Stalinist repression appears methodologically suspicious, in that it mirrors the “totalitarian” approach to the period, suggesting that everything in the subject's private lives must have ultimately been connected to state politics, so that a Soviet subject could not possibly have strong affects not determined by them. It may be more productive to acknowledge and accept the uncertainty of the cause-and-effect relationship in this case as an inherent part of the way the biopolitical logic functioned: the bodily symptoms acquired the additional meaning and came to signify, beyond themselves, the political sense of unease, even if they were not originally caused by this very unease. The body itself became the source of fear: regardless of whether fear was external at its point of origin, it was now internalised as a function of the body's own workings.

This dynamic of the body turning against the subject, and the subject opposing the body in writing, as an indirect expression of political hurt, echoes the logic of the hunger strike described by Ewa Płonowska Ziarek in her work that aims to complicate Agamben's thought on bare life. Writing on the prison hunger strikes of the turn-of-the-century suffragettes, she underscores how one's own body becomes the site where damage can be inflicted, and thus a site of freedom (rather than resistance): “subjugated groups resort to violence against their bodies when rational law-based arguments fail – that is, when instituted political speech is deprived of its performative power [...] such violence, inflicted on the self as a substitute target for political power, acts by refusing to act; it collapses clear distinctions between passivity and activity, actuality and potentiality, victim and enemy” (Ziarek, 2008, p. 100). In this situation, subjects resort to “the ambiguous political agency of self-hurt” (Ziarek, 2008, p. 101) as a way to fight back against the oppressor (see also Mbembe, 2003). As these examples show, there is little, if anything, uniquely Russian about this mechanism of performative self-hurt: it is rather a particular kind of biopolitical response to a situation of actual or perceived powerlessness. It is in this mechanism that Kharms's creative practice echoes regrettably much, although not all, of contemporary Russian anti-war activism. Kharms's case is clearly different from Ziarek's suffragists: he is, at the moment of writ-

ing, not reduced to bare life, as a prisoner can be; nor is he part of a militant political project. Instead, one sees how here, in the absence of political or practical action, this pattern plays out in his and (as this article will show further) Druskin's personal texts "on its own," in the space of private feelings and experiences. The failing body becomes the space where the subject can enact their freedom when resistance is either unavailable or felt to be unavailable. But in this milder scenario, the logic of self-harm is followed in text rather than in action: turning against one's own body in writing is instrumental in expressing political difference and non-belonging, but the writing presents it as the body turning against the conscious subject, who is left to document its misfortunes.<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to critical approaches that read Kharms as a creative testament to the oppressive workings of disciplinary power emanating from the state and encroaching upon the individual stubbornly resisting it, I would propose to read it instead as a case where the specific configuration of biopolitical power, and in particular fear, comes to constitute a certain kind of subjectivity, and how that subjectivity then comes to speak itself, simultaneously performing and documenting its own difference and alienation in writing. Brian Massumi (1993, p. viii) argues that fear is a technology by which power produces subjectivity, "carving into the flesh habits, predispositions, and associated emotions." State power does not simply limit expression; it grants the subject the language to express non-belonging and contributes to the situation where exercising one's freedom becomes associated with self-harm, so that self-harm *itself*, even when textual and not material, can be then experienced as a rebellious act. Meanwhile, rather than being merely a sign of external violence, the failing body becomes a medium through which fear and the feeling of alienation can be articulated, and more importantly, a language in which difference can be performed.

### The Fear of Impotence

A different fear characterises Kharms's notes regarding his (perceived) impotence. He chronicles his concerns as the budding affair with his friend, artist and book illustrator Alisa Poret, unfolds in 1933: "7 февраля я стал с Alice целоваться. И тут я обнаружил, что я импотент Это было страшно" (Kharms, 2002, p. 2:216; "February 7. I started making out with Alice. And that's when I discovered I'm impotent. It was terrible" Kharms, 2013, p. 349). He continues worrying for the next two weeks, as he keeps oscillating between this possible new relationship and occasional attempts at post-breakup sex with his ex-wife Ester Rusakova (Kharms, 2002, p. 2:217; Kharms, 2013, pp. 349–351). In 1938, while already married to his second wife Marina

Malich, among other complaints about hunger and poverty, Kharms mentions: “Меня мучает ‘пол’. Я неделями, а иногда месяцами не знаю женщины” (Kharms, 2002, p. 2:198; “I am tormented by ‘sex’. I go for weeks, sometimes months, without a woman” Kharms, 2013, p. 498).<sup>6</sup> The inadequacy and the powerlessness associated with impotence appear to be key here. The powerlessness to find work and feed oneself and one’s dependents is translated into the sexual powerlessness to “connect” with others. Yet attempts to regain this power consistently come at the cost of commitment in relationships with women around him: whatever the fear of impotence “means,” it still plays out as infidelity (remaining unavailable for the others to connect to him).

Kharms, of course, is far from simply passively suffering through these patterns of powerlessness and self-harm – he explores them critically in his fiction. An important example here is a short prose piece titled ‘Рыцарь’ (Knight, 1934–1936), which tells a story of a man who keeps injuring himself out of empathy:

Алексей Алексеевич Алексеев был настоящий рыцарь. Так, например, однажды, увидя из трамвая, как одна дама запнулась о тумбу и выронила из кошелки стеклянный колпак для настольной лампы, который тут же и разбился, Алексей Алексеевич, желая помочь этой даме, решил пожертвовать собой и, выскочив из трамвая на полном ходу, упал и раскроил себе о камень всю рожу (Kharms, 1997, p. 2:61).

(Alexei Alexeyevich Alexeyev was a real knight. So, for example, once, seeing from the tram how a lady had tripped on a post and dropped a glass shade for a table lamp out of her shopping bag, which of course immediately shattered, Alexei Alexeyevich, wishing to help the lady, decided to sacrifice himself and, jumping out of the tram at full speed, fell and completely split open his mug against a stone (Kharms, 2009, p. 210).)

Alexeyev is full of patriotic zeal at the outbreak of the war in 1914, sent to the front, “ранен в чресла” (Kharms, 1997, p. 2:62; “wounded in the loins” Kharms, 2009, p. 210), becomes a liberal upon his return, and after the revolution tries to earn his living by begging on the streets with a little song:

На баррикады  
мы все пойдем!  
За свободу  
мы все покалечимся и умрем! (Kharms, 1997, p. 2:63)

(To the barricades  
we will go, you and I!  
In the name of freedom  
we will all be crippled and die! (Kharms, 2009, p. 211).)

Eventually, Alexeyev gets embroiled in speculation, arrested and exiled for several years, returns to Leningrad, and after another attempt at begging is promptly disappeared by the secret police. ‘Knight’ works through the same patterns that play out in Kharms’s notebooks: self-harm as an act that constitutes the subject as exceptional, a “real knight”; the display of sexual lack; and the performance of political loyalties as one’s proclaimed acceptance of meaningless past and future bodily harm. The wounded loins, besides granting the text its air of dark absurd humour, become the crucial site where the body carries the mark of violence it has brought upon itself and endured. The impotence implied by the wound translates into Alexeyev’s powerlessness to find a place for himself in a new post-revolutionary reality. Kharms makes grim fun of the self-harming altruism of his knight, but his notebooks show how close this character’s troubles are to his own experience. The male body comes to be constituted by lack, and the fear of impotence captures the lack of conscious control the subject exercises over this body.

The crucial question, however, concerns the extent to which these images of the failing body should be read as a response to a specific political and biographical situation (arrest, imprisonment, exile, troubles at work, hunger, and the intensification of repressions), or rather as a reflection of a more general feeling of collective decomposition. The example of Yakov Druskin, Kharms’s close friend, is especially instructive in this respect.

### **Yakov Druskin: The Crack in the Sky and the Catastrophic Body**

Philosopher Yakov Druskin offers a vision of a catastrophic embodiment that is both similar to and markedly different from Kharms’s. Aside from philosophy, he studied music and mathematics, and taught mathematics and Russian language and literature at evening and factory schools to earn his living (Druskin, 1999, p. 28). He left extensive diaries, in which observations of his internal life mix with religious philosophy, and a number of philosophical texts, where reasoning, autobiographic (or even auto-ethnographic) elements, and fiction seem to be very closely entangled. One of Druskin’s texts that is particularly difficult to define in terms of genre is a piece from 1928 titled ‘Щель и грань’ (The Crack and the Edge):



открылась щель в небе.

Непостижимым и чудесным образом, как только приходит ночь и ход трамваев останавливается, вываливается мое содержание. И некоторое время кроме кожи, обволакивающей меня, ничего я в себе не нахожу. Затем кожа твердеет. Кожа становится крепкой. Затем начинается рост моей кожи. Кожа начинает бухнуть. Она бухнет внутрь. Как из теста идут пузырьки, и кожа начинает всходить. Она всходит внутрь. И затем уже через некоторое время бурный рост моей кожи я не в силах остановить.

Кожа бухнет внутрь.

Кожа всходит внутрь.

Было пустое пространство. Где оно? Места не хватает. И разрывается обволакивающая меня кожа. Под напором сил и газов при росте кожи внутрь разрывается обволакивающая меня кожа. [...]

Когда разрывается кожа, я могу пойти в отмерший мир, и это тоже очень поучительно, но сегодня отправлюсь на небо. (Druskin, 2000c, pp. 454–455)

([...] the crack in the sky has opened.

In an inscrutable and miraculous way, as soon as the night comes and the movement of trams stops, my contents fall out. And for some time, except for the skin that envelops me, I do not find anything in myself. Then the skin grows harder. The skin becomes strong. Then my skin begins to grow. The skin begins to swell. It swells inside. The bubbles come out like from the dough, and the skin begins to rise. It rises inside. And then already after some time I am unable to stop the boisterous growth of my skin.

The skin swells inside.

The skin rises inside.

There was empty space. Where is it? There is not enough space. And the skin enveloping me tears apart. Under the pressure of powers and gases with the growth of the skin inside, the skin enveloping me tears apart. [...]

When the skin tears apart, I can go to the world that has died off, and it is also very educational, but today I shall go to the sky.)<sup>7</sup>

Druskin's authorial "I" establishes itself on the site of the bursting self-annihilating body, a void cocooned in growing, moving, dough-like skin. As



the entrails of the narrator fall out and his skin bursts, having thus freed him from his individual boundaries, a clear space appears, connecting his insides and the sky:

И внезапно я ощущаю равномерные подергивания этой одномерной плоскости, идущей от моих внутренностей и кончающейся небом.

И внезапно открывается щель в небе, которая есть центр системы подергиваний.

Вот формула неба, вместе с трактатом о системе щели в нем: [...]

рваная дыра в небе, одномерной плоскости, протяженной до самых моих внутренностей и захватившей весь мир, и выбросившей из неба внутренности, как она это сделала со мною, рваная дыра в небе протягивает подрыгивающие щупальцы, распространенные по всей плоскости, равномерно ими подергивает, пустое небо захватывает, членики подрагивают – вот анализ системы неба.

Щель в небе колыхнется, колыхнется вся плоскость, плоскость вздыхает, из щели льет желтый свет, в дыру видишь безмерное протяжение, а больше ничего не видишь – вот анализ системы неба.

Заключение. Вот теория неба, а также и его формула и трактат о небе и щели закончен.

Дыра в небе ужасная непостижимая, я вывел для тебя формулу. (Druskin, 2000c, p. 456)

(And suddenly I feel the steady twitches of this one-dimensional surface that goes from my insides and ends with the sky.

And suddenly a crack opens in the sky, which is the centre of the system of twitches.

Here is the formula of the sky, together with the treatise on the system of the crack in it: [...]

a ragged hole in the sky, of a one-dimensional surface that is stretched to my very insides and that has occupied the whole world, and has thrown the entrails out of the sky, like it did with me, the ragged hole in the sky extends slightly jerking tentacles, spread out across the whole surface, it twitches them steadily, occupies the empty sky, the little members quiver – this is the analysis of the system of the sky.

The crack in the sky sways, the whole surface sways, the surface sighs, yellow light flows out of the crack, through the hole you see the immeasurable expanses, and nothing else – this is the analysis of the system of the sky.

Conclusion. This is the theory of the sky, and also its formula, and the treatise on the sky and the crack is finished.

The hole in the sky terrible inscrutable, I have deduced a formula for you.)

The catastrophic body that Druskin thus composes falls apart dramatically, although not entirely unpredictably: there is a sense of routine and thought-through dramaturgy in the progress from step to step. What he is describing appears to be a mystical journey into the sky and an ethereal and terrifying intercourse: “Вверх по веревкам поднимаясь, дойдешь до самого неба, в месте же, где веревки, повздрагивая, соединяются с небом и щелью, происходит совокупление” (Druskin, 2000c, p. 458; “Climbing up by the ropes you will reach the very sky, and in the place where the ropes, twitching, connect to the sky and the crack, the coupling happens”).

In a different text from the early 1930s, Druskin mentions that God himself flows out of the crack (Druskin, 2000a, p. 501). Returning to these texts in later years, Druskin defines the edge as “абсолютно потусторонний мир первый” (“the absolutely otherworldly world one”), the crack as “абсолютно потусторонний мир второй” (“the absolutely otherworldly world two”), and the surface as the presence of the otherworldly world in the one we inhabit (in Druskin, 1999, p. 526). The text therefore can be read as staging the drama of revelation: the otherworldly reality bursting through. While the imagery of the celestial crack invites several kinds of readings at once, from a psychoanalytic one informed by Julia Kristeva’s (1982) work on abjection to those looking for influences from Jewish mysticism, I would like to stay on the question of how the body is written. The body that Druskin describes (and, in this text, inhabits) collapses in on itself in its uncanny growth and falling apart and out of itself. The repeated images are those of latches and barriers being broken through, the cataclysmic “перерождение щели” (“rebirth of the crack” Druskin, 2000c, p. 462), and the constant swaying, twitching, and quivering of everything.

This text stands out among the rest of Druskin’s largely phenomenological philosophy, and yet fits in the context of some of his other semi-fictional writings from the period, including ‘Сдох мир’ (The World is Dead, 1929) and ‘Учитель из фабзавуча’ (The Factory School Teacher, 1932). ‘The World is Dead’ is marked by desperation and grief, and suddenly ends with a return to the same imagery of the crack and the surface. The grief in this text is expressed through imagery of the pogroms, with figures of a crying Jewish man, a

silent woman, and a molested girl walking alone in the street (Druskin, 2000b, p. 475). The grim prose piece ‘The Factory School Teacher’ tells a story of a group of people who have, by their own admission, failed at their lives, and have been meeting together to share dirty and joyless jokes. The titular character is a person who gradually becomes isolated from all his acquaintances since they feel burdened by him, eventually joins his twelve drunk apostles while himself drunk and incoherent, and preaches among them, to their horror: “Мы затыкали уши, старались его не слушать, мы катались по полу, извиваясь в судорогах, мы кричали и визжали, но его тихий и мерный голос заглушал наши стенания” (Druskin, 2000d, p. 531; “We stopped our ears, tried not to listen to him, we rolled on the floor, writhing convulsively, we screamed and squealed, but his quiet and rhythmic voice drowned our wails”). The grim message of the Teacher consists in the fact that there is only one soul, which travels among people and visits only some of them repeatedly: “И у кого она есть, тот живой, а у кого нет, ходит по улицам мертвый, бездушный, и с женой спит бездушный, и радуется и веселится бездушный, и радости и веселья нет, потому что нет души – душа гуляет по другим людям” (Druskin, 2000d, p. 532; “And the one who has it is alive, while the one who does not, walks the streets dead, soulless, and sleeps with his wife soulless, and joys and cheers soullessly, and there is no joy and no cheer, because there is no soul – the soul is visiting others”). Druskin (2000b, p. 472) captures this state of a soulless body by referring to such people as “паршивые кожи” (“lousy skins”) – once again returning to the same image of the skin as an uncanny empty container from ‘The Crack and the Edge.’

In these examples, there seem to be two levels of meaning actively at work: one, of Druskin’s religious philosophy, and the surface level of the way in which it is expressed. Here again I would like to stay with the surface. It encompasses, first, the images chosen: the catastrophic body ripening and bursting, with its entrails falling out, the listeners writhing helplessly on the floor as if hypnotised by the terrible words of their Teacher, and the soulless automaton-like and zombie-like “skins”. All these connect Druskin’s texts to Kharms’s accounts of a body falling apart and to the undercurrent of Gothic sensibility in early Soviet literature and culture (see especially Maguire, 2012 and volume 106 of *Russian Literature*). Second, the form itself: the circular repetition, with images/concepts from one text appearing in others, makes these texts similar to Kharms’s repetitive diaristic complaints and the nightmarish seriality of his prose (Iampolski, 1998; Jakovljevic, 2009, p. 169; cf. also Sandomirskaja, 2013, p. 219, on the “tautological circularity” of dystrophic writing). There is, however, an important difference from Kharms: while the latter documents the body that is treacherous and dysfunctional, the falling apart of the body in Druskin’s texts is – while repetitive – ultimately non-threatening, and fa-

cilitates the meeting with the otherworldly. Written between 1928 and 1932, these texts complicate the more straightforward reading of the biopolitics of the failing body as informed by the direct targeted violence of Stalinist repression: Druskin does not have Kharms's traumatic first-hand experience of it, but writes a very similar experience of the body. His texts speak instead to the intergenerational collective trauma of the pogroms (Druskin's parents were Bund activists from Vilnius) and to the more general feeling of powerlessness and decomposition, which is, in this case, accepted and welcomed. The subject is not betrayed by his body, but observes its staged and scripted disintegration with a sense of emotional distance. The textual auto-aggression (if it even can be called such in this case) appears preventative, almost inoculatory.

Finally, beyond how these texts are written, there is the question of how they *read*. Similarly to Kharms's detailed self-diagnoses of appendicitis or concerns about his sexual health, there is something in their insistent circularity that, uncomfortably and sometimes against the reader's will, makes them weirdly funny to read in a particular way: with an eye-rolling exasperation of encountering a very, very bizarre text. They are ridiculous rather than unproblematically serious or humorous.

### The Ridiculous Body Writing Itself

In both writers, one encounters a rather mixed relationship to the body. In Druskin, there appears to be a resigned acceptance of it:

Но плоскость от желудка до неба не протянулась, как обычно, и подергивания щели в небе не происходили. Может быть, рано еще или не вывалились еще мои внутренности: разное днем бывает, и грязи много накопилось, длительное требуется очищение. И подожду немного. Вывалится, может, очистится. А не вывалится – махну рукой и лягу спать. Бог с ним. (Druskin, 2000c, p. 461)

(But the surface from the stomach to the sky has not extended itself, as usual, and the twitches of the crack in the sky did not happen. Maybe it is still early, or my entrails have not fallen out: different things happen during the day, and a lot of dirt has accumulated, a long purging is necessary. And I will wait a little. It will fall out, maybe, get purged. And if it does not – I will give up and go to sleep. Let it be.)

As opposed to other writers of the *chinari* circle, Druskin is largely a rather serious author, and his texts barely have any explicit instances of humour or self-irony; furthermore, unlike Kharms and Leonid Lipavsky, he did not write

extensively on sexuality, although he knew Freud well (Druskin, 1999, p. 27). It is difficult, however, to disregard in this case the way in which the wait for the accumulated “dirt” to fall out and all the mentions of “latches” (запоры, the same word that is used for “constipation,” Druskin, 2000c, p. 462) evoke anal eroticism, complementing the suggestiveness of the crack and the tiny members wriggling in it, and the vaguely comical effect that these images create. The language of the body invades a spiritual experience, and the reader is unable to quite tell whether the text is meant to be “serious” or not, whether the double meaning of the blockage is intended, and to what effect it was meant to contribute. Celestial and bodily blocks come to be almost indistinguishable.

Despite the emphasis on blockage and isolation, these diaristic texts produce a kind of commonality. Complaints (which proliferate in Kharms’s notebooks, though not all of them are as markedly embodied as the ones discussed in detail above) are one such example of establishing a commonality in reading. Indeed, they could be read as emotional “social and cultural practices” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 9; for more, see Wetherell, 2012): Kharms’s diary notes reveal complaint to be a practice that is social even when it is solitary, and that is biopolitical in nature. Even while his diary notes were not intended for reading or publication in any form, their emotional characteristics contribute to a very personal, close relationship between the writer and the reader, where these repeated expressions of everyday grievances follow an almost ritualistic and culturally specific speech genre of a complaint, used to establish the commonality of experience and an empathic emotional connection.

The self-consciousness of this writing, in turn, opens a space for humour. In ‘Conversations’, recorded by Leonid Lipavsky in 1933–1934, Druskin appears as a self-aware hypochondriac focused on signs and rules:

Я. С. (жалуется входя): Я ощущаю свои три с половиной пуда, и мне это тяжело. Кроме того, я чувствую свои потовые железки. В этом тоже нет ничего приятного.

Л. Л.: Это ипохондрия. Ты сам в ней виноват, ты ее взращиваешь. Разве хорошо перед сном десять раз снимать и снова надевать дверной крючок? Это суеверие. Так не трудно и с ума сойти.

Я. С.: Ты был бы прав в своих упреках и мог бы смеяться надо мной, если бы я десять раз надевал дверной крючок. Это было бы, конечно, суеверие. Но ведь я делаю это восемь раз. Не можешь же ты требовать, чтобы я был так легкомыслен, что бросал вызов судьбе, садился, как безумный, в трамвай, сумма цифр которого составляет или делится на девять? (Lipavskii, 2005, pp. 357-358)

(Ya. S. [Yakov Semenovitch] (complains on entering): I feel my three and a half poods, and it is hard for me. Besides, I feel my sweat glands. There is nothing pleasant in that either.

L. L. [Leonid Lipavsky]: This is hypochondria. It is your own fault, you nurture it. Really, is it good to take the door hook off and then put it on again ten times before bed? This is a superstition. It is not difficult to go crazy this way.

Ya. S.: You would be right in your reproaches and could laugh at me if I put the door hook on ten times. Of course, this would be a superstition. But I do it eight times. You could not ask of me to be so careless as to challenge fate, to take, like a madman, the tram the sum of the numbers of which equals or divides into nine?)

Here, the excessive awareness of one's body is acknowledged and made fun of. The self-consciously hypochondriac body mocks the biopolitical imperative of careful self-observation and self-knowledge. Kharms and especially Druskin can be read as modelling a catastrophic subjectivity that, through its bodily "ruin" (Jakovljevic, 2009, p. 36), finds a way to narrate their physical difference as a mode of escape.

## Conclusion

Language, Agamben (1998, p. 8) maintains, is a means by which man "separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion." For Kharms, it appears, his notes work as a reparative articulation of himself as a subject whose separateness from others is affirmed precisely through the world's ability to affect him, and whose integrity can be thus re-imagined through chronicling the ways in which his body – fragmented, unruly, awkward, and sick – is disintegrating. This disconnected, "impotent" body, overcome by hunger and fear, appears, however, productive in that it offers a language in which his sense of alienation can be articulated.

Reading his diary entries alongside Druskin's essays allows for complicating the purely biographical explanation. What they seem to be offering is a vision of male embodiment which is more than a response to its historical context. To be sure, they do respond to it. Relying on complaints and mystical visions as genres which contest the dominant biopolitical discourses of wholeness and purity, they echo the repressed anxieties of the Stalinist culture about castration, illness, and bodily fragmentation. This is the curious point where Kharms and Druskin meet the official aesthetic of glorious dismemberment

and self-sacrifice. Here, however, this aesthetic of self-harm becomes a way to recapture at least textual agency over one's body; denied aggression transforms into auto-aggressive writing. Diary-writing as a disciplinary practice of the self turns into a space of freedom, where alienation, failure, and suffering can be, by means of repetition, distilled into their opposites, to enable the pleasures of shared playful self-deprecation – but not resistance.

## Notes

1. On the importance of OBERIU's practice to the performance-oriented contemporary Russian leftist scene, see Aizman, 2019.
2. The English translation goes for “nauseous when I see,” whereas the original reads “nauseous as when I see.”
3. Druskin's writing from this earlier time is uncannily reminiscent of the poetry written in the Siege of Leningrad, e.g. by Gennady Gor (see the *Written in the Dark* collection: Barskova, 2016), which is why it appears all the more important to pay attention to the earlier instances of this poetics. See the argument about the productiveness of OBERIU poetics for the poetry of the Siege, and about the “trauma of hunger” and characteristics of dystrophy affecting writing already in the 1930s, in Sandomirskaja, 2013, pp. 342, 204.
4. It is likely that “зайчики,” literally “little hares,” translated into English as “reflections of sunbeams,” stand for Kharm's nervous tics. See Jakovljevic, 2009, p. 203.
5. It may be productive to read this dynamic as hysterical. See, e.g., an interesting parallel in the case in French Surrealism in Lyford, 2007.
6. “Sex” appears to be a fitting translation for *pol* here, in its double meaning of belonging to a category based on one's physiology and of sexual activity (or lack thereof) implied by the context: being tortured by *pol* means the absence of intercourse.
7. All translations, where the source of the translation is not cited separately, are mine.

## Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. The author's positionality, which did influence the work reported, is addressed in the opening paragraph of the article.

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