

“Studyin This Volapuke” That Makes the “Barrel of the Narrative” Roll

In Search of a Constructed Voice at the Hour Between Dog and Wolf

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Abstract

Sasha Sokolov’s second novel *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom* has its origins in the author’s reflection on the role and nature of the narrating voice. In concocting the most appropriate voice for this narrative, the author constructed a language, defined by one of the heroes as “Volapuke,” a 19th-century constructed idiom (*Volapük*). In Sokolov’s “Volapuke,” every trope, word, and even grapheme is allowed to transfigure into its direct, objectified meaning. As for the voices that weave together the linguistic threads, there are many, and at the same time they are all combined into one. Like all of Sasha Sokolov’s novels, *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom* reminds the reader of the natural plurality of voices that is to be found within oneself. For a plot synopsis of *Between Dog and Wolf*, please consult the introduction to this issue of *CASS*.

Keywords

Sasha Sokolov – *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom* – *Between Dog and Wolf* – narrating voice – Volapük – realized metaphor – phraseologisms – constructed language

In a letter addressed to his publisher Carl Proffer in August 1976, Sasha Sokolov explained for his part the possible reasons that made Proffer’s critical statements concerning the first sketch for his second novel comprehensible and grounded:

I just want to explain: I thought up this book as a parody-novel, or as a half-parody. My intention was to make a parody of whatever comes to

hand and in sight, as the story unfolds. And I wanted to vary the style. In “Parenthetical Digression,” as you correctly understood, I am parodying Gogol. But I am probably not mature enough for such a book. Or there is another reason: I began to sing in a voice that was not mine. From the very start.¹

The successive sketches for the book, Sokolov assures Proffer further below in the letter, now describe “a completely new story,” written in what appears to be his own voice. The quotation from this letter is far from trivial: it testifies to the fact that *Mezhdú sobakoi i volkom*, Sokolov’s second novel, later published by Proffer’s Ardis in 1980, was born out of a reflection on the structuring role of narrating voices. The present article will thus touch on the constructedness of such voices, suggesting that – to quote Pirandello’s masterpiece – they are indeed one, no one, and one hundred thousand: as much as the novel’s style and vocabulary are multilayered and open to direct or metaphorical interpretation, so the identities of the hero(es) overlap, split, metamorphose. Both the *utterer* (the speaker) and the *uttered* (the spoken words) are subject to twilight at the hour between the dog and the wolf, this resulting in inevitable ambiguities for the reader. Indeed, this constructedness affects both the voices and their speech: on the one hand, the present analysis, based on a variety of textual evidence, will suggest that the narrative progresses through a series of images and situations that concretize specific uses of figurative language (thus implying a multilayered interpretation of the linguistic sign); on the other hand, starting from a clue contained in “Note xxvi” of the novel, the investigation will highlight the specific role played by the Binging Hunter as the fundamental structuring voice of the entire book, the voice that interweaves all the others.

The complex composition and organization of the book have challenged critics in devising analyses and interpretations. The presence of (at least) two narrators, Ilya and Yakov,² and the fact that the two appear in many ways connected, as well as having multiple, intersecting identities (Yakov in particular)

1 “Хочу только объяснить: задумана эта книга была как роман-пародия, или – полупародия. Пародировать я предлагал все, что попадется под руку и на глаза, по ходу развития сюжета. И стиль хотел варьировать. В *Отступлении в скобках*, как ты верно понял, я пародирую Гоголя. Но, вероятно, я еще не дорос до такой книги. Или другая причина: запел не своим голосом. С самого начала.” University of California Santa Barbara. *Sasha Sokolov collection*, Mss 117 Box 1: 5–6.

2 Leiderman and Lipovetsky interpret the novel as a tripartite narration, unfolded progressively by Ilya, Yakov, and a third “impersonal author.” N. Leiderman and M. Lipovetsky, *Russkaia literatura xx veka (1950–1990-e gody)*, Tom 2: 1968–1990 (Moscow: Akademiia, 2010), 407. Mario Caramitti’s article in this issue tackles the topic of the *skaz* in further detail.

have allowed for close studies of their different personal styles (sometimes loosely defined as *skaz*³) and models (ranging from Pushkin to Turgenev to mass culture and pop songs). Boris Ostanin's *Glossary for Sasha Sokolov's Povest' "Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom"*⁴ represents a highly useful resource to approach the book, both for the international public (yet, one composed mainly of Slavic Studies scholars) and native speakers: comprising a carefully compiled list of the direct and oblique references met in Sokolov's text, Ostanin's glossary highlights not only the meaning that Russian classics acquire in the organization of the narrators' voices, but also the role played in it by popular songs, sayings, idiomatic phraseologisms, nursery and counting rhymes. The intertextual play in the book, often approached in critics' reviews and analyses, is based on literary sources, highbrow and lowbrow culture alike.⁵

The result of such a linguistic interweaving in the novel is eventually defined by Ilya as an artificial language: "I have rowed across and hobble aimlessly, havin trampled lameness with lameness, and You – here, in the present – are studyin this Volapuke."⁶ Volapük, the spelling of which Alexander Boguslawski distorts in his English translation of the novel because "its sound reminds him [Ilya] about the consequences of drinking too much,"⁷ is a constructed language that was created by German Catholic priest Johann Martin Schleyer in 1879–1880, and that has assumed in some languages (French, for example) the generic meaning of an incomprehensible idiom. It is symptomatic that even in Esperanto, another, much more popular artificial language, the term *volapukaĵo* is used to define gibberish.

Indeed, the last words we read in Ilya's letter are the following: "Or maybe mysterious for you are these words of mine?"⁸ The unclear, unintelligible mean-

3 See for example, D.B. Johnson, "Sasha Sokolov's *Between Dog and Wolf* and the Modernist Tradition," in *The Third Wave: Russian Literature in Emigration*, ed. O. Matich, M. Heim (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984), 212.

4 B. Ostanin, *Slavar' k povesti Sashi Sokolova "Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom"* (Moscow: Pal'mira, 2020).

5 A.V. Korovashko in particular has analyzed Sokolov's creative use and reactivation of linguistic "polufabrikaty" (intermediate, semi-finished goods). A.V. Korovashko, "Zagovornaia poeziiia *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom*," *Vestnik Nizhegorodskogo universiteta im. Lobachevskogo* 5 (2008): 273–277.

6 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, translated by Alexander Boguslawski (New York: Columbia UP, 2017), 187. "Перегреб и тащусь вдоль кромки Лазаря наобум, хромотой хромоту поправ, Вы же – здесь, в настоящем периоде, изучаете сей волапук." S. Sokolov, *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom* (Moscow: OGI, 2014), 374. Boguslawski's translation is not analyzed in this article as it represents a separate linguistic entity, but it is simply quoted for ease of reading.

7 A. Boguslawski, "Annotations," in *Between Dog and Wolf*, 253.

8 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 227. "Или сокровенны тебе слова мои?" S. Sokolov, *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom*, 442.

ing of his own speech is something he himself acknowledges as perfectly possible: his *rech'* (speech) flows loosely and freely just like the Volga-Itil' river, to which the term *rech'* may seem etymologically – yet fallaciously – related (*reka*). Through its flow it collects various elements, combining them creatively and disorderly: the task of decoding it all is a tough one.

The actual complexity of Ilya's discourse concretizes the well-known theme of incommunicability as it is often found in poetry and in literature as a whole, epitomized in Russian culture by Fedor Tyutchev's invitation to literally observe "*Silentium*" ("Другому как понять тебя?" How should another know your mind?⁹). Yet on another level it also concretizes the *zvukosmysl* (sound/sense)¹⁰ notion that apparently links the terms *rech'* and *reka*, in a manner similar to that of Pasternak – a major source of reference and model for Sokolov, in this novel and in general in his oeuvre – in his "Variation 1 – Original," where he juxtaposes the terms *stikh* (verse) and *stikhiia* (force of nature): "Стихия свободных стихии / С свободной стихией стиха" (The force of the free force of the nature / with the free force of the verse).¹¹

The very (seemingly banal) quote from *Doctor Zhivago* taken as epigraph in *Mezhdub sobakoi i volkom* – "The young man was a hunter"¹² – invites the reader to reflect on the linguistic and communicative issues at stake in the novel: this specific quotation occupies a particular spot in its original literary source, as the "young man" it talks about is the fascinating interlocutor with whom Zhivago converses while on the train, and who only once in the dark of the night turns

9 Vladimir Nabokov's translation, contained in his anthology *Three Russian Poets: Translations of Pushkin, Lermontov, Tyutchev in New Translations* (Norfolk: New Direction, 1944), 34.

10 It is Sokolov himself who makes use of this word, explaining his admiration for Khlebnikov: "it's impossible to speak about phonetics separately from meaning. Linguistics captures that notion in the term *zvukosmysl* [sound/sense]." I. Podshivalov, "A Conversation with Sasha Sokolov," *СЛОВАРЬ*, n. 2–4 (2006): 357–358.

11 The literal translation here provided is mine. Besides the common profound admiration for Pushkin, Pasternak is an essential poetic model for Sokolov, who dedicated even an essay to him, *A Mark of Illumination*. Pasternak's poetics shares a set of elements and themes with Sokolov's, among which are: the ceaseless reflection upon the role of the Poet; the central value of musicality in the verse; the calibrated use of colors and lights in the scenarios they both paint; the crucial role of twilight (morning twilight mainly in Pasternak, rather dawn in Sokolov); the continuous play with tropes, word roots, assonances, sound associations; the occurrence of specific terminology, and a varied language that challenges apt translations. See also L. Fleishman, *Boris Pasternak v dvadtsatye gody* (Saint Petersburg: Akademicheskyy proekt, 2003).

12 However, Boris Ostanin notes that the term *okhotnik* (hunter) can also be interpreted alternatively: "тот, кто хочет; любитель; доброволец," literally the one who wants to, the amateur, the volunteer. B. Ostanin, *Slovar'*, 9.

out to be deaf and, therefore, capable of sustaining a conversation solely by lip reading. This pivotal sequence in Pasternak's novel unravels the theme of incommunicability, a topic that is of great interest to Sokolov, too; evoking the idea of the power of language and of its sound (which not everyone is capable of hearing), it stresses the redeeming sacredness of the word. After all, this second book by Sokolov, apparently constructed as an epistolary novel, presents itself as a letter addressed to Detective Pozhilykh by Ilya (now dead as we discover reading on), in which the sender seeks justice for a wrongdoing. The writing thus offers a refuge and a redemption from (linear) time and death.¹³

In order to approach the complex, multilayered, 'artificial' language in which the novel is written, the idea of tracing the different threads that construct it might be fascinating, yet it would leave us with the task of compiling a list of direct or possible references, sources, and allusions that in the end would not account for the result achieved by Sokolov's word-weaving. Indeed, the text is not simply a cento by an erudite master of quotations, but rather an intriguing artifact witnessing the creative power of 'recycling' existing – sometimes 'exhausted' – texts (in a semiotic sense, not strictly verbal¹⁴). In this sense, *Mezhdū sobakoi i volkom* is both imbued with the modernist tradition and resonant with the new postmodern sensibility which questioned the essence and role of the semiotic sign, of the Word, of the Author.¹⁵ What in the novel

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- 13 On the idea of circular time and death in Sokolov's oeuvre, see A. Boguslawski, "Death in the Works of Sasha Sokolov," *CASS* 21, n. 3–4 (1987): 231–246.
- 14 The importance of ekphrasis and the presence of references to Bruegel's paintings in Sokolov's second novel has already been noted. See D.B. Johnson, "*Mezhdū sobakoi i volkom*: O fantasticheskom iskusstve Sashi Sokolova," *Vremia i my* 64 (1982): 165–175; M. Caramitti, "Mul'tfil'm Breigelia i obraz Volgi v *Mezhdū sobakoi i volkom* Sashi Sokolova," *Slavica Tergestina* 8 (2000): 363–370; T. Baknina, "Sasha Sokolov i Piter Breigel' starshii: Dialog kul'tur," *Literatura. Literaturovedenie. Ustnoe narodnoe tvorchestvo* 41, n. 3 (2015): 181–185; M. Napolitano, "Il principio ekphrastico nel quadro proetico di Saša Sokolov," in (*S*)*confinamenti. Rapporti fra letteratura e arti figurative in area slava*, ed. E. Dammiano, E. Gironi Carnevale, E. Mari, O. Trukhanova (Roma: UniversItalia, 2018), 199–212.
- 15 The debate on Sokolov's belonging to the modernist or postmodernist sensibility is witnessed by many studies. The attention paid to form, almost as a polemical substitute for the dominance of linear plot, leads to a reading of Sokolov's work in continuity with the literary tradition of modernism, as suggested by Olga Matich: "Belonging to the modernist tradition, his fiction is verbal rather than ideological" (O. Matich, "Sasha Sokolov's *Palisandriia*: History and Myth," *The Russian Review* 45 (1986): 416). However, some critics have expressed doubts about whether Sokolov belongs to the modernist tradition. Indeed, the resurgence of Russian modernism in the second half of the twentieth century has long defied attempts at definition: this literature, at once heir to and distinct from the historical avant-garde, presented itself as a "new Russian Avant-Garde" (D.B. Johnson, "Sasha Sokolov: The New Russian Avant-Garde," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 30, 3 (1989):

is called “the barrel of the narrative”¹⁶ (*bochka povestvovaniia*) is “rolled” forward through the concretization of recalled threads – be they literary quotations, biblical images, popular songs, phraseologisms, idioms, or even Cyrillic graphemes. It is not simply the anecdotic plot that flows from the title of the novel, as Johnson observed long ago.¹⁷ The whole book develops on a set of realized metaphors – a device possibly reminiscent of Mayakovsky’s poetry.¹⁸

This is then, for example, how the proverb “*dva sapoga-para*” (two boots make a pair) concretely realizes in the episode in which Ilya and Yakov, both one-legged, acquire a pair of boots: “Fortune smiled on us, you may say; he’s missin this one and I the opposite, so we sniffed each other out like two mutts. Two boots of leather flock together.”¹⁹ When later, while on the train, Ilya meets his potential brother, the two “drained one for Bruderschaft”²⁰ (literally *brotherhood* in German). In “Note XXII – Farewell of the Tinker from Gorodnishche,” the hero’s departure from life is accompanied by his “flap[ping] [the] wing for goodbye:”²¹ the expression *makhat’ rukoi* (to wave, implied, a hand) is transformed into *makhat’ krylom*, to wave the wing (“махни, говорит, мне крылом”²²).

Transfiguration after death acquires biblical tones throughout the novel, as in the patent case of “Note XVIII – Transfiguration of Nikolay Helperov.”²³ Also,

163–178); although it lacked the programmatic ambitions and compactness of schools and movements, this new Avant-Garde laid the groundwork for a rebirth of Russian literature that had become stagnant through decades of censorship and socialist realism. As Andrei Zorin wrote after Sokolov’s first official publication in the USSR, this writer (along with others) “succeeded in stirring the wind over Russian prose” (A. Zorin, “Nasylaiushchii veter,” *Novy mir* 12 (1989): 253). The result of such ‘classification difficulty’ has created a kind of historical-geographical divide between Russian critics and their Western counterparts. Thus, while Western critics associated his first two novels with a resurgent form of modernism, a number of Russian critics more often chose the term ‘postmodernism’ to describe the totality of Sokolov’s texts. Only in the case of *Palisandriia* did the two factions agree.

16 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 25.

17 “The book’s content flows from its title” and “so does its dominant stylistic device – the phraseologism.” D.B. Johnson, “Sasha Sokolov’s *Between Dog and Wolf*,” 212.

18 See also R. Jakobson, *Language in Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987): 273–300.

19 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 52. “Скажи, подфартило: у него этой нет, а у меня противоположной, и мы снюхались, как те бобики. Два сапога – пара.” S. Sokolov, *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom*, 119.

20 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 76. “И высушили на брудершафт.” S. Sokolov, *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom*, 170.

21 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 141.

22 S. Sokolov, *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom*, 294.

23 Transfigured, Nikolay “had turned into a falcon,” (96) a bird that in Russian sounds as *sokol*,

Pozhilykh, Ilya's addressee, is once 'transfigured' into an alleged Resurrection painting whose title plays on the ambiguity of his last name – *Voskresenie Pozhilykh*, The Resurrection of the Elderly.²⁴ Ilya indeed concludes his letter wishing Pozhilykh “a happy resurrection:” this is his final message, his “good news.”²⁵ It literally is his Gospel, from the Greek εὐαγγέλιον (*good news*) – in the original, Ilya here distorts the canonical *blagaia vest'* in “blagoe izvestie.”²⁶

One-leggedness works as a source of wordplay and word-weaving in the novel, as in Ilya's being approached as “Your Lameness,” *Vashe Kalechestvo*,²⁷ or in the above-mentioned Nikolay's transfiguration, where we read, in Russian, “мы – калики, он – калика из калик, / мы – калеки, он – калека среди калек” (we are pilgrims – he's one far above us all, / we are cripples – he's one far above the rest).²⁸

Assonances, puns, and misspellings also often help in rolling the “barrel of the narrative” further, as happens in the conversation described in chapter 5 that is stylized as if it were taken from some nineteenth-century prose:

And the bird's eye? The host's question is so unexpected and seems so contradictory to the general tone of the conversation that Ksenofont Ardalyonych and Nikodim Yermolaich are startled, as if someone suddenly fired a montechristo. Do You know, Ignaty Varfolomeich orated in the meantime, are You aware, esteemed gentlemen, what the bird's eye is? I know better what a bread pie is, ruffled up like a sparrow, the visiting polygraphist rushes forward with a pun.²⁹

one more wordplay around Sokolov's last name. See also O. Dark, “Mif o proze,” *Druzhba narodov*, n. 5–6 (1992): 225.

24 S. Sokolov, *Mezhdub sobakoi i volkom*, 246. Boguslawski translates it as “Pozhilykh's Sunday.” S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 117. It should be noted that such a last name may have been chosen in order to draw a parallel with Pasternak's character of Zhivago, whose roots derive from the adjective *zhivoi*, alive. The idea is suggested also by Ostanin, *Slovar'*, 10.

25 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 225, 227.

26 S. Sokolov, *Mezhdub sobakoi i volkom*, 437.

27 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 73. S. Sokolov, *Mezhdub sobakoi i volkom*, 164.

28 S. Sokolov, *Mezhdub sobakoi i volkom*, 200. S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 96. There are plenty of examples of this kind in the novel. To mention just one, we find it in “Note XXXII – Eclogue:” “Бездомной считалась, однако / казалась довольно жирна. / Но это меня не касалось: / казалась, считалась – все вздор, / мне главное – чтоб не кусалась.” S. Sokolov, *Mezhdub sobakoi i volkom*, 412. Boguslawski's translations reads: “'Twas considered homeless, however, / rather fat it appeared to be. / But I was not in the least troubled. / 'Cause what counts? That the dog doesn't bite. / While 'appeared,' 'considered' are babble.” S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 210–211.

29 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 66–67. In the original the pun is construed around the terms “птичий глаз” and “писчий спазм.” S. Sokolov, *Mezhdub sobakoi i volkom*, 149.

Among concretized phraseologisms are those implying the notion of death, a central theme in Sokolov's oeuvre.³⁰ As if to exorcise it, as if to disavow it as incompatible with the characters' very personal idea of a-chronological, non-linear, circular and modifiable time, death is always spoken of in a metaphorical key. Its appearance is estranged in the text, recalling Shklovsky's theory of *ostranenie*. Death is referred to through periphrases or epithets (in particular, *ta dama*, that dame³¹) and it is not, and can never be, described as a definitive stage. *To die* in the novel is to "skate to [one's] maker" (отбросить коньки), "lose a client" (клиента утратить), "vanish somewhere" (отправиться вдалё), "go thru [one's] transfiguration" (выйти преображение),³² and these all metaphors find their apt realization in the narrative, thus questioning their very nature as tropes.

In a similar manner the flow of the narrative questions the nature of proper names (always interchangeable in the novel³³), pronouns (moving fluidly from the third- to the first-person narrator³⁴), and also toponyms, all carrying speaking names – a common feature in Russian literature that in this novel is taken to its extreme: the toponyms Gorodnishche, Malokulebyakovo, Vyshelbaushi, and Lugovaia Subbota not only imply a literal reading by the reader, but their meaning is plainly turned into a topic of conversation and of questioning repeatedly in the book. The first one is definitively explained in the already-mentioned "Note XVIII" as "the town of [...] beggars," "в Городнище, в город нищих."³⁵ The second toponym remains unclear even after examination:

30 See also D.B. Johnson, "Sasha Sokolov's Twilight Cosmos: Themes and Motifs," *Slavic Review* 45 (1986): 639–649. In this particular novel, "Note XXXI – Epitaphs of the Bydogoshchi Cemetery" represents a core nucleus in this sense, condensing in a few stanzas many reflections and stylistic variations on the theme. Sokolov could also have Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* in mind when composing it.

31 This figure is not devoid of allusions to Aleksandr Blok's *prekrasnaia dama*.

32 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 2, 3, 4, 8. S. Sokolov, *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom*, 19, 24, 32.

33 For instance, in the very first pages of the novel we read: "And in Ploski among more or less runners one can find the youngster Nikolay who never had his own name or, precisely, had, but too long ago." Or else: "But ain't clickin, somebody suddenly said, ain't smartin over there, in Ploski, that Fyodor, on the abacus of his? That is, not necessarily Fyodor but sorta Pyotr. And, in general – Yegor." S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 8, 10.

34 In recounting the episode of the fight with the wolf (which later turns out to be a dog) on the frozen river, Ilya alternates the two pronouns, always meaning himself, depending on the perspective from which the action is depicted: "The adversary initially showed obstinacy, just kept spinnin around like on a stake, yelpin, but subsequently could not take it – and darted. He overturned Ilya, but as long as the collar held, I was thwartin the flight, and our twosome rolled, completely wild, dappled white, like devils in the mill." S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 163.

35 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 96. S. Sokolov, *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom*, 200.

What village is this? – says nothing, only keeps sucking a lollipop on a stick and, as if nothing happened, turns into ice your visiting soul with the stare practiced around Izhory. For a musical ear, our name reverberates with the entire symphony; after all, one can also discover it in the voice of the miller himself who, having heard the above-mentioned conversation, hurries to provide assistance [...]. But the miller himself also seems to have stuffed his mouth with something – most likely with some millstones, because the grains of his words are pouring on the traveler with the flour of noise. And it does not help that in a moment the hallowed name will flash in the fog: To determine clearly – is it Malokulebyakovo or Mylokulelemovo – there is not enough perspicacity.³⁶

“Note xx1” is entirely devoted to the village of Vyshelbaushi, rendered in English by Boguslawski as Overbrowears, whose name derives from the expression “выше лба уши не растут” (ears do not grow higher than one’s forehead), meaning that everyone has a limit to what they can do. The expression is indeed recalled in the verses: “‘Can there be Overbrowears?’ they inquired. / I responded: ‘It’s a farm, a tiny place.’ // [...] That over brow ears can’t happen, ever, / while Overbrowears farm can, as a rule.”³⁷ Finally, Lugovaia Subbota, or Meadow Saturday, is presented by Ilya as “an unforgettable land” – Saussure’s notion of the arbitrariness of the sign is thus profoundly undermined:

Just imagine, Fomich, the Meadow Saturday. That is, not only Saturday but in addition framed by meadows, perhaps even water ones. And streams of concertina are splashin over them. And the weekenders, in ironed clothes, and even with canes, keep strollin, beamin about somethin appropriate. Everythin is calm, no mug-thrashin, only the coachmen swear at water carriers, but even that with yawns. And if they decide to sit for a while in the shadow with company – retire, gentlemen, into the bushes, to special stands, and relax to your health. I pictured for myself this bliss, so unlike our places, and I make a commitment: Whatever happens, regardless of

36 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 119. In Russian the two possible toponyms are spelled differently: Malo-li-to-kulebiakovo and Mylo-li-kuleliomovo (S. Sokolov, *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom*, 251).

37 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 139–140. This is the original text: “Был спрошен: Вышелбауши бывают? / Ответствовал: то хутор в три двора. // [...] Что выше лба ушей не может статься, / А хутор Вышелбауши – то так.” S. Sokolov, *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom*, 291.

any scrapes or anything else – to pay Meadow Saturday a visit in the future existence. And I tied a knot. On my necktie.³⁸

The entire novel thus presents itself as a tireless manual of metalinguistic labor, rolled forward through series of digressions in a manner somehow metatextually depicted in “Note xxiv – Between the Dog:” a warden, while stitching a rip, “by willows that weep / let[s] his needle drop;” trying to search it out, he finds instead “some kind of ball,” beginning thus to play with it and his companions, and continuing on till a foggy dusk occurs, literally at the hour “between the dog and wolf.”³⁹ So the novel is construed by the unendingly weaving of words and images used as threads in order to compose ever new textual scenarios.⁴⁰

The alphabet naturally links words and images, and it is thus not left unattended in the novel, but it is used as a creative engine to make the “barrel” roll. The topic is first introduced in the second chapter where we are presented with a scene that is composing itself just while we read (a set of infinite verbs suggests how to gradually paint it in our heads). The excerpt deals in particular with the close pronunciation of certain unaccented vowels in Russian, which often gives rise to misspelling – *я, е, ъ*:

Метель, о ком многие думали еще через я, тогда как особым указом его давно передали Зайцу, на кого и безухое оно столь походило, а несвойственное и ненужное Зайцу е передали метели, – она расходилась, разыгрывалась, делалась неугомонной и неумолимой.

(literally: the *metel'* [blizzard], thought by many as written as *miatel'*, although a special decree long ago decided to hand that vowel over to the *Zaiats* [hare], on whom, even if unaccented, it suited well, and although that decree decided also to hand the Hare's unreasonable and unnecessary vowel *e* to the *metel'*, – this very blizzard dispersed, played out, became restless and inexorable.)⁴¹

38 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 193.

39 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 144–145.

40 In this sense it recalls Penelope's weaving trick in Homer's *Odyssey*. Alternatively or at the same time, we can also think of *A Thousand and One Nights*'s frame story.

41 S. Sokolov, *Mezhdú sobakoi i volkom*, 60. Boguslawski's translation plays on the closeness of the terms *blizzard* and *lizard*: “The blizzard, still confused by many with the lizard, which, even with a ‘b’ it so resembled, although a special decree not only had determined long before their differences, but also assigned the not appropriate and not needed by the lizard ‘z’ to the blizzard – the blizzard kept gathering speed, kept acting out, becoming relentless and merciless.” S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 18.

However, the most important role played by a grapheme in the novel comes further below in the narrative, when the origin of the Cyrillic letter *zhe* (ж) is questioned, having been elicited by the request for yeast, in Russian дрожжи (spelled alternatively in the book as дрозжи). In this case, Ilya – literally appearing as a “prophet” (*prorok*) – solves the matter, again linking figures of speech and their concrete realization, word and image:

Well, perhaps it will be possible to reciprocally extract the hooch-brewin yeast from someone, but where can one get the letter *zhe*; it has stumped us, enlighteners. With the letter *ge*, shares Pyotr, we came up without a problem; it resembles the gallows, it does, ‘cuz on the gallows you can pronounce only that letter: *ge*, *ge*, and *ge*. The letter *de* is like a dacha, *be* almost like *ve*, and *ve* almost like *be*, but *zhe* – that one’s mysterious. At that moment, worn out by everyday hardships and by lashin incessant downpours, I also report to the crashbaret in person – a prophet who stole from Christians two hours of light in the month of July – I drop in to celebrate the conclusion of my unsuccessful to the hilt and to the core business. [...] ‘Cuz, when it turned light, I discovered that my grindin stand suffered durin the fall more than we did. The main wheel had cracked in many places [...]. And the crosspiece fell precisely between them, between the two rim fragments, while they were lyin sorta resemblin two thin crescents, with backs to each other and with faces – here and there: one young, the other Krylobyl, on the wane. [...] Well, said Krylobyl, sniffin his sleeve as a chaser, what kind of sound can be heard at the Wolf River, when one of our grinders starts workin on his grindin stand, ain’t it *zhe-zhe-zhe*? Exactly. [...] The wheel from the grindin stand, which is lyin in the dust of this sickle turned upside down, ain’t it sorta-kinda the sought letter?⁴²

Anything then in this novel is as much as it appears to be, but it can also appear alternatively, depending on the light, the perspective, the personal state of mind. In this sense, the concretization of tropes, words, images, letters, of the *zvukosmysl* notion in general is far from a virtuosic and elaborate linguistic exercise, but it serves a much deeper and grounded reflection on the subjective perception advanced by Sokolov in all his oeuvre. Indeed, the entire book plays on an ‘alcoholic atmosphere:’ not only drinking is mentioned repeatedly, but the result of it, that is to say, a certain shade of alcoholic numbness, or

42 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 44–46.

blurred vision and understanding is perpetuated in the narration. As claimed in “Note xxvii – Not the Firebird’s:” “ergo – в дупель, ergo – sum,”⁴³ where the expression *v dupel’* is to be interpreted as ‘heavily drunk.’⁴⁴ Cartesian epistemology gets its due distortion in this novel; the Itil’ world has its rules: “Everything around is drunkenness, everyone comes drunk and leaves drunk, and the river just flows and flows, and she don’t give a hoot about nothin,”⁴⁵ – or else: “drinking and hunting bring joy nowhere else but in Rus,”⁴⁶ – or metaphorically: “Wolf lived on one Volga shore, / Hound – the other roamed. / Couldn’t reach it as before / so he drank and groaned.”⁴⁷

In such a drunk atmosphere, not only the narrative staggers, due to the blurred vision of its narrators, but the reader, too, wavers in following the flows of the voices weaving together the narrative texture. These voices are not simply Ilya’s and Yakov’s (and his alternative personalities, including the Binging Hunter’s), but Maria-Orina also shows up, accompanied for instance by a nineteenth-century porter, or even a certain Carus Sterne with his natural history book *Werden und Vergehen*. Thus, we are presented with Maria’s notebook, containing “sufferings in the Russian language.”⁴⁸ Orina will take the floor and open chapter 10 describing her life “in the barracks,”⁴⁹ being “known as a walker and turned into a typical strumpet.”⁵⁰ Elsewhere, “God only knows how long their confusion would have lasted if the porter Avdey, a sleepy peasant with a pitch-black beard reaching up to his dull and birdlike tiny eyes and with a similarly dull metal badge, did not come to say to the master that they should not be angry – the samovar completely broke” (and, of course, instead of a tea then, he suggests that they sip some “fresh beer”).⁵¹

However, “Note xxvi – Postal Chores in the Month of May” offers a peculiar key to understanding the entire novel’s structure and the nature of its narrating voice(s): in it the “Binging Hunter” retells a meeting with the mail carrier Sila Silych, during which – after an invitation to taste his newly-brewed “nectar,” partaken by the postman “without postponement,” as “today we’re alive, and who knows what will happen tomorrow” – they decide to “read at random

43 S. Sokolov, *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom*, 312. Boguslawski translates the line as: “Ergo – pickled, hence – I am.” S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 157.

44 Such is Boris Ostanin’s suggestion in his *Glossary* (“сильно пьян”). B. Ostanin, *Slovar’*, 84.

45 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 199.

46 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 213.

47 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 215.

48 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 21.

49 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 121.

50 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 126.

51 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 67.

some of the messages,” since “it’s an unheard thing not to read someone’s epistles.” It is then curious to find out that among these letters there is everything we encountered in the narrative: “For instance, Pavel from Gorodnishche writes to Pyotr in Bydogoshch, / begs his uncle to purchase the yeast for hooch-brewing, / he implores him to find without fail some alphabet letter.” But, in particular, the two stumble upon Ilya’s letter to Pozhilykh, in which – as we might expect now – “he complains – during a snowstorm someone lifted his crutches, / the wardens of Shallow Reach, he claims, absconded with them.”⁵² So, what we can assume from “Note xxvi” is that the entire novel may be but a reconstruction or recollection of different voices and stories sketched down by the “Binging Hunter” only (or rather by Yakov, to the extent we can assume he *is* the author of the *Notes* – and such a first name, so close to the Russian word *iakoby*, makes him literally only ‘allegedly’ a hunter, a wannabe poet/artist, or, more generally speaking, a round and authentic character).

Be that as it may, *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom* disrupts – as do all Sasha Sokolov’s texts – the idea of the monolithic character, hero and/or narrator, putting forward a concrete example of the natural plurality of voices encountered in any human ‘identity.’⁵³ Such multiplicity – be it reproduced by the “Binging Hunter” only, or not – recreates a gallery of different conversations, both dialogic and monologic, as if randomly heard, collected, and exhibited as a continuum that holds together through a series of more or less clear associations. A similar creative process was later described by Sasha Sokolov himself in his essay “An Abstract:” “from time to time I catch [...] some conversations, essentially, conversing voices, and on the basis of their motifs, that is, the motifs of these conversations, I create sketches.”⁵⁴

Thus, the novel is construed on themes and variations (to quote Pasternak’s cycle of poems), echoes that purposely confound and distract any linear reading and search for a ‘traditional’ *siuzhet*. Coming back to Ilya’s definition of his own speech as some sort of “Volapuke,” we shall now agree on its being ‘constructed,’ yet like any constructed language it is based on at least one living, spoken idiom. In weaving their own speech, the ‘narrator(s)’ in this novel conduct an impressive experiment, demonstrating the vital inter-

52 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 151–154.

53 Voices or ‘masks:’ “To draw the heavy, nebulous, slovenly face of Maria and frequently, instead of the expected portrait, may the inexperienced draftsman create the image of her mask.” Yet sometimes, these images are “extraordinarily similar to the original.” S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 19, 24.

54 S. Sokolov, “An Abstract,” in *In the House of the Hanged: Essays and Vers Libres*, trans. Alexander Boguslawski (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012): 73.

connection of the different layers and strata of the Russian language – from tropes to euphemisms, from almost dialectal vocabulary to specific terminology, from simple graphemes to a creative use of prefixes and assonant syntagms. Such devoted praise of the creative power of language, not devoid of Turgenevian subtexts (evident in particular in “Note xxxii,” “I salute you, my native tongue”⁵⁵), is elsewhere expanded on so as to comprise Russia and the Volga river, too – yet often with slightly parodic tones.⁵⁶

As if by rule, in language as in life everything is wrapped up, since “for no reason, in the world practically nothing can happen.”⁵⁷ It is all so interwoven that it is hard to distinguish the different threads, yet they are somehow visible, even if blurred, just as it happens at twilight: “You, I suppose, are already acquainted with each other or, more precisely, with this wonderful time of the day and are irrevocably enchanted by it, like I am, and thus reveal remarkable taste, exceptional feel for the color, and an inclination for melancholic contemplation.”⁵⁸ The twilight – defined by D.B. Johnson as “perhaps the key theme in Sokolov’s vision of the world”⁵⁹ – represents indeed the tool par excellence employed by the estranged gaze of the artist, also in concocting his own language.

Mezhdú sobakoi i volkom has its origins in a creative reflection on the role and nature of the narrating voice. Searching for such voice, the author has constructed a language, defined by one of the heroes as “Volapuke.” This language apparently looks “mysterious” and inaccessible, yet given a closer examination, it reveals its complex texture of interwoven threads: as any constructed language, its origins are to be found in a spoken, lively idiom. A basic rule in this particular “Volapuke” derives from the chance allowed to any trope, word, expression, and even grapheme to transfigure into its direct, objectified meaning. The novel is thus built upon the unending weaving of linguistic threads that meet their realized metaphor. As for the voices weaving it all together, there are

55 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 211. In the original the implied adjective ‘Russian’ is made explicit: “Поклон тебе, русский язык.” S. Sokolov, *Mezhdú sobakoi i volkom*, 413.

56 For instance: “My buddy, this is the Wolf River, your kin. You tell her: Halloo, my sister, I’m in distress, quench my thirst with your current, feed the tramp with your mussels, gimme as many of them as you can, I enjoy their taste;” “It is wonderful outside – our native land. Kinda mother, but strikingly sly, deceitful. [...] there’s everythin in it, except *valenki*;” “Mother Russia is huge, playful, and she barks like a she-wolf in the fog, and we, like flies, hop on the top of her, and she bites us out one after another as we hop.” S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 16, 52, 53, 71.

57 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 151.

58 S. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 22.

59 D.B. Johnson, “Sasha Sokolov: A Literary Biography,” *CAS* 21, n. 3–4 (1987): 208.

many (Yakov, Ilya, Orina-Maria, and other background actors), and at the same time they are all summed up in one: the novel can thus be interpreted as a recollection of voices and stories written down by the “Binging Hunter,” the author of the *Notes*.