

Daniil Kharms, *"I Am a Phenomenon Quite Out of the Ordinary": The Notebooks, Diaries and Letters of Daniil Kharms*. Translated and edited by Anthony Anemone and Peter Scotto. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013. 689pp. \$35

Daniil Kharms was born in St. Petersburg in 1905. He died in 1942, a patient in a psychiatric clinic, likely of starvation, during the Leningrad Blockade. Although he was known as a children's author during his lifetime—many of his children's books are now classics—he was unable to publish his writing “for adults.” Not until long after his death, then, would Kharms earn his reputation as a poet and master of bizarre miniatures. Kharms's antic writing style brought the formal disapproval of the Soviet government, a fact that has led many to regard him as a dissident writer. This view has bolstered the misleading notion that censorship prevented him from reaching full artistic maturity. Like other repressed Soviet authors, Kharms has become something of a symbol—of the brave soul who risks everything to produce “extremely important work,” which is then understood as the record of a dissident's struggle (or protest) against the authoritarian state. *I Am a Phenomenon Quite Out of the Ordinary* sets out to restore Kharms to mere human status, or in the editors' words, “to recover the inner life of Daniil Kharms,” and collects a wide range of personal and fugitive material, previously unavailable in English, to this end. What emerges is a portrait of an *amateur*—not a dissident. The selections from Kharms's notebooks, diaries, and letters suggest that his most well regarded works are the expression of an idiosyncratic, implicit aesthetic program—i.e., an amateurist's philosophy—for which life and art are held to be continuous and fluid. Given the coherence and consistency of this tacit program over time, Kharms's miniatures and other well known works appear to constitute the type of writing he would have chosen to produce even under more favorable circumstances.

Reading *I Am a Phenomenon*, one cannot help but notice that Kharms wrote as a part of ordinary life, envisioning only a small readership of friends and family. Everyday pieces of writing, such as letters, display much ingenuity and aesthetic scruple, and they have come to be included in his body of literary works. Yakov Druskin, a friend and colleague, believed that Kharms's life and work were of a piece; the diaries and notebooks go some way in confirming this view. Kharms wrote incessantly as he went about his daily rounds. According to Anemone and Scotto, the volume's editors, the author “would write on the tram, in a sauna, at concerts, while visiting friends, visiting his aunt, or in the middle of a fight with his wife.” In *I Am a Phenomenon* important pieces of Kharms's literary output share notebook pages with grocery lists, schemes, and memoranda of romantic meetings.

Although some of the writing is of excellent quality, very little is consciously marked out as serious, planned, or distinct from the ordinary flow of words in the author's daily life. One gets the sense that even Kharms's most important works were composed spontaneously, that their literary merit is the result of a mix of happenstance and skill, perhaps inspiration, and not in general because of some special effort Kharms had made to distance himself from the social world or his practical affairs.

This effect is the result of Kharms's amateurist writing practice, and one only perceives it by reading his famous and lesser pieces side-by-side, as they accrued over the days, weeks, months, and years. By allowing readers in English to approach Kharms for the first time in this way, Anemone and Scotto have rendered an important service. One does wish that they had included at least a dozen more of Kharms's classic miniatures and poems—for example, those found in *Today I Wrote Nothing*—in order to situate the author at the height of his powers even more forcefully in the context of his everyday life. The editors have done well in trying to strike a balance between the known and the previously unknown Kharms, but they could have made clearer still the nature of his peculiar art practice, even at the risk of redundancy and to the exclusion of several pages of lesser work not previously available in English.

Throughout *I Am a Phenomenon*, Kharms shows a precocious and consistently high level of accomplishment with peripheral forms—sketches, dialogues, fragments, anecdotes, bathetic fables, and more. Take the following letter, at once correspondence and modernist experiment:

Dear Liza,

My best wishes to Kirill on his birthday, and also to his parents, who are successfully fulfilling the plan prescribed by nature of raising a human offshoot unable to walk up to the age of two years, but then, with time, beginning to destroy everything in sight and, finally, in the attainment of a young preschool age, using a voltmeter stolen from his father's desk to smash the head of his beloved mother who had failed to dodge an especially agile attack conducted by her not as yet completely matured child, already planning in his immature occiput that once having knocked off his parents, he could turn all his most ingenious attention to his grandfather, grizzled with silver hairs, thereby proving his mental development, so abnormal for his age, in honor of which, on the 28th of February, some of the admirers of this truly extraordinary phenomenon are gathering, among whom, to my great regret, I will be unable to count myself, since I find myself at the given moment in a certain state of tension, going into raptures on the coast of the Gulf of Finland, with

the ability characteristic of me since my childhood years, once I've grabbed a steel pen and dipped it into an inkwell, to express in short and distinct phrases my profound and, at times, even, to a certain extent, highly elevated thought.

Daniil Kharms

This letter is addressed to Kharms's sister on his nephew's birthday. In its syntactic experimentation, and in its highly artificial nature, it is at once empirical artifact and aesthetic object, and also an illustration of Kharms's commitment to integrating his art practice into everyday life. That commitment, however, meant his audience would have been limited—at least for the foreseeable future—to a handful of friends and family. This letter, and perhaps everything he wrote, is classifiable under the heading of “writing for the desk drawer.” But Kharms's work differs in an important way from the majority of Soviet authors who wrote without any immediate outlet or readership. Often, the practice of writing for the desk drawer suggests, if not a genuine hope for a future readership, then a commitment to writing in a way that could gain acceptance among a large, imagined readership. It also normally reflects an authorial commitment to the value of mainstream literary forms, such as the novel, with their considerable aesthetic and political possibilities. Yet, despite his early death, nowhere in these pages does Kharms display the desire to produce any such work. His story “The Old Woman,” which is not included in *I Am a Phenomenon*, is a mere nine thousand words, and is by far his longest effort, yet it comes nowhere near the length of a short novel. Even this level of sustained exertion was apparently of no interest to Kharms, who wrote, just after the story's closing words: “At this point I temporarily end my manuscript in the belief that it has drawn on long enough.” Kharms simply never showed the dissident writer's interest in major literary forms as vehicles for politically or aesthetically objectionable content. It's not clear that Kharms's brand of “writing for the desk drawer” would have found a ready readership even in a permissive climate.

Still, as *I Am a Phenomenon* illustrates, Kharms was no crank or outsider artist, literary only by accident. He had ties to the center of the Soviet literary world: Gorky was an early protector; Victor Serge was his brother-in-law; and he was a central member of the OBERIU group, which has come to be recognized as a major force in the Soviet avant-garde. Kharms was accordingly well aware of the other, less obscure approaches available to him and others who struggled as writers during difficult times. Nevertheless, Kharms deliberately chose his open-ended amateurist compositional practice, which meant writing in short forms with few historical precedents. The political and aesthetic reading of his work has prompted a connection to later writers, such as Ionesco, Sartre, and Beckett. But the stronger affinity, in both literary form and compositional practice, is with Henri

Michaux, of whom Malcolm Bowie has written, “Michaux, for all his talents as a narrator finds himself bound to invent countless small structures which cannot endure from one creative occasion to the next.” Richard Ellmann, also writing of Michaux, could as readily be describing Kharms: “While obviously a skilled and conscientious craftsman, he insists upon a kind of amateur standing in the writing profession; his work must always be spontaneous, never *voulu*.”

Nothing Kharms ever did was *voulu*. Rather, he wrote as a reflexive practice in response to his immediate environment. His notebooks suggest that, for him, the notion of the professional writer who sits at a writing desk for a fixed period each day was unappealing, perhaps impossible. Kharms was an amateur, in part, because of his avoidance of this too deliberate type of compositional approach. Kharms’s was instead one of constant movement, directed mainly toward his limited circle of intimates and colleagues. Had he wished to create work that could reach a larger audience, he would have needed to meet rigid formal as well as ideological requirements, in the very way that writers in modern-day capitalist countries must meet the comparably rigid demands of the market. Because he was not interested in producing ideological works of instrumental value, Kharms’s example sharply contrasts with that of the Soviet literary establishment of his time. Yet neither is it comparable to that of the American establishment writer, who succumbs to producing works that satisfy existing literary markets. Kharms’s uncompromising amateurism should serve today’s artists as an atypical example of artistic autonomy. Since he was an amateur above all else, Kharms let his personal vision dictate the shape of his work.

Michael G. Donkin

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Etel Adnan, *Premonition*. Berkeley: Kelsey Street Press, 2014. 56pp. \$19

Etel Adnan’s massive and diverse body of work is dedicated to other possibilities of knowing. Some possibilities include writing from the perspective of the other, as in her celebrated novel about the Lebanese Civil War, *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978); becoming a mountain as one paints it, as in *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* (1986); or staring into a dying sun as it bears witness to the crises of the Middle East, as in *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989). *Premonition* comes as the most recent product of nearly half a century of such works. Unlike Adnan’s earlier books, it is less tied to particular human conflicts, though it most certainly is born in their aftermath, as well as in the context of continuing ecological calamities. Still, it would serve as a valuable introduction for those unfamiliar with her oeuvre to the radical forms of perception by which Adnan seeks to tackle questions of being. And like her most recent books of poetry,