

Martina Napolitano

**Sasha Sokolov:
The Life and Work of the Russian “Proet”**

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Introduction

This book explores the poetics of one of the most significant Russian authors of the 20th century. Sasha Sokolov's oeuvre represents a milestone in the development of Russian literature. His legacy can be traced in much of the poetry and prose appearing in post-Soviet Russia. Taking the studies and analyses proposed so far as points of departure, these four chapters examine the keystones and the theoretical framework that arise from a close reading of Sokolov's works. This project endeavors to systematize the findings into what can be considered as a structured authorial theory of literary creation.

While "arguably the most important living Russian writer" (Boguslawski 2012: vii), Sasha Sokolov cannot be considered a prolific author. His first novel *A School for Fools* was published in 1976 by Carl Proffer's Ardis, as the writer fled the Soviet regime and landed in the United States. The book was an international success and was immediately translated into multiple languages. However, in 1980, his second novel *Between Dog and Wolf* met with less success. Due to the linguistic difficulties encountered in the reading process it has long challenged any translation attempt (the English version of this 'Russian *Finnegans Wake*' came out in 2017). Finally, in 1985, Sokolov's third and last novel *Palisandriia* (known in English as *Astrophobia*) was released.

In the writer's view, *Palisandriia* "would [have ended] the novel as a genre" (Johnson 1987a: 217): the assertion became a self-fulfilling prophecy, as Sokolov eschewed longform writing in order to concentrate instead on the development of a theoretical framework and on the practice of what he defines as *proeziia*. While this term and concept is frequently and haphazardly employed by critics, it has not been the subject of systematic analysis.

As one who was always drawn to isolation and wilderness, after *Palisandriia*'s publication Sasha Sokolov gradually disappeared from the literary public scene. His withdrawal from public life has led commentators to compare his figure to that of J.D. Salinger. However, after a set of lyric essays, Sokolov suddenly reappeared in the 2000s, authoring short compositions published by the Israeli Russian-language magazine "Zerkalo". These texts include three pieces later compiled in 2011 by the Moscow publishing house OGI: this *Triptych* is Sasha

Sokolov's fourth and last published book (excluding the collections of his complete works; 1999, 2020).

While Sasha Sokolov has authored a limited number of publications throughout his literary career, his oeuvre has inspired an impressive mass of critical articles and dissertations. Many analyses have been completed, especially in the United States in the 1980s and more recently, in Russia and Europe, mainly Italy. However, apart from published dissertations, no monograph has appeared, thus suggesting a heterogeneous yet fragmentary corpus of critical accounts.

In spite of the fact that articles have investigated many different aspects of Sokolov's novels, authors have failed to provide comprehensive overviews of the writer's poetics due to the limited size and scope of these publications. Moreover, while most investigations consider Sokolov's first masterpiece, limited attention has been dedicated to his recent *Triptych*. The situation is rather contradictory given the recognized role played by Sasha Sokolov in 20th-century and contemporary Russian literature.

Therefore, the purpose of this book is to propose the first systematic and longitudinal study of Sasha Sokolov's poetics. Zooming out from the specific stylistic and formal traits of his writing, this book, which is founded on my doctoral thesis (defended in March 2020 at the University of Udine, Italy), seeks to grasp the overall structure and message of Sasha Sokolov's hermetic literary works. Benefiting from a close personal exchange of ideas with the writer, the study presents a groundbreaking exploration of the fundamental tenets that underpin Sokolov's meaningful role as a literary creator of Beauty.

The book deals first and foremost with what has been regarded by critics as the central axis in the writer's literary cosmos: language. In support of this goal, the book takes the entire corpus of Sasha Sokolov's literary works into consideration, but concentrates primarily on *Triptych*, which is treated as his most mature and developed text.

This book aims to shed light on two significant and interrelated issues: first, the genesis and outcomes of Sokolov's linguistic mastery, and, second, the theoretical framework developed by the writer in relation to his definition of *proeziia*. Throughout the history of literature and in Russian culture in particular, theory and practice have been deeply intertwined. Reflection on the notion of

genre often complements and accompanies the 'manufacturing' of an artistic object; in other words, literary theory and practice often develop in tandem in the work of Russian 'writers-theorists' (or 'writers-philosophers', as is the case, for example, of Lev Tolstoy).

While the application of tools derived from other texts or even disciplines can be fascinating, it also risks being misleading and diverting attention away from the keys intrinsic to the text. From the perspective of the literary criticism produced within the framework of Russian Formalism and later developed by the Moscow-Tartu School of Semiotics, this analysis stems from a close reading of Sokolov's texts, highlighting those elements that determine the form and content of the author's work.

The frequent exchange of ideas with the writer over the course of a multi-year period of correspondence supports the ideas and authorial assumptions drawn from textual analysis. A comparable 'emotional proximity' has characterized the work and biographical profile of the most prominent scholars of Sasha Sokolov's oeuvre: Donald Barton Johnson, Olga Matich, Alexander Zholkovsky, and Alexander Boguslawski have all entertained a personal relationship and correspondence with Sokolov, which is arguably essential to access the literary cosmos of such an eclectic author.

The book is divided into four main chapters followed by a conclusion. The first two chapters frame the writer's profile and work by situating it in the overall literary context, presenting its key traits, and narrating its reception. The following two chapters represent the core of the analysis, which is rooted in a detailed investigation of Sokolov's language and based primarily on the textual material of his *Triptych*. While the third chapter delves into the idiosyncratic linguistic practice proposed by Sokolov (its background and results), the fourth chapter explains the theoretical reflection that supports this practice and outlines a definition of the author's notion of *proezii*.

Chapter 1 opens the investigation with an updated literary biography of Sasha Sokolov, which complements the previous biographies drafted by D.B. Johnson in 1987 and by Ludmilla Litus in 2006. The portrayal of Sokolov's histrionic yet introverted personality helps the reader to perceive the content and main stylistic

features of Sokolov's literary works, *Triptych* included. The title of the chapter, *Masquerade, or "Maintain your reputation!"*, alludes to Mikhail Lermontov's renowned verse play (1835) in which the author depicted human life as a theatrical performance carried out by masks rather than real individuals. Such a view reflects Sokolov's profile, as he consciously put on a literary mask, even upon assuming his "pseudo-name" Sasha (Dark 1992: 225). In addition, the title quotes the writer's short essay *About the Other Encounter* (2006), in which he underlined the need for the artist to "maintain one's reputation" (2012: 77), thus continuing to play the role that has been taken on.

The volume continues by drawing upon the critical research pioneered by D.B. Johnson, Alexander Boguslawski, Olga Matich, and Alexander Zholkovsky (mainly in the 1980s). The second chapter summarizes the main interpretations advanced by scholars of Sokolov's oeuvre, among which Johnson's depiction of a structured "Twilight Cosmos" represents an especially lucid proposal. The title of Chapter 2, *On Early Trains, or Beyond Sasha Sokolov's Twilight Cosmos*, refers to this study. The other allusion is to a poem by Boris Pasternak which, besides being indirectly mentioned by Sokolov in the essay *The Shared Notebook* (1989), highlights both the pervasiveness of intertextuality in the writer's literary activity (and consequently in the critics' writings) and the central role of the train image as one of Sokolov's favorite literary motifs. This innovative chapter does not merely enumerate the various findings presented so far, but applies a critical approach to these interpretations while further elaborating new ideas. Among them, the notion of Baroque, as suggested by some critics, serves as a basis for structuring a clearer idea of 'Sokolovian baroque'.

Chapter 3 demonstrates that Sokolov's oeuvre must be understood within the wider framework of inter-artistic creation: the writer, a "failed composer" as he himself admits (Kochetkova 2017), in his literary work has tried to draw natural and spontaneous connections between artistic realms that are traditionally separated—word, sound, painting, performance. The title *Pictures from an Exhibition* derives from a section of Sasha Sokolov's second novel, *Between Dog and Wolf*, but it is in itself an intertextual reference to Modest Mussorgsky's homonym piano suite (1874), which underscores the conceptual link between different art forms. Although critics have frequently observed the idiosyncratic

use of the Russian language employed in Sokolov's texts and the consequent difficulties encountered in the reading (and translating) process, a systematic investigation of such a linguistic game is lacking. Therefore, the third chapter assesses the role of language in Sasha Sokolov's oeuvre and its specific functions according to the writer's poetics. On the one hand, it identifies the authorial theoretical framework within which language is mastered in the texts, while on the other it explores the outcomes of Sasha Sokolov's word weaving. While the first part of the investigation suggests the existence of a direct link between the poetic word and music in Sokolov's cosmos, the second part highlights the importance of performance art in concretizing verbal music. The material analyzed in this section includes all of Sokolov's texts with special emphasis on *Triptych*, taken here as the writer's ultimate 'manifesto' of literary creation.

Finally, the book offers the first complete analysis of Sokolov's concept of *proeziia*. *Proeziia* is not merely a genre or style of Sokolov's creation, but a nuanced theoretical reflection on the role and value of literature, art, creation, and ultimately Beauty. That is to say, it is a reflection upon that notion of *iziashchnoe* (finesse) that turned into a keyword in *Triptych*. In 1989, Sokolov affirmed: "The time has come for a new period of synthesis. As I explained, genre interests me less than the kinds of works I write. I create *proetry* (*proeziia*)" (Podshivalov 2006: 352). Chapter 4 further clarifies the definition of Sokolov's neologism, highlighting its practical role as a stylistic reference point, its 'spiritual' value for self-identification and self-positioning in the wider literary and artistic context, and its theoretical meaning as a macro-genre. The title of this final section, *Theory and Play of Proeziia*, recalls the famous essay devoted to the *Duende* by Federico García Lorca, a poet Sokolov deeply admires.

The book's Conclusion discusses the findings of the last two chapters and their implication for what can be defined as a structured authorial theory of literary creation. Arguing that Sokolov's oeuvre must be reconsidered in light of inter-artistic creation, the general argument is that the interplay of form and content suggests a more comprehensive view on the meaning and value of Beauty. According to the writer, in its singular reflecting, interpreting and decoding of the world, art naturally tends toward the universal criterion of harmony.