

INTRODUCTION

Sasha Sokolov's *A School for Fools* has been called "a neglected masterpiece." The late Vladimir Nabokov, a man not known for the generosity of his critical judgements (especially of his fellow Russian writers), hailed it as "an enchanting, tragic, and touching book."

"Neglect" is a relative state. Compared to Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* or Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Sokolov's brilliant novella is little known to the American reading public. Nonetheless, it shares with them the distinction of being one of the very few Russian novels to remain steadily in print since its first publication in 1976. *A School for Fools* is eagerly read and discussed in university classrooms from New England to Southern California. In Europe, it is read in German, Dutch, Swedish, French, Italian, and Polish translations. Conferences and articles are devoted to its reclusive author who lives in rural Vermont and Canada. He has been Regents' Lecturer at the University of California where there is an archive devoted to his work. Sokolov has entered into the standard Western handbooks and histories of modern Russian literature.

Nor is Sokolov neglected in the Soviet Union, where he wrote *A School for Fools* before his emigration in 1975. His three novels, all banned although resolutely apolitical, are eagerly sought after by Soviet literary connoisseurs, and also by the authorities who carefully removed all copies of his works from exhibition at the 1987 Moscow International Book Fair — this, in the era of Gorbachev's glasnost when even Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* is finally being published in the land of its birth. Sokolov's works are broadcast to the Soviet Union where they are heard by thousands. They also make the journey in other ways. A recent issue of a Soviet film magazine contained a picture of a young screen idol being interviewed in his apartment. On the book-lined shelves in back of him, a Sokolov novel was (in)discreetly in view. In private conversation the better-read, "official" writers speak of him admiringly, and in 1981 the editorial board of the "unofficial" Leningrad literary magazine *Chasy* awarded Sokolov's second novel, the arcane *Between Dog and Wolf*, its annual Andrei Bely prize.

Sokolov has achieved his present enviable reputation in slightly over a decade without the international political scandals, best-sellerdom, and popular film versions that attended Pasternak's tragic love story and Solzhenitsyn's grim camp expose. Unlike these works, both traditional realistic novels, *A School for Fools* is a quiet, intimately personal book written in the spirit of high modernism. Pasternak's and Solzhenitsyn's novels are a continuation of the great nineteenth-century Russian literary tradition; Sokolov's marks the beginning of a new one.

A School for Fools is a journey through the mental landscape of a nameless, schizophrenic adolescent which he relates with the assistance of an author figure who may be the boy's older self. Through the kaleidoscopic prism of the teenager's schizoid mind, we share his bizarre perceptions and attempts to come to terms with the surrounding world. The boy, who refers to himself as "we", perceives himself and several other characters as two distinct but related persons, each with his or her own name. Much of the narrative is an interior dialogue between the two halves of the boy's mind, or interior monologues ostensibly directed toward often unidentified characters. Nor can the boy perceive time, or events in time, in any fixed order; past, present, and future are random and intermixed. These aberrations determine the unorthodox form of the novella. There is, in the ordinary sense, no plot, but rather an ever swirling verbal collage.

The novella's characters, who flicker in and out of the boy's imagination, are aligned with the

two halves of his personality. The main voice is that of his free fantasy, his delusions; the other, lesser voice is that of rationality which constantly intrudes, hectors, and accuses the first voice of fabrication, both trivial and fundamental. One character grouping represents the repressive, institutionalized forces of society that constrain the freedom and creativity of the individual. These include the boy's prosecutor father; Dr. Zauze, the psychiatrist; and Perillo and Sheina Trachtenberg, the school officials. All are creatures of the city. The positive characters, Norvegov and the Acatovs, are all associated with nature and the summer settlement in the Moscow countryside. They are the characters of spontaneity and freedom. It is Norvegov who counsels the boy to "live in the wind."

Most of the characters are "doubles" who exist in two variants, although they are not always easily identifiable. Pavel, who is also Savl, i.e., Paul/Saul, takes his dual name from the iconoclastic Biblical figure. A more obscure pairing is Veta's scientist father, Arcady Acatov, who appears in many scenes as Leonardo da Vinci, scientist and artist. Mikheev, the elderly postman whose beard streams behind him as he rides his bicycle, is also Medvedev, and, perhaps, the legendary "Sender of the Wind." The villainess, Deputy Principal Sheina Trachtenberg, often appears as the witch Tinbergen. Each of these "doubles," projections of the boy's schizophrenia, is a complex blending of elements from life and the boy's imagination.

A School for Fools can be read as a socio-political indictment, but this is far too narrow an interpretation. Russian literature has a tradition, largely associated with Dostoevsky, that links rationalism with political tyranny and artistic sterility. The irrational, on the other hand, is identified with social and political freedom, and artistic creativity.

Madness, the most extreme manifestation of the irrational (at least in its romanticized, fictional representation), permits Sokolov's hero freedom from drab, institutionalized reality. His madness and "selective memory" even free him from the laws of time. The hero can simultaneously be a snotty-nosed, crazy schoolboy and a suave graduate engineer courting Veta in his own car. Death, along with all else, becomes problematic. Norvegov can be simultaneously alive and dead. The boy and his idol Norvegov pay a high price for their freedom, however, since it puts them in conflict with society. Sokolov is a brilliant stylist, a language-obsessed writer, who revels in witty, elegant word play. His novella is a whirlwind of language and sound that shapes the narrative and rushes it along. This irrational, free, creative force of nature is embodied in the mythic figure of the "Sender of the Wind" which inspires and defends the positive characters and threatens havoc on their enemies. Norvegov, its prophet, is nicknamed the "winddriver" and the "windvane." His schoolgirl mistress is the mortally ill Rosa Windova. The name of the boy's beloved Veta poetically derives from the Russian word for wind, veter, as do the names and sobriquets of all of the affirmative characters. They are quite literally "children of the wind" who emerge from the verbal hurricane of the novella's stream of consciousness passages. Such poetic devices are the essence of Sokolov's literary style.

Sokolov was born in 1943 in Ottawa, Canada where his father, Major Vsevolod Sokolov, was attached to the Commercial Counsellor's section of the Soviet Embassy. In fact, Major (later General) Sokolov was deputy head of the intelligence network that passed U.S. atomic secrets on to Moscow. Expelled from Canada, the Sokolov family returned to Moscow where their dreamy son drifted through an unsatisfactory career in the public schools. After graduation the teenage Sokolov worked briefly as a morgue attendant and lathe operator before entering the Military Institute of Foreign Languages in 1962. This educational venture ended in brief stays in jail for being AWOL and then in a mental hospital as a ploy to be discharged from his military obligation. His favorite rehearsed delusions, that he was an unexploded bomb or a taut drum

with internal Aeolian harp strings, were fine metaphors for a developing writer. The ploy was successful. Sokolov had been extremely fortunate that an ill-fated attempt to cross the Soviet-Iranian border on foot had not been detected. In the mid-sixties Sokolov was part of Moscow's literary bohemia, before entering the journalism department at Moscow State University in 1967. Receiving his degree in 1971, Sokolov took a job as a game warden in a hunting preserve on the remote upper Volga. It was here that he wrote *A School for Fools*, although there was little hope of publishing such an avant-garde, stylistic tour de force in the USSR. Rather than submit the work to a Soviet publisher, Sokolov adopted the dangerous course of sending the manuscript abroad. While the novel was making its way toward publication abroad, Sokolov renewed his efforts to leave the Soviet Union. The interest of the KGB had been aroused by inquiries at the Canadian Embassy about Sokolov's possible citizenship. Matters came to a head when Sokolov and the Austrian girl who had taken his manuscript abroad decided to marry. The issue of Sokolov's mental health was raised again, and his parents signed a document disavowing his actions. Other authorities entered the picture.

If the writer were not in fact mentally indisposed, he still faced completion of his military obligation. When the fiancée returned home to Austria for a visit, she was barred from reentering Moscow. The couple decided to stage a well-publicized hunger strike: the bride-to-be in Vienna, and the groom in front of the Palace of Weddings in Moscow. Through the intercession of Austrian Chancellor Kreisky with Leonid Brezhnev, Sokolov was permitted to leave the USSR.

Sokolov emigrated in 1975. In response to an invitation from his publishers, Carl and Ellendea Proffer, the co-founders of Ardis Press, he arrived in North America where his Canadian citizenship was soon confirmed. While still in Russia, Sokolov had conceived a novel based on a murder he had heard about on the remote upper Volga. *Between Dog and Wolf* (1980) is a novel of startling originality, difficulty and daring. Its Russian title-idiom refers to twilight when the normally distinct becomes blurred, if not indistinguishable. *Between Dog and Wolf*, which has some claim to being the *Finnegans Wake* of Russian literature, was a quantum leap in Sokolov's literary development.

Sokolov, who had taught in Russian language summer programs in rural Vermont, found it an appealing place and settled there in 1981. There he wrote his third novel, *Pali-sandria* (1985). Known in English as *Astrophobia*, it is a comic, picaresque work that lampoons many popular genres.

Although too much the atypical, *recherche* stylist to attract a mass audience, Sokolov is the most critically acclaimed of the younger Russian prose writers to come to the fore in the late seventies and eighties. Together with his fellow emigre, poet Joseph Brodsky, the 1987 Nobel Laureate, Sokolov is writing a new chapter in the history of Russian literature.

D. Barton Johnson University of California Santa Barbara, California