

# Meeting the *Duende*: Sasha Sokolov reads Federico García Lorca

Martina Napolitano

◇ eSamizdat 2020 (XIII), pp. 251-258 ◇

## I. A 'SPANISH TEXT(URE)' OF RUSSIAN CULTURE?

THE reconstruction of the existence of a 'Spanish text of Russian culture' (to borrow Toporov's famous term<sup>1</sup>) requires a scholar to look back first to the tradition of translations and rewritings of Spanish texts in the Russian-speaking world and to trace, on the basis of the result, the fortune and success specific traits have acquired throughout the centuries; then, it would be necessary to argue whether in the end Russian culture autonomously managed to develop a particular 'Spanish colour' in its production, depicting its own image of the Spanish world – an image that would work as a fertile construction and narrative device. In such a work of analysis, however, one should keep in mind that, similarly to other 'national colours' that found fruitful soil in Russian culture, the Spanish one may have not in the end developed into a specific 'Spanish text', which indeed appears to be the case. Undoubtedly, Spain has entered Russian culture, leaving traces – be they a specific narrative setting, characters, or rather a reminiscence or direct allusion – in both successful and secondary works of art. However, it failed to transform into a whole set of texts that would make up a 'Spanish text'. If not of a 'text', anyway, we could speak of a specific Spanish 'texture' present in Russian culture since, at least, the 19th century. As Robert Stacy has observed, Spain "has always had [an] international appeal and has always served other European writers and artists as a source, almost like the Orient, of romantic and

exotic themes"<sup>2</sup>. As far as Russian culture is concerned, the above suitably applies.

Kirill Korkonosenko has recently and definitively reconstructed the history of Spanish translations in Russia, pointing out that until the beginning of the 19th century knowledge of Spanish was practically non-existent in the Tsarist Empire<sup>3</sup>: this is why the circulating translations of Cervantes, Lope de Vega or Calderón de la Barca derived mainly from their French or German versions. However, the interest in Russia towards Spanish literature can be defined as quite deep, given that prominent writers such as Karamzin and Zhukovskii, followed even by Empress Catherine II, authored a few translations<sup>4</sup>.

As Vsevolod Bagno states,

The first wave of intense attention devoted by Russian society to Spain has to be linked to the Patriotic War of 1812, which to the Russians vividly recalled Spain's battle against Napoleon. The second wave of interest towards Spanish affairs, more specifically the Spanish Revolution of 1820, spread in Russia among future Decembrists and in circles sympathetic to them<sup>5</sup>.

In the second half of the 19th century, Russian culture experienced a new passion for contempo-

---

<sup>1</sup> V. Toporov, *Peterburgskii tekst russkoi literatury*, Sankt-Peterburg 2003.

---

<sup>2</sup> R. Stacy, *Russia and Spain*, "Syracuse Scholar", 1981, II, (2), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> K. Korkonosenko, *Ispanskaia literatura v russkikh perevodakh i kritike*, Sankt-Peterburg 2019, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> The first translation of *Don Quixote*, for example, appeared in 1769, and it was based on a French version. However, the most successful Russian translation of Cervantes's text was the extremely free translation by Zhukovskii, published in 1804–1806. Cervantes's masterpiece has always held a special spot in Russian culture, being fundamental both for theorists such as the Formalists and Mikhail Bakhtin, and for writers such as Lev Tolstoi, who in his *What is Art* (1897) mentioned Cervantes's *Don Quixote* among the pieces of authentic universal art. Mass culture as well has been affected by Cervantes's fortune, as Kozintsev's successful movie (1957) demonstrated internationally.

<sup>5</sup> V. Bagno, *Ispanskaia literatura*, in *Pushkin. Issledovaniia i materialy*, XVIII-XIX, ed. by V. Rak, Sankt-Peterburg, 2004, p. 149.

rary Spanish authors, such as José de Espronceda, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, later on Vicente Blasco Ibáñez (the most widely published Spanish author in Russia between 1900 and 1920<sup>6</sup>); in addition to these new translations (seldom authored by professional translators and hispanists, for example Maria Vatson), the Russian-speaking public could have access to updated travelogues, such as the *Ocherki Ispanii* [Spanish Sketches, 1888] and *Ocherki Andaluzii* [Andalusian Sketches, 1902] by Nemirov-Danchenko. Many prominent Russian authors, artists and composers of the time, among which Ostrovskii, Bal'mont, Glinka, Rimskii-Korsakov, became affected by an interest in the Spanish colour.

After the October revolution, despite the efforts of Gorkii's editorial projects at Vsemirnaia literatura and Academia, and especially during the 1920s, as in Spain power passed into the hands of right formations (Primo de Rivera's dictatorship, 1923-1930), the USSR published less and less translations of Spanish literature<sup>7</sup>; the very profession of translator became risky and possibly fatal.

Only during the Spanish Civil War new materials had the chance to appear, especially linked to the assassination of Federico García Lorca, who was interpreted mainly as a civil poet, as a symbol of antifascism, as Olga Musaeva has recently investigated in her PhD dissertation<sup>8</sup>. In the 1930s-1940s García Lorca's ideas and poetics in the Soviet press were depicted as something close and comparable to Soviet 'revolutionary' literature; this is why the stress was put rather on his realism than on the avant-garde features of his production. Although limited and partial, knowledge of Lorca's oeuvre was thus popular in the USSR.

The situation changed in part during the Thaw, as a new wave of interest in the Spanish Civil War, and consequently in Lorca's figure, appeared, as Nikolai Aseev, *Pesn' o Garsia Lorke* [A Song about García Lorca, 1957] demonstrates. If after 1944 no texts by Lorca were published in the USSR, his poetry

and theatrical pieces started to appear again in new translations at the end of the 1950s<sup>9</sup>. Lev Ospovat's biography of the Spanish poet in 1965 underlined the new Soviet passion for Lorca, accompanied by a shift of paradigm in his reception: as Musaeva maintains, Lorca was no longer presented as a victim of fascism, or as a Communist sympathiser, but as a politically unengaged poet, a victim of a more generic regime. It is in this cultural context that Federico García Lorca became a fundamental author for Russian readers and especially for the *intelligentsia*, both at official and underground level. And it is in this cultural context that contemporary Russian author Sasha Sokolov first became acquainted with (and fascinated by) the Spanish poet. Later on, in the first decade of the 2000s, this fascination evolved into a very homage by Sokolov to Lorca, to which we shall now draw our attention.

## II. SOKOLOV'S *Duende* (2006)

Russian émigré writer Sasha Sokolov, author of the successful novel *A School for Fools* (1976), in 2006 published in the Israeli magazine "Zerkalo" a short 'graphic' composition, entitled *Duende*. It came after a long silence of the author, who, besides a brief speech delivered in Moscow in 1996 when he was conferred the prestigious Pushkin Prize<sup>10</sup> and apart from a series of short 'proetic'<sup>11</sup> essays<sup>12</sup>, had not published a thing since 1985: after the publication of his third and last novel, *Palisandriia*<sup>13</sup>,

<sup>6</sup> K. Korkonosenko, *Ispanskaia literatura*, op. cit., p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Many translations by Bal'mont were left unpublished, for example. Cf. K. Korkonosenko, *Ispanskaia literatura*, op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> O. Musaeva, *Retseptsiiia tvorchestva Federiko Garsia Lorki v russkoi kul'ture (1930-1960-e gg.)*, Tartu 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Musaeva underlines that at first Lorca's translators opted for a Russification of the Spanish texts, while later on they more often preserved features of exoticism in the Russian versions. Ivi, p. 147.

<sup>10</sup> S. Sokolov, *Konspekt*, in Idem, *Sobranie sochinenii v 2 t.*, II, Sankt-Peterburg 1999, pp. 424-427.

<sup>11</sup> At least since 1989, Sasha Sokolov maintains that his writing genre should be considered that of 'proeziia', and he defines himself as a 'proet'. See I. Podshivalov, *Trilistnik*, "Moskovskii komsomolets", 20.08.1989, p. 2: "More than once I said that I am not interested in genres, but rather in the nature of what I write. I do 'proeziia' and insist that this is my very invention, although I shall not be considered the first, but the last representative of such a long tradition. We can here mention Turgenev, Bunin. We had prose poetry, but still it was prose. I think of myself as a 'proet' instead".

<sup>12</sup> Sokolov's essays written in 1982-1991 were collected in 2007 by Azbuka publishing house. S. Sokolov, *Trevozhnaia kukolka. Esse*, Sankt-Peterburg 2007.

<sup>13</sup> The novel is known to the English readership as *Astrophobia*. S. Sokolov, *Palisandriia*, Ann Arbor 1985; Idem, *Astrophobia*, trans.

Sokolov interrupted his publications, as if uncomfortably stunned by the new environment in Russian letters that arose after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As he stated in an interview in 2003, “I am not satisfied with this literary situation. I have the right to strike. [...] There are only a few readers for my literature”<sup>14</sup>.

However, in 2006 *Duende* failed to be successful among the public and it was not even noted by critics, who apparently could not interpret this unusual ‘fragment’ publication as an actual return of Sokolov to literature<sup>15</sup>. Conversely, in the following years “Zerkalo” published other short compositions by Sasha Sokolov<sup>16</sup>, making it therefore possible to argue that *Duende* represented a sort of first step back to publishing for the author, at least marking a radical turning point for him towards more minimalistic forms. Moreover, similarly to all his previous works, *Duende* surprises the reader with its estranging forms, confirming Sokolov’s take on literature as a never-ending process of experimentation.

*Duende*’s paratext highlights the Spanish colour of the composition – rather unusual for Sokolov<sup>17</sup> – stating its Andalusian origin, reinforced also by the inverted question mark, a typical punctuation mark in Spanish.

As confirmed by the same author<sup>18</sup>, *Duende* rep-

by M. H. Heim, New York 1989.

<sup>14</sup> N. Vaiman, *Poverkh bar’erov. Beseda s Sashei Sokolovym*, “Radio svoboda”, 18.09.2003, <<http://www.svoboda.org/a/24200193.html>> (latest access: 23.09.2020).

<sup>15</sup> The impression was further reiterated by certain critical articles that came after Sokolov published his last long composition, *Triptikh* [Tryptich]: Igor’ Gulin, for example, considers this work “the prosecution not of Sasha Sokolov’s prose, nor poetry, nor essayistic production, but rather of his silence”, I. Gulin, *Smert’iu iziashchnykh*, “Colta.ru”, 28.11.2011, <<http://os.colta.ru/literature/projects/30291/details/32247/>> (latest access: 09.06.2020).

<sup>16</sup> S. Sokolov, *O drugoi vstreche*, “Zerkalo”, 2006, 27, pp. 169-171; Idem, *Rassuzhdenie*, “Zerkalo”, 2007, 29, pp. 3-16; Idem, *Gazibo*, “Zerkalo”, 2009, 33, pp. 3-27; Idem, *Filornit*, “Zerkalo”, 2010, 35, pp. 3-24.

<sup>17</sup> The encyclopaedic knowledge that Sokolov has demonstrated in his texts of course includes Spanish references, for example to Lope de Vega or to composer Pablo de Sarasate, both mentioned in his third novel, *Palisandriia*. However, such references have not further developed a specific Spanish text of Sokolov’s oeuvre.

<sup>18</sup> “*Duende* is of course the result of my passion for Lorca and for the Spanish culture in general”. Personal communication with the author (17.12.2017).

Саша Соколов

## ДУЭНДЕ\*

памяти Энкарнасьон Лопес Хульвес  
по прозвищу Архентинита,  
танцовщицы канте фламенко

¿ А ?

Август 2005 года  
Аркос-де-ла-Фронтера  
Андалусия

\* Из цикла *Испанские Опыты*

resents in the first instance a personal homage to the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, who has always held a fascination for Sokolov. Direct or mainly oblique allusions to Lorca and his poetry are to be traced in all of Sokolov’s works. In the short lyrical essay *Kliuchevoe slovo slovesnosti*<sup>19</sup> [The Key Word of Belles-Lettres, 1985], for example, Sokolov intertwines Lorca’s name with that of Andrei Voznesenskii and his text *Liubliu Lorku* [I love Lorca, 1961]. In another essay, *Obshchaia tetrad’, ili zhe Grupповoi portret SMOGa*<sup>20</sup> [The Shared Notebook or a Group Portrait of SMOG, 1989], Lorca’s poem *Gacela de la Huida* (1936) is an uncoined source of reference: “Nobody, next to a cradle, would forget horses’ skulls”<sup>21</sup>. After the publication of *Duende* Lorca has continued to represent a model for Sokolov, being overtly mentioned in the first sec-

<sup>19</sup> S. Sokolov, *Kliuchevoe slovo slovesnosti*, “Almanac Panorama”, 20-27.12.1985, 245, pp. 30-31; Idem, *The Key Word of Belles-Lettres*, trans. by A. Boguslawski, in Idem, *In the House of the Hanged. Essays and Vers Libres*, Toronto 2012, pp. 23-29.

<sup>20</sup> Idem, *Obshchaia tetrad’, ili zhe Grupповoi portret SMOGa*, “Iunost”, 1989, 12, pp. 67-68; Idem, *The Shared Notebook or a Group Portrait of SMOG*, trans. by A. Boguslawski, in Idem, *In the House of the Hanged*, op. cit., pp. 44-51.

<sup>21</sup> Idem, *The Shared Notebook*, op. cit., p. 49. Cf. the original version: “Нет людей, чтоб возле колыбели конских черепов не вспоминали”, Idem, *Obshchaia tetrad’*, op. cit., p. 68. Such are Lorca’s last verses in the second stanza of the poem: “ni nadie que al tocar un recién nacido / olvide las inmóviles calaveras de caballo”.

tion of his last published<sup>22</sup> work *Triptikh* [Tryptich, 2011], entitled *Discourse*:

Strings of some kind, of some instrument from the plucking pack, let's suppose, of a guitar, if not a cither or a sitar, let's suppose, but only on the condition it's a nocturnal and sleepless guitar, sleepless and merciless, crying to honour evita and angelita, pepita and rio-rita, and to salute the friend of their dark-skinned, sweet-lipped, and teeth-baring youth, federico garcía, ay, of an implacable guitar, crying à la sarasate<sup>23</sup>.

It is rather common to find allusions to and direct quotations from this particular Spanish poet among the works of the Russian poetic underground of the 1960s and 1970s, as Lorca was then translated by Leningrad poet Roald Mandelstam (1932-1961). The Spanish author is, for example, also mentioned in Vladimir Aleinikov's *Ochishchaiushchii SMOG* [Purifying SMOG, 1989]<sup>24</sup>, yet another essay devoted to the story of the Moscow underground group SMOG, which appeared the same year Sokolov published his *Obshchaia tetrad'*.

Besides the role the Spanish poet played in the Soviet context, which was briefly sketched in the introduction, the influence of Lorca has also been huge and widespread in the European and American cultural contexts<sup>25</sup>, environments to which Sokolov has belonged since his emigration from Moscow in October 1975; after a short period in Vienna – a common step for many coming from Socialist countries – in 1976 the writer was invited by his publisher Carl Proffer (Ardis) to move to the United States; finally, since the 1990s Canada has become his 'new'

home (or it rather re-acquired such status)<sup>26</sup>. In any case, *Duende*, whose origin is directly and deeply linked to the figure and work of Federico García Lorca, is more than a plain homage to the Spanish poet.

### III. (MIS)UNDERSTANDING THE DUENDE?

The dedication of the fragment to the flamenco dancer Encarnación López Júlvez, better known as la Argentinita, confirms the link to Federico García Lorca, whose *Juego y teoría del duende* made of him the most famous poet and theoretician of this concept. Lorca (at the piano) and la Argentinita used to perform together; moreover, the poet even dedicated to her lover, torero Ignacio Sánchez Mejías, a famous *Llanto* after his death. The Spanish poet was particularly close to the couple, especially in New York when in 1929 he experienced a profound distaste and discomfort in relation to the American world<sup>27</sup>.

However, Sokolov describes here la Argentinita as a 'flamenco dancer', failing to mention her voice, which Lorca appreciated and highly estimated. Similarly omitted in Sokolov's *Duende* is the distinction, fundamental for Lorca, between *cante flamenco* and *cante jondo*, more 'local' the first one, more 'spiritual' the other: "Color espiritual y color local, he aquí la honda diferencia", he stated at the conference "La importancia histórica y artística del primitivo canto andaluz, llamado *cante jondo*" held in February 1922 in Granada<sup>28</sup>. Sokolov may have been indeed

<sup>22</sup> Actually, the very last work published by Sasha Sokolov was a short story, included in a special issue of "Oktiabr" in 2014: S. Sokolov, *Ozarenie*, "Oktiabr", 2014, 10, pp. 14-15. Again, this text passed almost unnoticed by both critics and the wider public.

<sup>23</sup> Idem, *Discourse*, in Idem, *In the House of the Hanged*, op. cit., p. 83. Cf. the original version: "гитары ночной и бессонной, / бессонной и беспощадной, плачущей в честь / эвиты и анхелиты, пэпиты и рио-риты, / а также во имя друга их смуглой, / их сладкогубой, их скалозубой юности / федерико гарсиа, ай, гитары неумолимой, / плачущей а ля сарасате", Idem, *Triptikh*, Moskva 2011, p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> V. Aleinikov, *Ochishchaiushchii SMOG*, "Molodoi kommunist", 1989, 8, pp. 79-89. Both Sokolov and Aleinikov were members of SMOG.

<sup>25</sup> Besides literary intertextual references and translations, Lorca's poems have also been turned into music, as in the case of Dmitrii Shostakovich's *Symphony No. 14* (1969) and Leonard Cohen's *Take This Waltz* (1986).

<sup>26</sup> Sasha Sokolov was actually born in Ottawa in 1943, as his father, a Soviet spy, worked there as attaché at the embassy. After the Gouzenko affair, a triggering event of the Cold war, the family was quickly repatriated to USSR. In December 1947 the Sokolov family settled in Moscow. Later on, when trying to leave the Soviet Union in summer 1974, Sokolov tried to request a permit to the Canadian consulate presenting his birth certificate. He was arrested and interrogated by the KGB immediately the day after, and was kept under close surveillance until, the year after, he received the official permit to leave by the Soviet authorities (thanks to international pressure, and especially to Austrian chancellor Bruno Kreisky).

<sup>27</sup> G. Caravaggi, *Invito alla lettura di García Lorca*, Milano 1980, p. 29.

<sup>28</sup> The entire speech is available online. F. García Lorca, *La importancia histórica y artística del primitivo canto andaluz, llamado cante jondo* [1922], <<https://verseando.com/blog/lorca-el-cante-jondo/>> (latest access: 08.06.2020).

fascinated by the local colour of that Andalusia *flamenca* he visited in the early 2000s. For Federico García Lorca the *cante jondo* is a rare example of a primitive vocal style, “el más viejo de toda Europa, que lleva en sus notas la desnuda y escalofriante emoción de las primeras razas orientales”<sup>29</sup>. This is the *cante* of the duende, close to the “trino del pájaro, al canto del gallo y a las músicas naturales del bosque y la fuente”<sup>30</sup>. It is “verdaderamente hondo, más que todos los pozos y todos los mares que rodean el mundo”, “es casi infinito”<sup>31</sup>. The origin of the *cante jondo* is not found in the throat, but “sube por dentro desde la planta de los pies” and “hay que despertarlo en las últimas habitaciones de la sangre”<sup>32</sup>. It starts with a terrible cry (“el grito de las generaciones muertas”<sup>33</sup>) and it is followed by a melodic phrase that resembles a “lágrima sonora sobre el río de la voz”<sup>34</sup>. However, even if Sokolov does not primarily mention the *cante jondo*, it is possible to argue he is acquainted with Lorca’s views on the duende.

The short composition envisions a single letter, an A enclosed by two question marks. It is not difficult to interpret it as that primordial cry Lorca describes at the origin of the *cante jondo*, something similar to the “primer llanto” and the “primer beso”<sup>35</sup>: it is the Aleph of sound, of human communication, and finally, of artistic creation. The art of the duende, like the *cante jondo*, has its origins in this inner motif, a sort of uncontrollable engine that suddenly bursts out taking over the artist. It is not a matter of mastery, nor angelic inspiration; the muse is a complete stranger in this type of creation. The duende, in Spanish folklore identified as an elf, is possibly its complete opposite, bearing a sense of rather diabolic, ‘demoniac’ irrationality<sup>36</sup>. It is a creative little

death, a renovating abrupt devastation, and in this sense both Lorca and Sokolov share a common sensibility, as they designate a particular spot to death in their works<sup>37</sup>. It seems then more than coherent that Lorca’s verses from poem *Gacela de la Huida*, as above mentioned, alluded to in Sokolov’s lyrical essay *Obshchaia tetrad’*, properly link the image of a newborn to that of horses’ skulls; according to both poets, creation and death live an eternal circle that disrupts the conventional linearity of time.

When overwhelmed by the uncontrollable power of the duende, the poet cannot resist its domain and break free from its chains. In yet another short essay, *Trevozhnaia kukolka* [The Anxious Pupa, 1986]<sup>38</sup>, Sokolov described such an experience, depicting a god-like figure under which the poet succumbs:

Look how I am wrapped up, enupated. [...] That is, not you, but they, the others, joked. And you, when you understood the whole ugliness of what had happened, did not feel like laughing at all. On the contrary, entrapped by the dialect given to you a priori, you sank into a chronic despair. [...] In the meantime, his mask falls off. He has the strong-willed face of a usurper, the gloomy and grey eyes of a basilisk, and the unsmiling mouth of an executioner. His tongue quivers and is divided in two, like the

<sup>37</sup> See G. Caravaggi, *Invito*, op. cit.; D. B. Johnson, *Sasha Sokolov’s Twilight Cosmos: Themes and Motifs*, “Slavic Review”, 1986, 45, pp. 639-649; A. Boguslawski, *Death in the Works of Sasha Sokolov*, “Canadian-American Slavic Studies”, 1987, (XXI), 3-4, pp. 231-246. In 2017 film directors Anton Zhelnov and Nikolai Kar-toziia released *Sasha Sokolov – poslednii russkii pisatel’* [Sasha Sokolov, the last Russian writer]: in the film the author states that “death has always interested me”. Literary scholar and translator Alexander Boguslawski has in fact underlined how death is a peculiar element in Sokolov’s world, seldom being also recalled only allusively via images, and metaphors. In *Palisandriia* in particular, “it would be impossible to list all [its] instances”: in this novel “time can flow backwards”, “the past is really the future”, and there is no (nor can be) death (especially for those who live “in nature”, as “nature does not die”). Sokolov’s treatment of time is somewhat close to Greek and Oriental philosophies, to the idea of karma, “the law of universal causality, [according to which] one’s soul becomes incarnated in a long succession of bodies”, A. Boguslawski, *Death*, op. cit., pp. 235, 237, 239, 241.

<sup>38</sup> Both the image of the ‘pupa’ and the idea of the eternal circle of life and death, that of metamorphosis, along with many other typical aspects of Sokolov’s poetics recall the aesthetics of the Baroque, of course re-read in a modern (or, rather, postmodern) key. See N. Leiderman – M. Lipovetskii, *Russkaia literatura XX veka (1950-1990-e gody)*, II, Moskva 2010, p. 425; M. Caramitti, *Palisandr dentro e fuori la vasca*, in S. Sokolov, *Palisandriia*, Roma 2019, pp. 414-415; O. Matich, *Neobarochnaia “Palisandriia”: vremia, al’ternativnaia istoriia, pamiat’*, “Novyi zhurnal”, 2017, 289, <<http://magazines.russ.ru/nj/2017/289/neobarochnayapalisandriya-sashi-sokolova-vremya-alternativnaya.html>> (latest access: 20.10.2019).

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>32</sup> Idem, *Juego y teoría del duende* [1933], <<https://biblioteca.org.ar/libros/1888.pdf>> (latest access: 08.06.2020).

<sup>33</sup> F. García Lorca, *La importancia histórica*, op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>36</sup> J. Valender, *Lorca y Cernuda: el zumo amargo*, in *Federico García Lorca e il suo tempo*, ed. by Laura Dolfi, Roma 1999, pp. 123-135.

iguana's. Or even in three. In four. Endlessly. For pity's sake, who are you? I'm the Unspoken Word. I'm the Word, which was in the beginning of the beginnings. I'm the German yes and in mirror transcription the English I. Ja – ay. I – ja. I am The One Who Says: I Am. Yes, I am, confirm the champions of universal connections. I am your enemy. I am the whip. I am captivity, misfortune, and a forget-me-not of the valley. I am 'loves me – loves me not'. I am 'if you can live with it, you'll like it, and if you like it, you'll soar'. And having soared above this vale of tears, you'll begin the autopsy of existence, isolating from it the steaming, bleeding essence. Don't feed it to the heavenly birds: they ate their fill of the Fire-Thief's liver. Instead, drop after drop and piece after piece, turn it into living prose. Suffer and work hard. And I'll give you the *stilo* and the wings. Because I'm your language<sup>39</sup>.

The artist is then the designated victim of the creating power, of the duende in Lorca's terms, of Language from Sokolov's perspective. In this sense, he also feels terribly alone and possibly misunderstood, condemned to be considered, as Evgenii Zamiatin suggested, an 'heretic' by others, or a 'Jew' as Marina Tsvetaeva put it. Coming back to Sokolov's words, the authentic artist cannot but be an immortal wandering 'Agasfer': in a short essay, composed to honour Velimir Khlebnikov's anniversary in 1985, the Russian author wrote that:

Art is the means of learning the mysterious ways. The artist, doomed to roam along them, is an Agasfer. He is a living and erring question hieroglyph. The questions he asks the world do not have answers. Then, his hunching is unfixable. The appearance of Agasfer to the people is alarming. And even if not overtly, at least secretly, he is persecuted<sup>40</sup>.

Lorca himself considered melancholy, grief, and solitude as a common element in the artist's view and perception. Opening the prologue to *Impresiones y paisajes* (1918), the poet stated: "Amigo lector, si lees entero este libro, notarás en él una cierta vaguedad y una cierta melancholia"<sup>41</sup>. The same *cante jondo* is for him a melodic tradition dominated by a profound human solitude<sup>42</sup>.

What Federico García Lorca calls the duende, linking its meaning to the plastic example provided

by the *cante jondo* and therefore to the power of the sound and of music in general, in Sasha Sokolov's terms acquires in the end similar connotations. Although the two poets start from different perspectives and follow different paths in their artistic maturation, they both are fascinated by the subtle connection that links music and language. Lorca was himself a musician and a composer, while Sokolov maintained that "if I were born in another time, in another place, into another family, I would have become a composer, because language is one of the forms of music"<sup>43</sup>.

Retrieving the long tradition that since the Classical Age promotes a syncretic idea of the arts, music and poetry in the first instance<sup>44</sup>, Sokolov argues that his treatment of the Russian language equals that of music by a composer:

I compose words. When I see that words do not fit together, I simply do not use that couple or group of words. They should somehow match, not only by their meaning, but also by their sound. This visibly resembles the work of the composer. Maybe I could have become a composer if I were born in a musical country, although Russia is of course a musical country. But, let's see, if I were born in Austria, then maybe I would have become a classical composer, I would have written symphonies. Language is music, given to us from above, but often we do not appreciate this fact<sup>45</sup>.

Being a 'proet', as he more than once defined himself, means to let the sounds of language guide the creation, which arises at the end of the day from strict harmonic criteria. Meaning is something absolutely secondary: "The story: this part of literature

<sup>43</sup> M. Gureev, *Snimaetsia dokumental'noe kino: Sasha Sokolov*, "Voprosy literatury", 2011, 2, p. 165.

<sup>44</sup> Although for long critics and theorists (philologists and musicologists in the first instance) rejected the idea of a syncretic approach to the study of the arts, artists have always expressed their belief in the natural harmony that binds the different forms of artistic creation. From the *mousiké téchne* that in Classical Greece designated an indissoluble triad of music, poetry, and dance, to famous representatives of the music world such as Steve Reich, author of that *It's gonna rain* (1965) that turns into music a preacher's railing about the end of the world, many examples of experimentation in the field could be provided with. However, only in the second half of the Twentieth century the first studies of so-called 'melopoetics' started to appear: in 1949 Calvin Brown published *Music and Literature*, a volume that represented a key milestone in the field. C. Brown, *Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts*, Hanover 1949.

<sup>45</sup> N. Kochetkova, 'Ia vseгда znal, chto uedu iz Sovetskogo Soiuza', "Lenta.ru", 11.02.2017, <<https://lenta.ru/articles/2017/02/11/sokolovfilm/>> (latest access: 20/10/2019).

<sup>39</sup> Idem, *The Anxious Pupa*, in Idem, *In the House of the Hanged*, op. cit., pp. 38-39. For the original version see S. Sokolov, *Trevozhnaia kukolka*, "Kontinent", 1986, 49, pp. 85-87.

<sup>40</sup> I. Pomerantsev, *Sasha Sokolov o Khlebnikove*, "Radio svoboda", 09.11.2013, <<http://www.svoboda.org/a/25161164.html>> (latest access: 09.06.2020).

<sup>41</sup> F. García Lorca, *Prólogo*, in Idem, *Impresiones y paisajes*, Granada 1918, p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> G. Caravaggi, *Invito*, op. cit., p. 53.

has never held a fascination for me. The story is something invented, it is something on sale. For me the way language works is important, this kind of linguistic dance"<sup>46</sup>.

It is not music imitating language, but the very language copying music, stripped from its signifieds, a pure coding chain of signifiers. The poet can only be able to say something new if he works on this primordial language-music, if he starts right from the 'seeds of sounds' that compose the language<sup>47</sup>.

Finally, Sokolov's *Duende* can also be analysed in the wider context of artistic syncretism, as it is presented as a graphic composition, a unique example in the Russian author's oeuvre. This 'A' is self-sufficient, demanding a plain vocal execution, at least one virtually heard by the reader as result of the collision of the different images arisen through the mentioning of la Argentinita, of the flamenco tradition, of Lorca in such a short text. This Aleph of creation suggested by the first vowel and letter of the alphabet is the graphic realization of the duende principle, from which poetry, music, art, Beauty uncontrollably burst out.

#### IV. A UNICUM THAT FITS

In this fragment composition, a unicum in his oeuvre, Sokolov reaches the apex in his personal pursuit of a 'writing through images' that has actually characterized all his production since the beginning: as he clearly stated in the already mentioned essay *Kliuchevoe slovo slovesnosti*, the form (the how, *kak*) is more interesting to him than the content (the what, *chto*), a priority that has defined the quality of his works. Erasing the traditional idea of *siuzhet*, intended as a motion of motives and sequences, Sokolov develops a narration along a spiral chain of associations of sounds and images. In reading, the effect is that of a suspended atmosphere of still, frozen images in pastel tones, slowly interchang-

ing, following a montage pattern, and communicating sensations and perceptions, rather than defined ideas<sup>48</sup>. The reader is taken through an art gallery, as the title of some sections in Sokolov's second novel *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom* [Between Dog and Wolf, 1980] suggests: *Kartinki s vystavki* [Pictures from an Exhibition]<sup>49</sup>. Highly estimating the reestablishment of direct links between the arts (the poet, to cite a verse from *Triptikh*, literally "paints"<sup>50</sup>), Sokolov eventually admits to be more than satisfied with the choice his Moscow publisher OGI has made concerning the insertion of illustrations in re-printing the three novels: "Galya Popova's illustrations are wonderful. She has understood everything and got it all"<sup>51</sup>.

Sasha Sokolov's *Duende* is then the result of the close proximity felt by the Russian author to Lorca's sensibility and view on artistic creation, but also of his genuine and rather thorough comprehension of the Spanish poet's poetics. It is an unconditional and authentic homage to an artist that has represented a source of reference and a model throughout Sokolov's literary career. Possibly, it is a (typically Sokolovian) provocation for those critics who had yet failed to trace such evident poetic and 'spiritual' connection between the two great p(r)oets.

[www.esamizdat.it](http://www.esamizdat.it) ◇ M. Napolitano, *Meeting the Duende: Sasha Sokolov reads Federico Garcia Lorca*. ◇ eSamizdat 2020 (XIII), pp. 251-258.

<sup>46</sup> M. Gureev, *Snimaetsia dokumental'noe kino*, op. cit., p. 165.

<sup>47</sup> "There is no theme for me, all themes, all stories have long been studied by literary theory. The only place where we can say something new is the language. It is an instrument and it is a philosophy. [...] I start from the sound, and the sound is like a seed from which everything else grows", I. Podshivalov, *Trilistnik*, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Such a narration template recalls at the same time a theatrical composition, a dimension that has been explored by different stage directors in Russia. See I. Marchesini, *Il personaggio scontornato in "Škola dlja durakov"*. *Dal romanzo di Saša Sokolov agli adattamenti teatrali*, "Between", 2012, (IV), 2, pp. 1-19.

<sup>49</sup> It is not casual, as nothing is in Sokolov's world, that the title refers at the same time to the homonym piano composition by Mussorgskii (1874), making thus a clear link between different arts – word, image, and music.

<sup>50</sup> "живописует поэт", S. Sokolov, *Triptikh*, op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>51</sup> Personal communication with the author (17.12.2017). Some of these illustrations have been reprinted in M. Napolitano, *Il principio ekphrastico nel quadro proetico di Saša Sokolov*, in *(S)confinamenti. Rapporti fra letteratura e arti figurative in area slava*, ed. by E. Dammiano et al., Roma 2018, pp. 199-212.

◇ *Meeting the Duende: Sasha Sokolov reads Federico García Lorca* ◇  
**Martina Napolitano**

***Abstract***

Sasha Sokolov's short graphic composition *Duende* ("Zerkalo", 2006) is more than a personal and overt homage to the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca; it testifies of a deeper poetic and 'spiritual' connection between the two authors. Although unexplored by critics, references to Lorca can be traced in different literary works by Sokolov. The Spanish poet has always represented a source of reference and a model throughout Sokolov's literary lifetime.

***Keywords***

Sasha Sokolov, Federico García Lorca, Duende, Russian Contemporary Literature, Intertextuality, Cante Jondo, Music and Poetry, Syncretism.

***Author***

*Martina Napolitano* obtained her PhD in Linguistics and Literary Studies - Slavic Studies at University of Udine, Italy. Her dissertation deals with the oeuvre of Russian contemporary writer Sasha Sokolov. Her research interests lie primarily in Russian literature of the second half of the XX century and contemporary Russian poetry, samizdat and tamizdat phenomena, the connection between poetry and music.

***Publishing rights***

This work is licensed under **CC BY-SA 4.0**  
© (2020) Martina Napolitano

