

Introduction

Talking “Round and Round with Both, the Wolf and the Hound”

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God be with it, I am thinkin,
let the hidden water in the clouds thunder,
perhaps it'll pass by.

SASHA SOKOLOV, *Between Dog and Wolf*

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In a certain way, the confluence of events that led to this special issue devoted to Sasha Sokolov's *Between Dog and Wolf* (*Между собакой и волком*, 1980) represents a particularly Sokolovian blend of contrasts. On the one hand, when we learned of the tragic loss of Donald Barton Johnson, the leading specialist in Sokolov studies (among other topics!), we hoped to honor his legacy by continuing to explore the work of an author whose novels would remain much less clear to so many readers if it were not for his pioneering analyses and for his collaborations with Sokolov himself. On the other hand, we also hoped to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the novel's release by Ardis Publishing. Although its complex mix of styles and language bewildered many initial readers, it wasn't long before *Between Dog and Wolf* achieved its own curious status as a classic *and* cult work.

CASS has a long history of bringing greater understanding to Sokolov's art. The special issues published in honor of Sokolov on the tenth and thirtieth

anniversaries of *A School for Fools* in 1987 and 2006 brought together scholars who made sense of not just his first two novels, but of *Palisandriia* (1985) as well. We felt that this moment would also be an opportune time to gather Sokolov specialists and have them dive into *Between Dog and Wolf* to make it more accessible and showcase the book and its significance (and that of its recent English translation, 2017) as a whole through targeted analysis. The ultimate scope of the issue became wider than we even imagined.

Olga Matich, for instance, examines in her article the intersections of various kinds of “inbetweenness,” or intermediacy, in Sokolov’s novel (the shifting spaces between life and death, reality and representation, parody and intertextuality), while Elena Kravchenko explores the novel from a Lacanian perspective to make sense of its “gaps” and the linguistic play that arises from them. Rather than focus on what happens between the words, Martina Napolitano analyzes Sokolov’s “volapuke” – his version of a constructed language in which all words, tropes, and even graphemes may be transfigured and objectified literally. Mariya Donska, for her part, deploys metareference theory to consider the metalingual aspects of *Between Dog and Wolf*, particularly its realized metaphors and paronomasia. Along similar lines, Noemi Albanese’s contribution reveals new aspects of the “metricalization” of the prose sections in the novel. Taking a broader approach, Alexey Salomatin and Artem Skvortsov demonstrate how *Between Dog and Wolf*, not *A School for Fools*, is in fact Sokolov’s most “representative” text; that is, it is in his second novel that he developed the narrative techniques and devices so central to his later works, *Palisandriia* and *Triptych*. José Vergara, similarly drawing attention to a key motif shared by Sokolov’s novels, peels back the mythological and folkloric layers of the bird imagery in *Between Dog and Wolf*. Zlata Kocić, who has recently translated the novel into Serbian, proposes a series of lessons concerning the novel’s semantic structures in order to underscore how the text’s various component parts build upon one another. Finally, Mario Caramitti explores and discusses the notion of *skaz*, arguing that Ilya’s narrative plane, although comprising elements of *skaz*, should be interpreted as a metaprojection framing these sections of the novel.

Our goal here, of course, is not to provide the final word on Sokolov’s brilliant second novel. Much remains to be excavated. Rather, we wish to encourage further exploration of *Between Dog and Wolf* and to provide new entry points for both experienced and novice readers, particularly those encountering the text in its new English translation. Indeed, Alexander Boguslawski’s inventive translation, which follows his Polish rendition, has made the world of Ilya Zynzyrela and Yakov Palamakhterov accessible to a wider audience, as we can now introduce *Between Dog and Wolf* to new generations of students who may or may not

know the original Russian. While recognizing that the English version of the novel is not isomorphic with the original, given that the translator in consultation with Sokolov himself had to make certain adjustments to the text, we have nonetheless opted to use Boguslawski's translation in the English-language articles presented in this issue for ease of reading.

Although it would be an intriguing exercise to have each of our contributors offer their take on the novel's events, we have chosen to provide a plot synopsis here to simplify matters and to allow each author to focus on their selected topic more fully. Summarizing a book whose narrators constantly change their stories, offering contradictory accounts of events and questioning their own versions of the tales in which they were participants, is not easy. Here, we provide the essentials.

The events of Sokolov's novel take place on the Upper Volga, which is also called the Itil' River (its Tatar name) by his heroes. There, the reader encounters a group of men who spend their time hunting, ice skating, drinking, talking, and otherwise killing time however they can. The book is divided into three narrative planes. The first is narrated by the knife-grinder Ilya Petrikeich Zynzyrela, who is missing one leg. His chapters (1, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 17) consist of a letter of complaint that recounts how – the reader only learns gradually – he was murdered by the whipper-in Yakov Ilyich Palamakhterov after a sequence of events beginning with Ilya attacking one of Yakov's dogs after mistaking it for a wolf. His epistle to Pozhilykh also contains numerous other stories and tangents on such subjects as Ilya's relationship with the love of his life, Orina (also known as Maria); the mysterious *dama* who visits the hunters, tempts them, and, somehow, leads them to their suicides; his interactions with the other men around him in this cruel, strange space; and his stay in a hospital after the loss of his leg (the details of which accident are explained in several ways).

Another set of chapters (2, 5, 9, 13, 16) tells the story of Yakov. If Ilya's chapters are told in the first person (stylizing the epistolary genre) and in a strikingly colloquial style, then Yakov's read much differently. Here, the third-person narrator makes use of plentiful infinitive constructions, passages that mimic the classics of Russian literature (Gogol's works most evidently), and other rhetorical devices to paint a portrait of a character who is the polar opposite of Ilya, but who may be his son, depending on whose story you believe. Many of these chapters (some of which are titled "Pictures from an Exhibition," an intertextual reference to Mussorgsky's piano suite) are stylized ekphrastic descriptions of paintings, and in this sense, they consist of a stroll through a museum space, as the narrator reproduces in writing various works of art, including Bruegel the Elder's *Hunters in the Snow* – a key motif in Sokolov's novel.

Finally, chapters 3, 7, 11, 15, and 18 are made up of 37 numbered poems (called “Notes,” *Zapiski*) ostensibly penned by Yakov and sent down river as messages in a bottle. As in the Yakov-related chapters, many of these poems are highly stylized, often parodying or otherwise resembling works from the nineteenth century. At times, they recount events seen in the prose chapters, but many trade in the folkloric or describe the natural world around the heroes of the novel.

Between all three narrative planes, the reader encounters countless minor and episodic characters, each of whom enters the flow of the narrative with their own personal idiolect that creatively manipulates the rules of the Russian language, opening up to neologisms, loan words, phraseologisms with or without variation. The very title of the novel stems from an idiom (a calque from French and originally a Latin expression), immortalized in Russian culture by Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*: the expression “between the dog and the wolf” indicates the time of day when our vision is blurred by the coming twilight (*sumerki* in Russian), which represents more than a recurring motif in Sokolov’s oeuvre, as it is its structural and symbolic chronotope. What Sokolov invites the reader to do is to dive into his “Twilight Cosmos” (D.B. Johnson’s appropriate definition¹) and notice through this defamiliarizing glass how things are always more fluid, multivalent and available for plural interpretation than they may initially seem.

However, any synopsis of *Between Dog and Wolf* is bound to be incomplete or, at the very least, to give a false impression of the novel. Like the river that runs through the middle of its setting, Sokolov’s *Between Dog and Wolf* is constantly in motion, and in this way, everything that happens in the book is happening at once – or perhaps recurring. Much as Sokolov demolishes traditional notions of character through multiple spellings of names and identities that fluctuate constantly, so too does he disrupt the reader’s traditional sense of linear time, proposing rather a cyclical, or spiraling, sequence of events. It is a chaotic, bewildering, and yet beautiful rendition of a world rarely seen in literature.

We would like to sincerely thank our contributors for their willingness to explore *Between Dog and Wolf* with us and for offering these exciting new readings of the novel. They represent a truly international coalition of *Sokoloveds*, writing from Austria, Italy, Russia, Serbia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. We are also very grateful to our reviewers for their time, generosity,

1 D. Barton Johnson, “Sasha Sokolov’s Twilight Cosmos: Themes and Motifs,” *Slavic Review* 45, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 639–649.

and extremely valuable feedback, as well as to Kira (Carol B.) Stevens for her unmatched editorial assistance throughout the process of putting together this special issue of *CASS*. We are glad to include a photo essay featuring pictures of Sasha Sokolov and D.B. Johnson provided by Sheila Golburgh Johnson, Aaron Moody, Olga Matich and Samuele Pellecchia, and the *ELKOST* Agency. Finally, our special thanks go to writer Evgeny Popov, who from Moscow has contributed a passionate short essay on the oeuvre of his colleague, and to Sasha Sokolov himself, who has not only enthusiastically supported our work, but also enriched it with his new “proem,” a personal reply to Johnson’s stimulating article “The Galoshes Manifesto” (1989). Of course, responsibility for any errors or omissions that remain is ours.

All that is now left to do is to plunge, whether for the first time or anew, into the intoxicating world of Sokolov’s novel. We leave you with the author’s own words of encouragement: “Courage, sayeth he, I’m in possession of good news.”²

² Sasha Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, translated by Alexander Boguslawski (New York: Columbia UP, 2017), 227.