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THE LEFT CLASSICIST AND HIS COVERT CONSERVATISM: TRACING THE IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL VIEWS OF DANIIL KHARMS

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Abstract

It has been a longstanding tendency in contemporary cultural analysis to associate reputedly avant-garde authors and artists with left-wing political leanings. In the particular case of Russian post-revolutionary Modernism there is generally little doubt today that its protagonists were *en masse* pro-Communist or at least sympathized with the dominant state ideology to some degree. It appears possible, however, to offset the ideological affiliation of the last generation of Russian Modernists, namely those associated with the OBERIU circle, from the mainstream beliefs of their colleagues. With due analytical diligence, the contradictory self-referential terminology of titles like “The Academy of Left Classicists” or “Three Left Hours” can be ascertained to evince aesthetical rather than political radicalism. In public opinion, the true political views of Daniil Kharms still remain a matter of controversy. It may prove a futile endeavour to find out whether Kharms divulged any kind of truth to his NKVD interrogators. However, his own textual legacy contains paramount evidence to his clerical, monarchist, and in other ways conservative, if not at times reactionary, personal and ideological agenda. In a way, the same was true for most of his OBERIU peers, whether Vvedenskii, Zabolotskii or Vaginov. The proposed article aims to analyse this textual evidence and reconstruct the ideo-

logical mindset of Daniil Kharms in an attempt to conclude the discussion that has been going on for years without clear resolution.

Keywords: *Daniil Kharms; Oberiu; Russian Avant-Garde*

The time period circa 1925 when Daniil Kharms had “formally” stepped onto the (Soviet) Russian cultural scene by applying for membership in the Leningrad Union of Poets (Shubinskii 2008: 129-132; Kobrinskii 2008: 38) and co-founding the literary group called “Levyi Flang” (Left Flank; 44-45) was decidedly pivotal for his country and its culture. The premonition of the overbearing crackdown on anything that would deviate from the official point of view might have already been in the air, but artists and literati who would rather tread their own ways could still enjoy the very availability of choice, to a degree. The year 1925 witnessed the crisis of LEF (Left Front of the Arts)¹ as its leader, Vladimir Mayakovsky balanced precariously between brandishing his brainchild as the only alternative to the “bourgeois” as well as to state-approved art and trying to appease the government by openly serving the needs of its political propaganda. This ideological and, presumably, psychological divide that eventually turned to Mayakovsky’s undoing deepened during the late 1920’s, which were equally turbulent for him and for his colleagues in general. It appears, however, that even at that point, the word “left” as an ideologically charged term was still appealing to those wishing to oppose the ever-growing, mainstream socio-cultural trend of de-facto reverting to pre-revolutionary middle-class values while supporting the government’s policies unreservedly or at least submitting to them.² In 1927, Mayakovsky resumed publications of the Left Front journal under the name of *Novyi LEF* (*New LEF*). In the same year, Levyi Flang, where Kharms was active for about two years changed its name to “Akademiia Levykh Klassikov” (The Academy of Left Classicists).³

It is the word “left” that should probably be blamed for any confusion that may ever have arisen with regard to the ideological and political predilections of Daniil Kharms. In fact, it can be argued, even if this is somewhat bold, that the issue of employing the term “left” was always at risk of getting lost in the historical context he lived in. Indeed, the collective political portrait of the early 20th century Russian avant-garde can easily be branded, conventionally speaking, “left”. The Russian Futurists who were a major influence on the cutting-edge art in their country at that time were mostly left-wing, contrary to their Italian protagonist cohorts, and met the Bolshevik revolution with eagerness.⁴ Mayakovsky, who was one of the most prominent characters amid their ranks and who was, moreover, involved in Russian Social Democratic Labour Party activity before the revolution, transpired as a staunch supporter of the new regime, as did most of his comrades, some of whom later joined him in the LEF.⁵ The advanced art - the

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