

# Daniil Kharms and Sherlock Holmes: Between Imitation and Deconstruction

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**Abstract.** Daniil Kharms (1905–42) is known as an author of Russian absurd literature. It is generally overlooked that the pseudonym Kharms encodes Sherlock Holmes's Russian name of Kholms. An intertextual comparison between Kharms and Holmes shows how Arthur Conan Doyle's Holmes made his way into Russian absurd literature.

## 1. SHERLOCK KHARMS

Arthur Conan Doyle's hero Sherlock Holmes was an idiosyncratic prototype for the Russian author of absurd literature Daniil Yuvachev (1905–42). At the age of 17, Yuvachev invented his pseudonym Kharms that not only encoded the English words *harm* and *charm* (Meilakh 16; see figure 1) but also the Russian word *Kholms* for Sherlock Holmes.<sup>1</sup> His poet-friend Igor' Bakhterev (who was a fellow member of the St. Petersburg avant-garde group OBERIU) remembered:

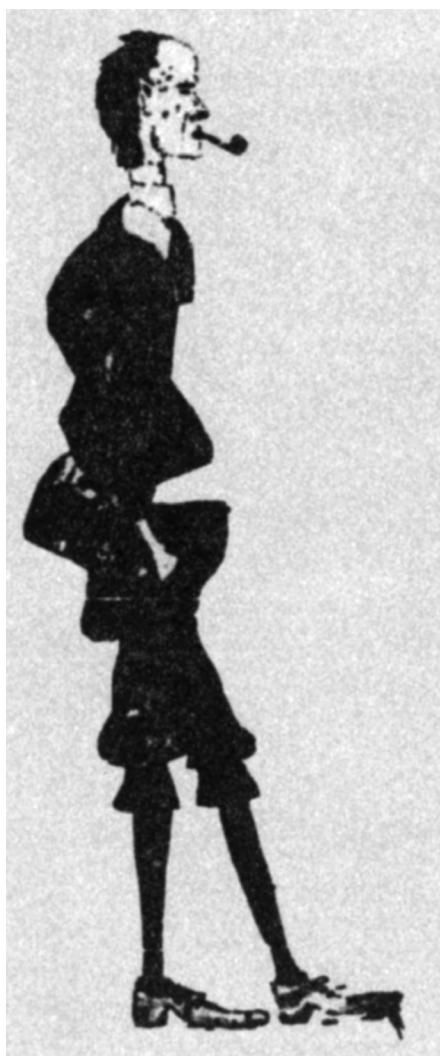
The pseudonym Kharms Daniil had invented a long time ago—apparently in his last year of school. He was reading Conan Doyle and tried to imitate Holmes. And until his final days of life the features of his youthful enthusiasm accompanied him: the formally changed surname in his passport, the English pipe reminiscent of Holmes that he constantly smoked, the antiquated paternal felt hat. One time he wore it, and, to everybody's surprise he was walking with an imperviously somber expression along the Nevsky [Prospect], in the one hand holding a walking-stick, in the other one a leash with the tiny dog Keppi [Cappy].(63)<sup>2</sup>

Kharms was generally known for his eccentricity, unconventional dress, and strange mannerisms (see figure 2). Notwithstanding the antiaristocratic Soviet agenda, Kharms

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styled himself in the fashion of an English gentleman: “a British-style gray jacket, vest and plus fours tucked into checked socks. The image of ‘mysterious foreigner’ was completed by a starched collar, narrow black velvet ribbon on his forehead, thick walking stick, pocket watch the size of a saucer on a chain, and a crooked pipe” (Volkov 392). Meilakh even termed Kharms the “last Petersburg dandy” (7). Along these lines, Kharms’s imitation of Holmes’s look and name has been perceived as a matter of an old-fashioned Anglophone taste. Certainly Kharms did not fit into the new communist era, resulting in several incarcerations until he eventually died of starvation in a prison during the German occupation of Leningrad (aka St. Petersburg). However, the question of what precisely fascinated Kharms in Holmes has been left unanswered so far. Did Kharms’s fascination with Holmes go beyond mere fashion, and, if so, which ideas did he adopt? Can these be traced in his texts?

Kharms kept track of his favorite readings in his notebooks.<sup>3</sup> Out of his 43 favorite non-Russian authors, Kharms placed Conan Doyle in 18th place in 1936 (Ustinov and Kobrinskii 493); from the standpoint of literary mastery, Conan Doyle obviously could not compete with writers such as Shakespeare (who was Kharms’s top selection at that time). It is remarkable that Kharms mentions Holmes in his known writings only once, even though he was obviously a fan.<sup>4</sup> In 1927, a caricature of Kharms resembling Holmes was published in a book (see figure 3), indicating that his intention to imitate Holmes was not overlooked by the St. Petersburg public. It seems that for Kharms, Holmes could be seen primarily as a role model for real life — a suitable mask for his artistic desire of mystification. As we will see, various character traits of Kharms suggest his identification with certain aspects of the Holmes persona.<sup>5</sup>



*Above Left:* Figure 1. Self-portrait of Kharms (Aleksandrov 80. ©2004 L. S. Druskina). Reproduced by permission of the publisher. *Right:* Figure 2. Picture of Kharms in his typical Holmesian dandy style (Kobrinskii 320. © 2008 Molodaya Gvardiya). Reproduced by permission of the publisher.



Figure 3. Caricature of Kharms as Holmes, saying “oll-rai!!” [alright]. (Kobrinskii 160, ©2008 Molo-  
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## 2. “YOU KNOW MY METHOD”

One common character trait of both Kharms and Holmes is a predilection for anything unusual and strange. As Holmes states: “I know, my dear Watson, that you share my love of all that is bizarre and outside the conventions of humdrum routine of everyday life” (Conan Doyle, “Red-Headed League” 176). In another instance, he makes clear: “My life

is spent in one long effort to escape from commonplaces of existence. These little problems help me to do so" (190). It is not the great exceptionalities and sensations that fascinate Holmes, but the minor curiosities that the average person would overlook or neglect. The following thoughts by Kharms echo Holmes's interest for the "strange and bizarre" (Conan Doyle, "Case of Identity" 191): "I am only interested in '*balderdash*'; only in that which has no practical sense. I am interested in life only in its petty manifestation" (Kharms, *Menya* 224; emphasis in original).

As Ginzburg has elaborated, Conan Doyle fashioned the detective work style of his hero according to an epistemological model that emerged in the late-nineteenth century and can be termed as "medical semiotics or symptomatology" in which "tiny details provide the key to a deeper reality" (87). In a similar fashion to Freud's future psychoanalytical approach, Holmes invests his detective energy in the analysis of minor details: "You know my method. It is founded upon the observation of trifles" (Conan Doyle, "Boscombe" 214).

For Kharms, the "*melochi byta*" (details/trifles of everyday life) were also of utmost importance. Kharms's understanding of small details was primarily informed by a theological concept according to which the tiny original sin of Adam and Eve was the cause of all evil and disorder to follow. In a letter addressed to K. V. Pugatshevo, Kharms explains that, for him, there exists a primordial harmony and order of the world (before the defect came into being), and it is the duty of the poet to help (re-)establish this order:

However, I started bringing the world into order. And that's when art appeared.... Now my concern is to create the right order.... I am the creator of the world and this is the most important thing in me.... True art is on a par with primary reality; it creates the world and constitutes its first reflection. (*Incidents* 202; trans. Cornwell)

Interestingly enough, Kharms developed his own form of short prose texts in the early 1930s that he termed "*Sluchai*" ("Cases," 1933–39). The main characteristic of these texts is that they treat seemingly unimportant details of life. The lack of context and explanation makes the report of "cases" such as "*Vstrecha*" ("A Meeting," 1934) seem absurd:

The other day a man went to work, but on his way, he met another man, who had bought a loaf of Polish bread and was on his way home, to his own place. That's about all. (63)

To Kharms—whose notebooks are full of minute observations of details of life—the tracing of these cases is the essence of establishing the initial harmony and order. On the whole, the status of details is ambivalent, however: They are both the cause of, and the remedy to, evil. In a similar manner for Holmes, details are a vital source for breaking the daily routine, while at the same time being indicators of disorder that must be rectified.

For both Kharms and Holmes, the establishment of order is a twofold process. On the one hand, it is predetermined by a primordial form of order (in the case of Holmes, it is a social one; in the case of Kharms, it is a spiritual one); but on the other hand, this order needs to be constructed in a creative process leading to the establishment of a hypothesis (to deduce a criminal act) or a piece of art. For this (almost prophetic) mission both need to be exceptionally gifted "seers."

Indeed, it is this aura of ingenuity that again unites Kharms and Holmes. According to Holmes, he is "the only one in the world" (Conan Doyle, *Sign of Four* 24), meaning that he is the only authentic detective. Holmes elsewhere asserts, paraphrasing Carlyle, that "genius is an infinite capacity for taking pains" (Conan Doyle, *Study in Scarlet* 31)—which he, of course, is capable and willing of taking. Holmes is also vain, or as Watson puts it, "sensitive to flattery" (34). When Holmes, in *The Hound of Baskervilles* (1901), is addressed

as “the second highest expert in Europe,” he immediately inquires “with some asperity” who the first would be. The subsequent answer — that “to the precisely scientific mind the work of Monsieur Bertillon must always appeal strongly” — is finally put into perspective by the client’s admitting that “as a practical man of affairs it is acknowledged that you [Holmes] stand alone” (Conan Doyle, *Hound, Complete* 672–73).

Kharms also defines himself as a talented observer with an ingenuous creativity. In the following passage from “Odnazhdy ja prishel v Gosizdat” (“Once I Went to the State Publisher,” 1935–36), Kharms stylizes himself mockingly as an accidental genius. He is better than everybody else “by nature”:

Without bracing myself I can say that I am very observant and ingenious.... I do not consider myself to be an especially smart person, but still I do need to say, that I am smarter than everybody else. It may be that on Mars there are smarter people than me, but on Earth I do not know anybody.... For some reason everybody looks at me with admiration. No matter what I do everybody finds it admirable. And I do not even make an effort. Everything works out itself.... Listen, friends! There is in fact no need to worship me. I am the same as you, only better. (“Odnazhdy” 105)

The asset that both Kharms and Holmes claim to have, apart from their astuteness, is a high degree of nonconventional creativity or intuition. As Thomas A. Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok have pointed out, “it is from intuitive clue-gathering that Holmes is able to formulate his hypotheses” (20). Holmes explains his investigatory method as a process “where we balance probabilities and choose the most likely” (Conan Doyle, *Hound, Complete* 687). Of course, this process only sets in after Holmes has established a “material basis on which to start our speculation” (687), which consists in the gathering of a broad array of additional data and minor clues. The error of his unsuccessful detective competitors lies in the fact that they form their theories on the basis of the general information and “outstanding facts, ignoring ‘trifles’ and thereafter refusing to consider data that do not support their position” (Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok 23).

The geniality of the semiotician Holmes lies in his strictly logical analysis of all clues and events. To the remark of Watson that “there was method in his madness,” Inspector Forrester replies that “some folk might say there were madness in his method” (Conan Doyle, “Reigate” 402). The madness to which both Watson and Forrester allude is not Holmes’s irrationality or craziness, but indeed the opposite: a degree of reasoning and rational consequence that marches on the absurd.

### 3. THE IDEAL REASONER: BETWEEN MAGIC AND SCIENCE

From the outset, Sherlock Holmes was composed as a meeting point between science and everyday life. Whereas Dr. Watson clearly belongs to the former category, Holmes embodies a combination of both. The reader is, in turn, introduced to Holmes and his “amateur” (Conan Doyle, *Study in Scarlet* 31) investigations through the lens of Watson. The main tool that Holmes adapts from science to his detective work is scientific reasoning, the logical combination of facts: “I am simply applying to ordinary life a few of those precepts of observation and deduction” (33). The underlying semiotic utopia of Holmes rests in the idea that by reading semiotic signs (clues), “The Book of Life” (23) can be deciphered. It is the *idée fixe* of Holmes that “from a drop of water ... a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other. So all life is a great chain, the nature of which is known whenever we are shown a single link



of it. Like all other arts, the Science of Deduction and Analysis is one which can only be acquired by long and patient study..." (23). No wonder that, to Watson, the Holmesian article "The Book of Life" appears to be a "remarkable mixture of shrewdness and of absurdity" (23).

Holmes applies this method of "reading signs" not only to interpreting drops of water but also to all spheres of life. In his investigatory process he generally starts by deciphering the physiognomy of live culprits and clients as well as dead victims. The following theoretical thoughts by Kharms display an equivalent semiotic procedure, even though Kharms takes his method to an ever higher degree of categorization:

Register the structure of a human face with signs, letters, and ciphers. Number every part and mark every possible type of exceptionality accordingly with a letter. Divide everything into categories with a special sign. Draw a scheme of the face with identification marks of the separate parts and details in their designated exceptionality with letters. All this needs to be internalized by extensive practice, so that with a mere glance at any person, you can momentarily subconsciously deduce his code. This way, you can collect material on people. Disposing of sufficient exemplary human faces and characteristics, you can extrapolate it *all into a theorem* and find opposite individuals. (*Polnoe* 1: 344; emphasis in original)

For Kharms, this procedure is a private form of amusement, and his diaries contain numerous physiognomic studies of faces (see figure 4). It is also a way of learning to read "The Book of Life" and decoding its complex interrelations.

Physiognomic studies build on the belief that the features in the outer appearance mirror internal character traits (as was propagated, for example, by the physiognomists Johann Caspar Lavater and Cesare Lombroso). In mainstream science this divinatory approach has long since been abandoned. Yet, at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was still commonplace.

Sebeok and Ginzburg have put Holmes's method of deduction into an historical perspective by tracing the long line of continuity in the intertwined paths of divination and science. Whereas astronomy has developed out of astrology and chemistry out of alchemy, Holmes's level of knowledge of physiology can be described as a mixture between modern medicine and magic (Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok 28).

Kharms, in contrast, read scientific books with the same enthusiasm as he studied, for example, Agrippa von Nettesheim's occult writings on magic. On the physiological-scientific front at the beginning of the twentieth century, two Russian scientists, Ivan Pavlov and Vladimir Bekhterev, should be mentioned. Kharms was also familiar with Henri Bergson's psycho-physiological investigations, as well as Freudian psychoanalysis (Ustinov and Kobrinskii 430–31). In the field of occultism there is hardly a niche that Kharms left unexplored. In a superficial and autodidactic fashion he studied astrology; alchemy; graphology; phrenology; numerology; and also toyed with Cabbala, tarot, and yoga.

Before the revolution, numerous esoteric teachings circulated in Russia. The intelligentsia eagerly absorbed Anna Blavatskaya's theosophical works and Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical writings. The common denominator of these teachings was precisely their claim to be scientific. An example of this trend was Petr Uspensky's well-known work *Tertium Organum* (St. Petersburg, 1909), which consists of a colorful blend of these various trends in science and occultism. Furthermore, book titles such as William Walker Atkinson's *The Development of Seership: The Science of Knowing the Future; Hindoo and Oriental Methods* (1915)—published under the pseudonym Yogi Ramacharaka in the United States—illustrate the general trend of turning the divinational yearning of mankind into a "science."<sup>6</sup>



Figure 4. Physiognomic sketches of Kharms (Aleksandrov 58. ©2004 L. S. Druskina). Reproduced by permission of the publisher.

The major difference between Kharms and Holmes is, however, that the fictional figure Holmes at least claims to be scientific and appears as a “champion of rationality” (Koppenfels 171), whereas Kharms deliberately deployed a scientific rhetoric for his own creative purposes. Even though it was clearly the eccentric aspects of Holmes as a dandy and aesthete that appealed to Kharms as an idiosyncratic model, a comparison can be drawn between the utilization of a scientific rhetoric by Holmes and Kharms.

Whereas Conan Doyle fashions Holmes as a self-proclaimed champion in the science of deduction, Kharms is a practitioner of the “science” of absurd deconstruction. The

hypothesis developed for the comparison of Conan Doyle's and Kharms's literary texts is that, by imitating and parodying the rhetoric of science, Kharms concomitantly cited Conan Doyle's fiction and perhaps even adopted some elements and motives.

#### 4. THE ABSURD HOLMES

It is a favorite hypothesis of Theodor Adorno that rationality taken to its extremes, that is rationality for its own sake detached from the sociohistorical dialectic processes, becomes irrational. Be it Martin Heidegger in philosophy, Arnold Schönberg in music, or Samuel Beckett in literature, their common ground is the "totalitarian" implementation of modern rational thinking. To Adorno, they are the epitome of a reified consciousness (*verdächtigtes Bewußtsein*); and, *ex negativo*, they are of use to the general dialectic process as peripheral exponents of deformation. In contrast to Adorno, who indeed wanted to save rationality from degeneration, Kharms exposes totalitarized rational thinking to overcome it and supersede its limits. As we shall see, Kharms does this by imitating "scientific" methodologies (as employed by Holmes).

A first example may be given in the field of deduction. A standard deductive procedure practiced by Holmes is the analysis of the outer appearance of people: "Now, when you see that a young lady, otherwise neatly dressed, has come away from home with odd boots, half-buttoned, it is not great deduction to say that she came away in a hurry" (Conan Doyle, "Case of Identity" 197). The logical inconsistency of Holmes's assertion lies in the fact that he is not actually deducing but abducting — he is formulating a possible hypothesis for explaining the given facts. In the fictional world of Holmes, this pretence for actual truth is proven to be right so many times that in the end, his dictum is often not questioned (by Watson) but believed.

Kharms, in turn, unmasks the underlying Holmesian methodology in the episode "Vidite li" ("You See," 1935) by rendering the deductions of his hero as arbitrary hypothetical fantasies:

"As you see," he said, "I saw how you were riding in the boat with them the day before yesterday. One of them sat at the rudder, two rowed, and the fourth sat next to you and talked. I stood on the bank for a long time and watched how the two rowed. Yes, and I can boldly allege that they wanted to drown you. You only row in this way before a murder."

The lady in yellow gloves looked at Klopov.

"What does that mean?" she said. "How is it that you row differently before a murder? And then, what sense is there in drowning me?"

Klopov abruptly turned toward the lady and said: "Do you know what an iron gaze is?"

"No," said the lady, involuntarily scooting away from Klopov.

"Aha," said Klopov. "If a frail porcelain cup falls from the cupboard and flies downward, then in that moment, while it is still flying through the air, you already know that it will touch the floor and break into pieces. And I know, that if a person looks at another person with an iron gaze, then sooner or later he inevitably kills him."

"They looked at me with an iron gaze?" asked the lady in yellow gloves.

"Yes, madam," said Klopov, and put on his hat. ("Vidite" 153)

In this "case," Kharms's hero Klopov follows the standard Holmesian investigatory procedure. He first recollects the "facts" of an incident that happened a few days ago in a boat



in the park. The omniscient narrator (or is it a Kharmasian Watson?) gives some additional clues to the outer appearance of the involuntary “client” (the lady) by informing the reader that she wore “yellow gloves.” On the basis of the “facts,” Klopov constructs a plot for a murder. The only clues he actually has are the “peculiar way” of the men’s rowing and their “iron gaze” that allegedly manifests their criminal potential. The absurd turn is, of course, that no crime has been committed so far. Klopov projects his hypothesis based on those two “facts” into the future. Whereas Holmes establishes a hypothesis to prove a problem, Klopov establishes a problem to justify his hypothesis (giving him a reason to start a conversation with an interesting lady).

But Kharms is not simply inverting Holmes’s detective procedure. He is hinting at a methodological blind spot in empirical investigations. The Holmesian hypothesis can only be formulated on the ground of some initial data (soft facts). The hypothesis is then verified on the basis of “the truth” (hard facts). In the case of Holmes, both the soft and hard facts are given and not subject to change. Holmes may find one or two more clues to change the whole outcome of the story, but the plot of the crime itself does not change. A criminal is a criminal even though he has been unable to make his final move — he is bad by (genetically predetermined) nature.

In a nonfixed real world this is different: Who can guarantee that the abduction virtuous circle (leading from the initial hypothesis based on the soft facts to the hard facts) does not turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy, so that a man sitting in a boat who is said to possess a murderous “iron gaze” eventually commits a crime?

With this episode, Kharms obviously touches issues of his social reality in postrevolutionary Russia. First, he alludes to the Marxist post-theistic belief in materialistic progress achieved by science. Second, he adapts the spin-doctoring methods of forming “reality” by hypothesis (propaganda) rather than facts. Third, he mirrors his own experience with the denunciatory machinery of endless interrogations to prove with “hard facts” (confessions of guilt) the soft facts (ideological incongruence), which were, in principle, already predetermined by the fact that the person was arrested (on the basis of mere suspicion).

In the following example, Kharms imitates Holmes’s search for physiological deviations from the norm. This search is, of course, also informed by the Soviet social reality of forming the ideal healthy and happy proletarian with no space for ideological or physical divergences. For Holmes, it is a standard exercise to analyze the anatomy of people to draw conclusions about their background and lifestyle:

“How did you know for example, that I did manual labour? It’s as true as a gospel, for I began as a ship’s carpenter.”

“Your hands, my dear sir. Your right hand is quite a size larger than your left. You have worked with it. And the muscles are more developed.” (Conan Doyle, “Red-Headed League” 177)

Even though the client seems to be deeply impressed by Holmes’s accurate observations and deductions, it turns out that there is really no magic involved — only careful observation of his anatomy that anybody could learn. That Holmes has learned this method through his autodidactic medical studies is one of the first things Watson learns when he is introduced to Holmes in a laboratory, and it is said about Holmes that “he is well up in anatomy” (Conan Doyle, *Study in Scarlet* 16). Another example of the application of this anatomical knowledge is given when Holmes explains that “the height of a man, in nine cases out of ten, can be told from the length of his stride.... There is no mystery in that” (33).

A parody of physiological investigations of the human being can be found in Kharm's "Novaya Anatomiya" ("New Anatomy," 1936), in which the following incredible features of a little girl are described: "Out of the nose of a little girl grew two blue ribbons. The case was especially rare, because on the one ribbon was written 'Mars,' and on the other one 'Jupiter'" (Kharm's, *Menya* 176). From the standpoint of the narrator, the rarity of this case is not based on the fact that two ribbons grew out of the girl's nose, but that "Mars" and "Jupiter" were written on them — as if there were other girls with ribbons hanging out of their noses. The extraordinariness of this 'case' makes Holmes's analysis of footsteps and hand shapes appear rather boring and conventional, but, in contrast to Holmes, Kharm's narrator does not give any explanation for this "case." The title "New Anatomy," on the contrary, insinuates that this anatomical aberration is setting a future standard. Instead of marveling at and offering answers to the abnormality of this girl as a deviation from the norm, the abnormal is accepted as the new norm. This argumentative technique of understatement is one of Kharm's reliable strategies used to mock commonsense (norm-oriented) thinking.

The presumption that Kharm adapted features of Conan Doyle's fiction is most clearly manifested in the case "Prikljuchenija Katerpillera" ("Adventure of Katerpillar," 1940). The Holmes stories are often presented with titles such as "The Adventure of the Empty House" (1903) or "The Adventure of the Devil's Foot" (1910). Moreover, the fact that Kharm adapts the English word *caterpillar* for his Russian title (instead of using the Russian equivalent *gusenica*) hints at an English textual model:

Mishurin was a katerpillar. For this reason, or maybe not for this reason, he liked to lie under the sofa or behind the wardrobe and suck dust. Since he wasn't an especially neat man, sometimes for the entire day his mug was covered with dust and down.

Once he received an invitation to someone's house, and Mishurin decided to rinse his physiognomy a bit. He poured warm water into the basin, sprinkled in a little vinegar, and submerged his face in this water. Apparently, there was too much vinegar in the water, and so Mishurin went blind. Until extreme old age he got around by touch, and for this reason, or maybe not for this reason, began to resemble a katerpillar even more. ("Katerpillar" 328)

The announced "adventure" of Kharm's hero is by no means adventurous. Mishurin's adventure consists of sucking in dust while lying under the sofa or crawling around half blind. This is rather an anti-adventure, especially because Kharm is describing permanent conditions and not decisive actions that would bring about change. It is, of course, also absurd that the cause for him resembling a "caterpillar" follows the effect of him being called "Katerpillar." Mishurin was already being called "Katerpillar" before he was blinded by the vinegar. His name, in turn, causes him to lie under the sofa. This inverted cause-and-effect scheme is even more accentuated due to the twice repeated "for this reason, or maybe not for this reason," which, in terms of Aristotelian logic, is impossible and false, because something either is, or is not, and cannot be both. Furthermore, the physiognomic aspect of the hero is emphasized once again. The assertion that Mishurin was "rinsing his physiognomy" sounds like a process of whitewashing his body from suspicious traces (dust) that could indicate that he was a "caterpillar" by nature.

A more subtle intertextual link can be established between Conan Doyle's "The Red-Headed League" and Kharm's "Rizhyj Chelovek" ("The Red-Headed Man") — also known as "Golubaja tetrad' No. 10" ("Blue Notebook No. 10," 1937). The plot of Conan Doyle's story seems very unlikely and almost absurd: A man calls on Holmes, and Watson states that "there was nothing remarkable about this man save his blazing red head" ("Red-Headed

League” 177). One day, the apprentice of this red-headed man showed him a newspaper ad for the “Red-Headed League” that offered a highly profitable and easy job for which the only prerequisite was the possession of red hair: “all red-headed men who are sound in body and mind, and above the age of twenty-one years, are eligible” (178). The man applies for the job, is accepted, and commences work copying the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. He works each day for four hours and receives £4. Finally, one day he appears at work and finds a note on the locked door: “THE RED-HEADED LEAGUE/is Dissolved/October 9, 1890” (182; emphasis in original). It turns out that the man’s apprentice had invented the league to dig a tunnel from the red-headed man’s house to a nearby bank in the hours of his absence. Possibly this strange incident inspired Kharms to write his own text about a red-headed man:

There was a red-headed man who had no eyes or ears. He didn’t have hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily.

He couldn’t talk because he had no mouth. He didn’t have a nose either.

He didn’t even have arms or legs. He had no stomach, he had no back, no spine, and he didn’t have any insides at all. There was nothing! So, we don’t even know [what] we’re talking about. We’d better not talk about him any more. (“Rizhyj Chelovek” 45; trans. Yankelevich)

The statements “There was nothing!” and “so, we don’t even know what we’re talking about” would easily fit into Conan Doyle’s story “The Red-Headed League.” Whereas in Conan Doyle’s story a red-headed man finds his league dissolved, in Kharms’s text the reader finds the red-headed man dissolved.

Another example of Kharms that may be compared to Conan Doyle can be found in “Vsestoronne issledovanie” (“General Investigation,” 1937):

ERMOLAEV: I was at Blinov’s; he showed me his strength. I have never seen anything like it. The strength of a beast! I got scared. Blinov lifted a writing desk, hauled it off, and flung it four meters away from himself.

DOCTOR: It would be interesting to investigate this phenomenon. Science knows about such facts, but the reasons for them are not understood. Where such muscle strength comes from, science is not yet capable of saying. Introduce me to Blinov: I will give him the pill of science.

ERMOLAEV: But what sort of pill is that which you are planning to give Blinov?

DOCTOR: What pill? I don’t plan on giving him a pill.

ERMOLAEV: But you yourself only just said that you are planning to give him the pill.

DOCTOR: No, no, you are mistaken. I didn’t talk about a pill. (“Vsestoronne” 205)

The episode continues with the doctor hypnotizing Ermolaev so that he can finally give him the “pill of science”—thereby killing him. The doctor concludes: “He died, not finding answers to his questions on Earth. Yes, we, the doctors, have to carry out a general investigation of death” (206).

The name Ermolaev encodes the Russian word *ermolka* (round hat) and perhaps also the Latin word *emulatio*, both alluding to Holmes who is generally portrayed wearing a deerstalker and who emulates science. Instead of helping Ermolaev solve his “case” of figuring out why Blinov has such physical strength that he can throw a table four meters away, Kharms’s doctor (Watson) turns his client into a test subject for a “general investigation” of death by killing him.

Science, which, according to the progress-oriented rationalistic rhetoric of commu-

nism (and capitalism), aims at furthering the well-being of mankind, thus turns against its beneficiary. As a model for an exaggerated degree of scientific ambition, Kharms may have adapted the following passage on Holmes describing him as “a little too scientific” leading to “cold-bloodedness”: “I could imagine his giving a friend a little pinch of the latest vegetable alkaloid, not out of malevolence, you understand, but simply out of a spirit of inquiry in order to have an accurate idea of the effects. To do him justice, I think that he would take it himself with the same readiness. He appears to have a passion for definite and exact knowledge” (Conan Doyle, *Study in Scarlet* 17). In this quote, Conan Doyle exposes the ambiguous status of Holmes (as a representative of science), who, on the one hand, works for the side of law and order and, on the other hand, seems willing to violate it for the sake of furthering scientific knowledge (Povidisa 69). The Kharmsian doctor, in contrast, believes that he acts in the service of medical progress even though from an outside perspective it is clear that he is a sardonic criminal.

For Kharms, the limits and dangers of science were all too clear.<sup>7</sup> He himself was excluded from public discourse and his works banned because his rhetoric did not fit into the progress-oriented and science-enthusiastic discourse of proletarian optimism. Kharms could discern in his totalitarian environment that, if the whole of society is put to the service of science, then science is no longer at the service of mankind; the individual is nothing more than a “guinea pig” on the way to a hypothetical state of perfection. As for the capacity of science in general, Kharms simply doubted that rationality alone could bring progress. Kharms was prone to parodying science. For example, Vladimir Lifshits, a friend of Kharms, reported seeing a contraption made of bits of metal, wooden boards, springs, a bicycle wheel, and empty jars in Kharms’s room. When Lifshits asked what it was, the following exchange occurred:

Kharms replied, “A machine.”  
“What kind of machine?”  
“No kind. Just a machine in general.”  
“And where does it come from?”  
“I put it together myself,” Kharms said proudly.  
“What does it do?”  
“It does nothing.”  
“What do you mean nothing?”  
“Simply nothing.”  
“What is it for?”  
“I just wanted to have a machine at home.” (qtd. in Gibian 7–8)

At the end of the 1930s, Kharms’s jovial haughtiness and flirtation with playing the “master of the universe” increasingly made way for a rather pessimistic realism and an awareness not only of the limits of mankind in general but also his own. This change also manifested itself in his appearance. In the last years of his life Kharms increasingly gave up his outer mask and dress code of Holmes. The main reason for this may have been his extreme poverty and lack of energy due to constant starvation. Eduard Arenin remembers his last encounter with Kharms before he was arrested for the final time in August 1941: “He was walking somehow strongly limping, but I was surprised about something else which I could not understand straightaway: Kharms was dressed like everybody else and did not differentiate himself” (Shishman 158). Arenin also deduced, much to his surprise, that Kharms was dedicating himself with great enthusiasm to the study of the architecture of old Russian churches in his final weeks of life — piling up monographs on Novgorod, Kiev, Suzdal, and others in his room (Shishman 159).

Holmes is also known for his numerous monographs on different aspects of his investigatory detective life such as the “science” of cigarette ash, tattoos, footprints, and the simulation of illness, but Conan Doyle kept him within the domain demarcated by rationality. Mysteries exist for the purpose of being demystified. In the end, Kharms also experienced a demystification of his hopes and dreams, but this made him an even stronger believer in the mysteries of the universe.

*Keywords:* absurd literature; Conan Doyle, Arthur; Kharms, Daniil; Sherlock Holmes

## NOTES

1. The first translation of Conan Doyle appeared in Russia in 1902 (*The Hound of the Baskervilles*, trans. E. N. Lomikovskoi). Until 1917, numerous translations were published, the last ones being “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle” and “The Adventure of the Speckled Band” (trans. V. Voskhodova). After the revolution, works of foreign authors generally fell under suspicion, so that Conan Doyle’s name can be found on censorship lists from the 1920s due to “ideological” reasons (Bljum 109). After Joseph Stalin’s death, Holmes was “rehabilitated,” and in 1971, A. F. Zinov’eva produced the first Soviet TV production of Holmes’s adventures (*Sobaka Baskervilei*). In pre-revolutionary times Kharms was educated at the prestigious German “Peterschule” while his father taught him English (Kobriniskii 16). Therefore, it is very likely that Kharms read the original English-language version of Conan Doyle’s Holmes stories.

2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this article are the author’s.

3. Kharms left 38 diary-like notebooks plus many sketches composed between 1924 and 1940. Ustinov and Kobriniskii published a small fraction of these writings in a carefully edited version. Zhakkar and Sazhin published the complete diary and notebook corpus (Kharms, *Polnoe*).

4. Holmes is mentioned in Kharms’s notebook only in 1937. This is at a time, however, when he has already given up the “pose” of Holmes: “Create yourself a pose and have the character strength to pull it through. Once I assumed the pose of an Indian [Native American], then of Sherlock Holmes, then of a Yogi, and now of an irritable neurasthenic. The last pose I don’t want to keep up. I have to think about a new pose” (Ustinov and Kobriniskii 498).

5. To contextualize the works of “Sherlock Kharms,” it is necessary to summarize a few important facts. Since the Bolshevik revolution, the primary art movement in Russia was the avant-garde that was revolutionary in method (antimimetic), but not in content. By the end of the 1920s when Kharms entered the art scene, the avant-garde was already under attack; the content of art was supposed to be revolutionary and connected to the progress of the proletariat (see Ostashevsky). Avant-garde artists were accused of apolitical “formalism,” and a new art paradigm — socialist realism — emerged. As a consequence of a systematic exclusion from the public aesthetic discourse of avant-garde artists, Kharms could only publish two poems during his lifetime as he struggled to make a living by writing children’s literature. Nevertheless, he continued to cultivate his writing style in private. A majority of his works has survived, largely thanks to his friend, Yakov Druskin, who hid them from an unsympathetic government. Druskin began showing Kharms’s texts to others in the 1960s, but Kharms’s œuvre could not be made accessible to a wider audience until after the demise of the Soviet Union. For further information, see Kobriniskii.

6. Kharms read several publications by Yogi Ramacharaka (Kharms, *Polnoe* 1: 245, 471).

7. In the interrogatory protocols of the State Secret Service after his first arrest on 13 January 1932, Kharms is reported to have made clear his skepticism toward atheistic materialism and science: “Given that I generally and purposefully distracted myself from the current political questions—I don’t read the newspaper as a matter of principle.... Apart from that I consider and always considered that my philosophical searches, which follow the path of idealistic philosophy and are closely linked to mysticism, are much more in tune with pre-revolutionary political and societal forms of order than the current political order, which is based on materialistic philosophy.... In my opinion, science can only reach its absolute heights and will be capable of grasping the deep truths of the universe when it loses its utilitarian practical character” (Sazhin 2: 530–31).



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