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The Embodied Language of Sasha Sokolov's *A School for Fools*

JOSÉ VERGARA

MUCH has been made of the language in Sasha Sokolov's first novel, *Shkola dlia durakov* (*A School for Fools*, 1976), but less has been said about *how* we read his protagonist's words. Are they his thoughts alone or something more? What is the relationship between what he says and what he thinks? What, in fact, are we seeing on the pages in front of us: text, speech or some combination thereof? How we describe Sokolov's book as a text directly impacts our interpretations in what feels like an unusual way. This phenomenon especially pertains to the narration, which consists of an exchange between Student So-and-So's (*uchenik takoi-to*) two personalities, a kind of catechism enacted by a man of indeterminate age evidently suffering from dissociative identity disorder and schizophrenia.¹

The Student's narrative, which also includes occasional intrusions by an authorial figure, has been called many things, from 'a brilliant literary

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¹ While Sokolov does not factor into her study, Rebecca Reich has recently analysed how 'dissenters [of Sokolov's era] used their narratives to depathologize themselves and pathologize both society and the state' in the Soviet Union. 'Defining madness in abstract literary terms', she writes, 'enabled dissidents and dissenting writers to both expose and reshape a longstanding cultural association between creativity and insanity. Even as many dissenters accused the state of abusing this association to pathologize *inakomyслиe* [dissent], it was precisely by portraying the Soviet Union as a madhouse replete with deluded artists of reality that many dissenters depathologized themselves'. Rebecca Reich, *State of Madness: Psychiatry, Literature, and Dissent after Stalin*, DeKalb, IL, 2018, pp. 5–6, 15. Although Sokolov largely downplays the political dimensions of his works, it might be said that he engages in similar tactics as those described by Reich.

performance showing the possibilities and capacities of artistic imagination at work' (Alexander Boguslawski) to the problematic 'crazy talk' of the narrator (Cynthia Simmons).² Some, like Vladimir Bondarenko, have proposed that Sokolov relays his hero's 'speech' and 'broken glimmers of consciousness', while others emphasize his use of 'stream of consciousness' in what Fred Moody calls 'exchanges and arguments between the two voices'.³ The author of a fascinating unsigned review produced in the USSR and published by the *Russian Language Journal* in 1977 describes it as follows: 'A dialogue between the author and the hero, "Student So-and-So", and, ultimately, a central dialogue between "Student So-and-So" and the very same "Student So-and-So" that is held in the bifurcated consciousness of the main hero.'⁴ These assorted descriptions highlight how critics and reviewers have typically rendered *A School for Fools* in either of two limited ways: as an oral conversation or as the Student's thoughts themselves. These readings, in turn, have given shape to our own approaches more than forty years after its first appearance.

² Alexander Boguslawski, 'Sokolov's *A School for Fools*: An Escape from Socialist Realism', *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 27, 1983, 1, pp. 91–97 (p. 91). Cynthia Simmons, *Their Father's Voice: Vassily Aksyonov, Venedikt Erofeev, Eduard Limonov, and Sasha Sokolov*, New York, 1993, p. 134.

³ Vladimir Bondarenko, *Zhivi opasno*, Moscow, 2006, p. 511, and Fred Moody, 'Madness and the Pattern of Freedom in Sasha Sokolov's *A School for Fools*', *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, 16, 1979, pp. 7–32 (p. 9). On various iterations of the term 'stream of consciousness' in relation to *School for Fools*, see Richard C. Borden, *The Art of Writing Badly: Valentin Kataev's Mauvism and the Rebirth of Russian Modernism*, Evanston, IL, 1999, p. 313; Erzsébet Vári, "'Literatura [...] — iskusstvo obrashcheniia so slovom": Zametki o povesti "Shkola dlia durakov" Sashi Sokolova', *Studia Slavica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 47, 2002, pp. 427–50 (p. 428); D. Barton Johnson, 'A Structural Analysis of Sasha Sokolov's *School for Fools*: A Paradigmatic Novel', in Henrik Birnbaum and Thomas Eekman (eds), *Fiction and Drama in Eastern and Southeastern Europe: Evolution and Experiment in the Postwar Period*, Columbus, OH, 1980, pp. 207–37, (p. 221); Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos*, Armonk, NY, 1999, pp. 88, 90; Vladimir Tumanov, 'A Tale Told by Two Idiots: Krik idiota v "Shkole dlia durakov" S. Sokolova i v "Shume i iarosti" U. Folknera', *Russian Language Journal*, 48, 1994, 159–61, pp. 137–54 (p. 138), and Moody, 'Madness', p. 9. Some of his earliest readers, too, found this phrase to be the most apt in describing Sokolov's book. None other than the distinguished scholar of Russian culture Simon Karlinsky, for instance, writes in an unpublished letter responding to Ardis publisher Carl Proffer's request for an advertising blurb: 'While it is a new experience to read that kind of Joycean stream-of-consciousness prose in Russian, I happen to have a built-in aversion to literary works dealing with split personalities.' Santa Barbara, UC Santa Barbara Special Research Collections (hereafter, UCSB SRC), Sasha Sokolov Collection, box 4, folder 6, letter from Simon Karlinsky to Carl Proffer, 5 January 1976.

⁴ Anonymous, 'ŠKOLA DLJA DURAKOV by Saša Sokolov', *Russian Language Journal*, 31, 1977, 108, pp. 188–93 (p. 189).

An alternative, which, to be sure, has not been entirely lost on past commentators, instead involves viewing the Student's discourse as a written document. As Richard Borden explains, both character and author paradoxically 'speak (or write) in the exact same voice (or style)', while their relationship functions as 'parodic play with an aesthetics of graphomania'.⁵ *A School for Fools*' ending underscores this approach when the hero and purported author head out together to buy additional paper to continue the story before the reader's eyes. No matter how one splits the Student's story, it cannot be that the novel is *both* a written and oral narrative. The line dividing speech and writing is a fuzzy one in *A School for Fools*, yet it makes all the difference, influencing as it does how we understand Student So-and-So's story.

In her monograph, *The Prose of Sasha Sokolov: Reflections on/of the Real*, Elena Kravchenko considers this problem from a related angle. She claims that 'reflection and language, as one of its forms, signifies or creates reality in/through Sokolov's three novels. Fading away into its reflection, reality, paradoxically, finds its essence and substance: it becomes real'.⁶ Relying on a number of theories, Kravchenko argues that 'memory, instead of retrieving the past, signifies it [that is, memory], and [...] language, instead of expressing reality, engenders it'.⁷ Language, she continues, becomes the only constant in Sokolov's novel; it reflects itself through character doubles, word echoes and structural parallels. This interplay between the reflection and refraction of countless pieces in the novel make up its so-called reality.

While Kravchenko rightly emphasizes the auto-reflective nature of *A School for Fools*, I maintain that Sokolov's methods extend to additional elements of his book. The present article investigates how the author plays with visual cues, such as punctuation and capitalization, that are typical of a written text (as opposed to speech or thought), along with readerly habits. He does so in order to craft his tale about language coming into being and thought materializing on the page in concrete form. The novel's reality, in other words, manifests through language. It is a devious brand of narration that aims to mask its written qualities, even as it delights in the nearly limitless possibilities that language affords. Furthermore, in the third part of the article, I examine how Sokolov deploys related body imagery that operates on a metaliterary level to accentuate this relationship between

⁵ Borden, *The Art of Writing Badly*, p. 317.

⁶ Elena Kravchenko, *The Prose of Sasha Sokolov: Reflections on/of the Real*, London, 2013, p. 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

physicality and writing, thereby giving form, as it were, to its true hero: language. The visual markers and imagery work in tandem to bridge the gap separating the ephemeral and the corporeal, the immaterial and the material, that Sokolov stresses in various ways throughout his short book.

On the one hand, the text accentuates its written qualities in subtle ways by having the reader grapple with the difference between internal and spoken discourse and its transcription upon the page. In a closely related manner, this body imagery reinforces the same idea: that the novel comments upon itself and its composition. In a text where there are no characters who can be said to exist in a conventional sense, the author proclaims the supremacy of the written word as his guiding narrative principle through these subtle techniques. Without language, Sokolov suggests, there is neither consciousness, nor life, and therefore language is more than simply a representation of reality. In short, *A School for Fools'* metafictional components, expressed both through style and image, accumulate to craft a novel in which the written word occupies the central position as hero and narrative.

Logocentrism, the stream of consciousness and other metaphors in 'A School for Fools'

All three of Sokolov's books are notoriously difficult to summarize, each in its own way. *A School for Fools* established this pattern by breaking with many norms of fiction. The writer's debut novel lacks a clear chronological plot. Perhaps reflecting the hero's condition as a (young?) man with mental issues, numerous characters are also imbued with different personas. The action mostly takes place either at the Student's dacha community or at his school, where his teacher, Savl/Pavel Norvegov, works. His parents, who go unnamed, act as foils, particularly his father who makes Student So-and-So copy propagandistic articles from Soviet newspapers as a cruel re-education. The hero also spends his time pining for Veta Akatova, a teacher and the daughter of a scientist who lives nearby.

But all is not so simple. Student So-and-So allegedly suffers from a disease that makes him (or, read more positively, permits him) to travel in time. Instead of experiencing time as a linear progression, he imagines a simultaneity, in which he can drop his consciousness into any moment of his life. The practical effect of this condition, allegedly inherited from his grandmother, upon the novel is that contradictory situations can coincide. For instance, after several exchanges shared by the Student and Norvegov, it is finally revealed that his mentor has died at some earlier

point. Elsewhere, Student So-and-So's conversations with Veta's father morph into encounters with Leonardo da Vinci. Chapter Two of the novel likewise breaks readers' expectations as the narrative shifts away from Student So-and-So and is dispersed among twelve short vignettes. These stories take place in the same general location as the rest of *A School for Fools*, as evidenced by overlapping characters, settings and circumstances, but the change can be quite disorienting. (I will return to the function of this curious chapter below.)

It is within this atypical novel that Sokolov engages in his revolution of the word. Before examining how the author uses written and spoken discourses against each other, it would be worth considering in more detail what has led so many critics to view it as a product of the stream-of-consciousness style, which prioritizes the Student's narrative as speech or thought, rather than as the written text it purports to be. Such a reading is not necessarily wrong; it simply implies that the book itself has prompted a collective response among readers, both early and more recent.

The obvious paradox, of course, is that all thought becomes writing when depicted on the page. Sokolov's *School* is by its definition written and literary, so playing with speech and thought can be no more than a device, albeit a powerful one, that has shaped many readings. Nonetheless, within this literary framework we may delineate the differences — in organization, structure and spontaneity — between speech/thought (that is, stream of consciousness) and writing (traditional written discourse). Here, I take speech as a generally spontaneous act that is dependent upon the subject's shifting mindset and is opposed to the outwardly more structured phenomenon of writing. In Sokolov's novel, the latter appears to be inflected with the ostensibly chaotic quality of thought and speech, particularly as the writer's tactics, which I discuss further below, help mask this feature of the text. On a narratological level, the question of speech vs. writing is further complicated by the shimmering quality of the narrator. It is not entirely clear, after all, who does the thinking, speaking, or writing in the novel. Thus, the argument for or against stream of consciousness in turn becomes decidedly problematic. If the narrator(s) write(s) things down right away while composing the text, then there is no question of an external filter; but if the narrator(s) think or speak and then the implied author transcribes everything and in doing so shapes him/them, then it is an entirely different matter. Sokolov moreover thwarts any easy interpretation by inserting a stand-in into the work, the figure who identifies himself as 'the author' and as the Student's creator. I propose that

what appears to be the spoken words or thoughts of Student So-and-So and the author are actually a transcription, one that is contingent on the act of writing for the creation of meaning and therefore the life within the novel's fictional space. There is no existence or presence in Sokolov's world without the medium of written language, despite critics' tendency to focus on the mental or verbal. Indeed, the Student's condition demonstrates how the externalization of his mind through writing recovers (or produces) the book's reality. It is important, then, that we consider what expectations we bring to *A School for Fools* as we open its pages.

At play in a number of these aforementioned interpretations might be an example of what Jacques Derrida called logocentrism, the tendency in Western thought to view language (*logos*, Greek for speech, thought) as an embodiment of external reality. Responding to such diverse figures as Plato, Rousseau and Saussure, in his first book, *De la grammatologie* (*Of Grammatology*, 1967), Derrida maintains that due to its perceived proximity to original thought, or, in other words, its ability to be expressed without the means of any tools, speech was often taken to be a purer type of discourse by various thinkers. The written word, on the other hand, is considered a signifier of a signifier, removed to a second degree from external reality, an 'absence' rather than a 'presence', and therefore somehow intrinsically less than speech:

Even when the thing, the 'referent', is not immediately related to the *logos* of a creator God where it began by being the spoken/thought sense, the signified has at any rate an immediate relationship within the *logos* in general (finite or infinite), and a mediated one with the signifier, that is to say with the exteriority of writing.⁸

It is no wonder then that the impulse to associate the Student's narrative with his thoughts or his conversation with himself and with the authorial figure dominates critical accounts of Sokolov's book. If we assume the narrative to be his thoughts or vocalized words, it feels as if we have given firmer shape to the Student, understood him better in a sense, as thought or speech would appear to be direct incarnations of his true nature. Writing and speech, Derrida counters, are no different in their status as tools of signification. They both remain signs that refer to other signs.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore, MD, 1997, pp. 14–15.

Of course, this issue is not new to Russian culture. The nineteenth-century poet Fedor Tiutchev, for example, famously pronounced in his poem 'Silentium!' that 'a thought expressed is a lie'.⁹ In other words, there can be no unmediated thought. Sokolov, though, approaches this idea in a fresh way; without the written word, the author suggests, there could be no reality, no existence for the Student or his creator. *School's* central conceit aims to give substance to the word as such by imbuing it with creative potential. Its *transcription* — that is, the process by which it is externalized from the Student's mind — gives it meaning as his ideas and memories are called up and take shape. For Sokolov, unlike Derrida, language becomes logos; life itself erupts out of and *because* of writing/text, crafting a new reality in the book by means of a quasi-religious feat of transfiguration.

The true nature of Sokolov's prose may also be thrown into sharp relief with reference to the theory of *skaz*. A 'self-willed literary, artistic orientation toward an oral monologue of the narrative type', Viktor Vinogradov writes, *skaz* 'is an artistic imitation of monological speech which contains a narrative plot and is constructed, as it were, as if it were being directly spoken'.¹⁰ *School* would appear to share some of these traits, as defined by one of the Formalists' compatriots and critics, particularly in its deliberate illusion of oral recitation. It further complicates matters, however, with its dialogic, rather than monologic, voicedness. Thus, Sokolov's book might be said to belong to the list of works that Vinogradov classifies as 'narrative prose "flavored" with *skaz*'.¹¹ Sokolov is certainly fascinated by how the Russian language feels and sounds. This interest comes through in the ebullience of the narrative, one that revels in its possible forms. Although elements of *skaz* narration can be discerned here, the text continually emphasizes its written nature as if to mystify the reader on some level.

Boris Eikhenbaum, of course, also took up the question of *skaz* as a style and suggested that:

the artist, by nature, is always an improviser. A culture geared to the written and printed word forces him to choose, to reinforce, and to rework his material; but this only makes him try all the harder to preserve at least the illusion that he is freely improvising. When this illusion is maintained

⁹ F. I. Tiutchev, 'Silentium', in Tiutchev, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii*, ed. Iu. A. Andreev, Leningrad, 1987, pp. 105–06 (p. 106).

¹⁰ V. V. Vinogradov, 'The Problem of *Skaz* in Stylistics', trans. Martin P. Rice, *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, 12, 1975, pp. 237–50 (p. 244).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

while at the same time severity of poetic form is achieved, one has the joyful impression of the artist's power.¹²

There is something of an improvisational streak in *School*, a book absolutely produced in a culture obsessed with the word. Not surprisingly, this feature of the text's fabric has led critics to dwell on its so-called oral qualities (or its representation of a mind at work) rather than its written ones. The illusion holds. Sokolov's mastery of improvisation, the ability to make it seem as if the words simply flow unfettered from the mouth or mind of his protagonist, masks the real heart of *School*: a strong affirmation of the written word.¹³

These theoretical frameworks alone nonetheless do not explain why Sokolov's novel has been read the way it has. A third factor that bears consideration is Sokolov's attitude toward language in general and Russian in particular. The author has consistently advocated a perspective that places the literary word above all else, as in an interview with David Remnick conducted after his return to Russia in 1989:

Texts are more important than life, for me. Language is more important than life. So if you deal with language, you are creating not only texts, but also something more important than life. It's been said many times, of course, but it is true that first there was the Word, and God created the Word, the Word is God, and God is more important than life.¹⁴

His novels, in turn, reflect these beliefs, as Sokolov prioritizes the intricacies of his language over plot, character and setting.¹⁵ Evidence suggests that Sokolov's generation of Soviet non-conformist writers adhered to and developed the myth of language as a substitute reality. Joseph Brodsky, for instance, proclaimed in his Nobel lecture that the poet is 'an instrument

¹² Boris Eikhenbaum, 'The Illusion of *Skaz*', trans. Martin P. Rice, *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, 12, 1975, pp. 233–36 (p. 234).

¹³ In his other novels, *Mezhdú sobakoi i volkom* (*Between Dog and Wolf*, 1980) and *Palisandriia* (*Astrophobia*, 1985), Sokolov drops any ambiguities by making clear that the texts consist of a letter of complaint, poems, memoirs and other written documents. For more on *skaz* in Sokolov's work, see Barbara Heldt, 'Female *Skaz* in Sasha Sokolov's *Between Dog and Wolf*', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 21, 1987, 3–4, pp. 279–85.

¹⁴ David Remnick, 'Wellspring of the Russian Writer: Thirsting for his Native Language, Sasha Sokolov Returns', *Washington Post*, 28 September 1989, p. D01.

¹⁵ Peter Vail' and Aleksandr Genis have called this fascination a form of 'word worship' and 'linguistic pantheism'. See Peter Vail' and Aleksandr Genis, 'Uroki *Shkoly dlia durakov*', *Literaturnoe obozrenie*, 1–2, 1993, pp. 13–16 (p. 13).

of language for the continuation of its existence'.¹⁶ These writers endowed their stylistic and narrative experiments with metaphysical value. The USSR was, of course, a space made up of competing discourses — inner versus outer, kitchen table versus public realm — and, therefore, realities; by playing with the tension between speech and writing, and pitting different characters' approaches to language against each other, *School* foregrounds the power of the word to shape life itself.

Elsewhere, in an interview with Viktor Erofeev from around the same time, Sokolov expresses his love of the *Russian* language. Although he notes that he could theoretically write in English, he finds it lacking in certain respects (for example, grammatical cases) and explains his limitations by means of a musical parallel, 'as if music were deprived of half-tones'.¹⁷ This desire to experience the innumerable possibilities afforded by language led Sokolov to spend about a year in Moscow after more than a decade in emigration, 'listen[ing] with pleasure to all kinds of idle chit-chat' as he told Ivan Podshivalov.¹⁸ In another recent interview, Sokolov has used similar metaphors to describe his writing process: 'For me, language is a kind of symphony, and it happens that I'm composing variations on its themes.'¹⁹ The musical metaphor applies equally well to the structure of his novels, which are largely built upon recurrent motifs, as to his prose at large with its constant word play, a concern with phonetic qualities and explorations of the linguistic diversity and plasticity of Russian. The overarching goal of Sokolov's craft is to manifest the word in a way that is, on the one hand, musical and therefore ephemeral and, on the other, concrete through its insistence on a physical form.

Returning briefly to the way *A School for Fools* has been described by readers, we find a different set of metaphors, not least of which is the 'stream of consciousness' in their responses to the book. The extended list of examples from both Russian and Western sources cited above demonstrates that this inclination has been a commonplace in Sokolov criticism since the novel was first published, even if it is clearly not one of Sokolov's preferred descriptors when discussing his writing. Sokolov's book has also often drawn comparisons to major modernist works, such as

¹⁶ Joseph Brodsky, 'Nobel Lecture', trans. Barry Rubin, *The Nobel Prize*, 2011 <https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/1987/brodsky/lecture> [accessed 11 May 2019] (para. 23 of 26).

¹⁷ Viktor Erofeev, 'Vremia dlia chastnykh besed...', *Oktiabr'*, 8, 1989, pp. 195–202 (p. 198).

¹⁸ Ivan Podshivalov, 'A Conversation with Sasha Sokolov: Moscow, 1989', trans. and comp. Ludmilla L. Litus, *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 40, 2006, 2–4, pp. 352–66 (p. 365).

¹⁹ Georgii Mkheidze, 'Snezhnii chelovek', ed. and comp. Ludmilla L. Litus, *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 40, 2006, 2–4, pp. 379–88 (p. 382).

Joyce's *Ulysses* and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.²⁰ These assessments emphasize the mental approach to *A School for Fools*, as Sokolov's forebears deploy their own brands of stream of consciousness to explore the inner worlds of their characters, from Stephen Dedalus to Benjy Compson. Along these lines, Erzsébet Vári has argued that 'Sokolov's *povest'* [*School*] represents the first authentic narrative form in post-Soviet [*sic*] belles-lettres to convey "stream of consciousness".²¹ Sokolov's approach to stream of consciousness, however, may be less directly modernist than it appears. The stylistic parodies of his second novel, *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom*, have been documented widely.²² Likewise, Alexander Zholkovsky has determined how Sokolov must have read the works of Laurence Sterne and how his last novel, *Palisandriia* (*Astrophobia*, 1985), belongs to the Sternean genre of parodic narratives.²³ *School*, by contrast, has generally been read as a relatively less parodic work. Its complexities can mystify the reader, but its message and the Student's discourse are usually taken straightforwardly because of the apparent lack of ironic narrative masks familiar to readers of Sokolov's later work. However, given the ways the author complicates stream of consciousness throughout *School*, it can be read differently. It is, after all, not 'simply' the Student's mental ramblings but rather a much more intricate amalgamation of speech, thought, and, ultimately, writing

²⁰ On the Sokolov-Faulkner/Joyce connections, see, for example, Igor Burikhin, 'S. Sokolov. *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom*. Ardis, Ann Arbor, 1980', *Grani*, 118, 1980, pp. 273–74 (p. 273); Aleksandr Genis, "'Lessons of *Shkola dlia durakov*" (Over the Barrier: A Special Broadcast in Honor of Sasha Sokolov's 60th Birthday)', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 40, 2006, 2–4, pp. 341–49 (p. 345); Alexandra Heidi Karriker, 'Double Vision: Sasha Sokolov's *School for Fools*', *World Literature Today*, 53, 1979, 4, pp. 610–14 (p. 613); Arnold McMillin, 'Aberration of the Future: The Avant-Garde Novels of Sasha Sokolov', in Arnold McMillin (ed.), *From Pushkin to Palisandriia: Essays on the Russian Novel in Honour of Richard Freeborn*, London, 1990, pp. 229–43 (pp. 234–35); Moody, 'Madness', p. 15; Emily Tall, 'Behind the Scenes: How *Ulysses* was Finally Published in the Soviet Union', *Slavic Review*, 49, 1990, 2, pp. 183–99 (p. 188), and Tumanov, 'A Tale', pp. 137–54.

²¹ Vári, 'Literatura', p. 428.

²² Consider, for example, Gerald S. Smith, 'The Verse in Sasha Sokolov's *Between Dog and Wolf*', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 21, 1987, 3–4, pp. 345–68.

²³ See Alexander Zholkovsky, 'The Stylistic Roots of *Palisandriia*', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 21, 1987, 3–4, pp. 369–400. This connection to Sterne can be extended to *A School for Fools* as the former's *Tristram Shandy*, too, is a largely plotless, highly verbal adventure. In the Russian context, Sterne's name is synonymous with that of Viktor Shklovskii, whose article on *Shandy*, originally published in the early 1920s, famously explains that it is in the nature of the novel as a genre to parody conventions of narration, making Sterne's book 'the most typical novel in world literature'. In particular, as Shklovskii writes, Sterne introduced human gestures and poses to the novelistic tradition. Sokolov in much the same way merges body imagery with stylistic innovations to craft a text obsessed with its corporeality. Viktor Shklovskii, 'Parodiinyi roman ("Tristram Shendi" Sterna)', in Shklovskii, *O teorii romana*, Moscow, 1929, pp. 177–204 (p. 204).

that makes up his narrative. Indeed, reading Student So-and-So's stream of consciousness through the lens of parody helps clarify its peculiarities. In *School*, Sokolov sets his sights on a different target than the nineteenth-century classics (Pushkin, Turgenev) that *Dog* takes on. Here, it is the modernist stream-of-consciousness novel that is warped by Sokolov's pen. A belated entry into this genre, *School* uses the device even as it subtly disrupts our expectations of what it may do and, consequently, of our understanding of the interdependence of writing and thought in a literary work. Thus, a familiarity with exemplars of high modernist novels on its own likewise cannot account for the tendency to read *A School for Fools* as a close look into the protagonist's mind.

The novel's iconography similarly insinuates a kind of internal flow (stream of consciousness), particularly the river that runs near the dacha community, one of *School's* principal images. Its appearances throughout the book are manifold, and the narrator introduces it early: 'And why didn't they go to the river? They feared the whirlpools and main channels, the wind and the waves, the pools and the deep grasses. And maybe there simply wasn't any river? Maybe. But what was it called? The river was called.'²⁴ Among other things, the river serves as the location of the Student's alleged transformation into a white water lily, as well as a place of cleansing for Norvegov after he hears about what the Student reads in his literature classes. Its centrality in the novel should not be ignored, and this combination of style and image, as noted above, frequently results in an interpretation of the text that emphasizes its superficially indeterminate and so-called cerebral qualities for many readers. The watery stream of consciousness metaphor, in other words, colours our reading of *A School for Fools*. Sokolov, though, downplays the significance of any one single image in his work. Speaking with D. Barton Johnson in a taped interview, he said, 'I never think about what I want to use in general [in my works]: which particular materials, which devices I want to use. Which images: time or a river or water.'²⁵ Sokolov here emphasizes a different kind of arbitrariness that speaks to his apparently improvisatory writing. Although the free-flowing properties of *A School for Fools* might imply the inner workings of the protagonist's mind, and thus an interpretation that foregrounds the 'stream of consciousness' when linked to the river that the Student calls the Lethe, we must be wary of taking the text's surface-level

²⁴ Sasha Sokolov, *Shkola dlia durakov*, Ann Arbor, MI, 1976, p. 8.

²⁵ UCSB SRC, Sasha Sokolov Collection, tape A13591/CS Sokolov interviewed by DBJ, 20 June 1983 (0:00).

features to be a signifier of the content or meaning. What is at stake is much more illusory.

*Deception, deviancy and interaction between visual cues and readerly habits*²⁶

The tendency to view Student So-and-So's narrative as an unstructured, unnatural speech or thought act tends to exaggerate its deviancy and obscures its status as a physical transcription of the protagonist's ideas. The most obvious example of this trend, of course, occurs when the Student's narrative breaks with grammatical conventions. Sustained, unpunctuated narration (what we routinely term 'stream of consciousness') most often emerges in *A School for Fools* as Student So-and-So begins thinking about his biology teacher, Veta Akatova.²⁷ In her first appearance, his words serve as an incantation that brings Veta into existence. There is a sense of urgency as the character's thoughts, musings and runaway ideas carry the narrative forward:

[...] но ветка спит, сомкнув лепестки цветов, и поезда, спотыкаясь на стыках, ни за что не разбудят ее и не стряхнут ни капли росы — спи спи пропахшая креозотом ветка утром проснись и цветы потом отцветай сыпь лепестками в глаза семафорам и пританцовывая в такт своему деревянному сердцу смейся на станциях продавайся проезжим и отъезжающим плачь и кричи обнажаясь в зеркальных купе как твое имя меня называют Веткой я Ветка акации я Ветка железной дороги я Вета беременная от ласковой птицы по имени Найтингейл я беременна будущим летом и крушением товарняка вот берите меня берите я все равно отцветаю это совсем недорого я на станции стою не больше рубля [...]²⁸

[...] but the branch is sleeping, having closed its flower petals, and the trains, stumbling on joints, will not wake it ever and will not shake off a single drop of dew from it — sleep sleep branch smelling of creosote in the morning wake and bloom then wither scatter petals in the eyes of semaphore signals and dancing to the beat of your wooden heart laugh at the stations sell yourself to those who pass and those who depart weep and yell baring yourself in the mirrors to the train compartment what's your

²⁶ I am indebted to Derek Attridge for his work on Joyce and narration in *Ulysses* for inspiring some of the ideas presented in this section.

²⁷ In addition to the block quote provided directly below, see also *Shkola*, pp. 72, 88, 104, 108 and 110.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

name I am called Vetka [branch] I am Vetka of the acacia I am Vetka of the railroad I am Veta pregnant by the tender bird named Nightingale I am pregnant with the coming summer and the crash of the freight train here take me take me I am wilting anyway it's not at all expensive I cost no more than a ruble at the station [...]

The very texture of the novel embodies this mood; punctuation drops away in the rapid procession that forces the reader to reckon with not only the meaning of the individual words but also with the syntax by mentally inserting the missing markers (periods, commas and so on) in order to separate clauses from sentences, one phrase from the next. The Student's style and Veta's perspective also intertwine. Although this monologue undoubtedly provides a sense of the characters that produce it, the emphasis on the way language forms the imagined world, along with the reader's impressions, takes centre stage. Here, language itself, as opposed to plot, dictates the novel's progression. As has been noted numerous times, the railway branch (*severnaia vetka*) transforms into a branch of acacia (*vetka akatsii*) and, finally, into the multi-faceted character Veta, who is a teacher, railway prostitute and beloved all at once.²⁹ Puns, homonyms and roots build the impression of a text that has become both overwhelmed by the power of language and self-consciously captivated by its own possibilities.

Nonetheless, periods, commas and other punctuation marks can easily be inserted to produce lucid, if highly poetic prose:

[...] But the branch is sleeping, having closed its flower petals, and the trains, stumbling on joints, will not wake it ever and will not shake off a single drop of dew from it. Sleep, sleep, branch smelling of creosote in the morning. Wake and bloom, then wither. Scatter petals in the eyes of semaphore signals, and, dancing to the beat of your wooden heart, laugh at the stations. Sell yourself to those who pass and those who depart. Weep and yell, baring yourself in the mirrors to the train compartment! What's your name? I am called Vetka. I am Vetka of the acacia. I am Vetka of the railroad. I am Veta pregnant by the tender bird named Nightingale. I am pregnant with the coming summer and the crash of the freight train. Here. Take me! Take me! I am wilting, anyway. It's not at all expensive. I cost no more than a ruble at the station. [...]

²⁹ See, for instance, Johnson, 'A Structural Analysis', p. 222, and Kravchenko, *Prose*, p. 25.

This altered version of the passage shows that our experience of the text is highly influenced by the syntactic markers or the lack thereof in its original form. It is speech that has been transformed into a written text. For instance, the deictic marker 'here' is used as it would be in speech, and yet the entire passage is rendered as if filtered from mind to paper. We can still observe how the Student (channelling Veta) quickly and unexpectedly shifts from topic to topic, and his discourse remains marked by poetic images. The essential grammar nevertheless stays intact. We are not thrust into a completely amorphous or illogical zone of random, surreal speech, nor even what we might call the shapeless mind of a truly psychotic character. Rather, we encounter a passage that has been carefully and deliberately stripped of syntactic indicators.

Despite these manoeuvres, the alleged deviance of *A School for Fools* has become a commonplace in discussions of the novel. One of the most extensive explorations of this idea centres in Cynthia Simmons's *Their Father's Voice: Vassily Aksyonov, Venedikt Erofeev, Eduard Limonov, and Sasha Sokolov*. Simmons recontextualizes these four writers as representatives of a trend in post-Stalinist literature who excel in their 'linguistic and artistic nonconformity' by adopting an 'intentional and extreme deviation from literary and linguistic prescription and expectation'.³⁰ She outlines three kinds of 'aberrant' discourse, all of which Sokolov's novel expresses: 'A text that deviates on the level of ideation [information about our experience and perceptions] we will refer to as illogical. One that founders as an exchange between addressor and addressee we will term inappropriate. And a discourse that fails internally as a text we will consider incoherent.'³¹ While *A School for Fools* does present important examples of failed communication (that is, inappropriate aberrance), whether it is the Student and his parents or the protagonist and his reader, the claim that the book fails to cohere as a *text* feels overstated. Simmons herself notes that readers are 'more likely to classify particular sections of *School for Fools* as aberrant discourse [...] because they are approached as prose narrative *and* as dialogue, with accompanying preconceptions, rather than verse'.³² It is precisely this fusion of speech and writing that disorients the reader and imbues the novel with greater meaning. Sokolov's technique certainly involves breaking expectations, yet

³⁰ Simmons, *Their Father's Voice*, pp. 4–5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6, 127.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 129. In a groundbreaking study of Sokolov's novel, Johnson likewise emphasizes the metaphoric nature of *A School for Fools* by adopting Roman Jakobson's methods of paradigmatic analysis. See Johnson, 'A Structural Analysis', pp. 207–37.

the novel's discourse is far less radical than often assumed, especially when compared to *Dog* with all its neologisms, puns and other word games. It is Sokolov's deconstruction of narrative traditions and tropes that allows him to elevate the place of language in written form (even as it becomes intertwined with speech) and to craft a work in which an only seemingly abstract, chaotic, even formless idea begets material substance.

Sokolov's use of atypical punctuation further develops this method. Even apparently 'less necessary' punctuation is omitted, as in the reproduction of the approaching train sounds in the continuation of the long passage cited above. The Veta/Student hybrid continues its speech: 'dont yell Im not yelling the approaching [train] is yelling tra ta ta whats the deal tra ta ta what tra who there ta where there there there.'³³ This omission of the dashes ('tra-ta-ta'), unlike the periods and commas that have gone missing, contribute little to a reader's (mis)understanding of the text; their absence serves simply as a reminder of the constructed, that is, written, nature of the novel.

While logical connections may frequently blur in the so-called stream-of-consciousness passages, simply adding punctuation, along with tracking the frenzied and lyrical connections between words and sections, can clarify much. If the Student's narration seems to be a freewheeling expression of his mind, it has less to do with the thoughts themselves, than the way they are presented on the page. Regardless of whether Sokolov's protagonist knows where the punctuation should lie, we take the frantic nature of the printed word in these stream-of-consciousness passages to be representative of the Student's thoughts or speech, in essence interpreting a visual sign (the words and omitted punctuation on the page) as an aural or mental one. Not surprisingly, this connection has been reinforced by the Student's condition as a pupil in a special school, as we expect the protagonist to have thoughts that are devoid of logical coherence and that persistently shift in focus, particularly when he becomes excited by his love for Veta.

However, several other visual cues complicate this reading. Detailing a visit to his grandmother's grave, Student So-and-So reproduces the train sounds he hears nearby: 'and on the left there will be the cemetery, my

³³ *Shkola*, p. 12. The train sounds reference a children's song from the 1937(!) short film *Veselye puteshstvenniki* (Happy Travellers) written by Mikhail Starokadomskii and based on Sergei Mikhalkov's poetry. Alexander Boguslawski's more recent English translation of the novel, but not Carl Proffer's 1977 translation, retains the expected punctuation marks in 'tra-ta-ta'. Sasha Sokolov, *A School for Fools*, trans. Alexander Boguslawski, New York, 2015, p. 13.

grandmother is buried there — e-e-e-e-e [и-и-и-и-и] — the same as now, commuter trains, freight trains, express trains.³⁴ We also see/read the Student practise his accordion in a similar manner: ‘I recognized that in essence I strangely love all music, especially accordion three quarters. E-e-e, one-two-three, one-two-three, and one, and two, and three.’³⁵ Finally, he hears the ambulations of his frightening teacher and neighbour, the witch-like Tinbergen: ‘Starting at midnight, in the building you’ll hear only Tinbergen’s footsteps: e-e-e, one-two-three, one-two-three.’³⁶ The nearly identical graphical representation of distinct sounds in these three scenes highlights the space or difference between Student So-and-So’s mind and the reproduction of these impressions on the page. In reality, they would sound quite different, of course. Yet, the narrative reduces them all — train, accordion, footsteps — to a single phoneme as a kind of simplified illustration of sound itself. In essence, the reader witnesses sound taking physical form.

Something similar takes place when the Student yells at various points throughout the novel, either screaming into a barrel or mimicking another troubled student from his school: ‘this boy began to yell, for some reason really began to yell, like this: a-a-a-a-a-a-a! [...] And here the boy started to yell terribly again, this time it was a different sound: o-o-o-o-o-o-o!’³⁷ The narrative acknowledges differences in sound (speech); however, it renders them again not through description, but through a simplified graphical representation readily identifiable with written discourse.

Along the same lines, Sokolov uses capitalization, which does not ordinarily factor into speech or thought, in two contrasting, though related ways. First, he drops the capitalization of sentence-initial letters in some passages entirely. Alternatively, proper names remain capitalized even in the stream-of-consciousness passages. The words representing a series of shop signs in another section of Chapter Three are reproduced entirely capitalized. We see, among other things, ‘FISH-FISH-FISH. [...] SHOES. [...] FLOWERS. BOOKS. [...] FASHION PARLOUR, ruolrap noihsaf [ATEL’E MOD, *dom e’leta*].’³⁸ This latter example underscores the disjunction felt when reading the Student’s words as thoughts or speech as opposed to written expression, as the reader is tasked with noticing and interpreting the use or abandonment of capital letters, something that

³⁴ *Shkola*, pp. 88–89. Here, of course, I transliterate for sound quality.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 118–19.

makes little difference in spoken language. The inclusion of the mirror-image phrase ‘fashion parlour-ruolrap noihsaf’ relies on the reader seeing this play on words, particularly the ‘dom’ present in the Russian. In this way, Sokolov consistently underscores the primacy of the written word in the text as that which constructs the fictional reality at hand with the reader’s interaction.³⁹

The novel makes the connection between oral expression and writing in even more explicit ways. This feature of *A School for Fools* is introduced early in its first chapter when the authorial voice interrupts the Student to tell the story of a freight train. Part of this extended passage involves a Gogol’ian aside regarding chalk. Most significant is the way it begins and ends: ‘This commission is sad, it also takes chalk out of its pocket (here I should note in parentheses that the station at which the action takes place never, even during the world wars, could complain about a shortage of chalk. [...])’ and ‘[...] However, we’ll return to the second railroad commission that takes chalk out of its pocket, and — here we will close the parentheses) and writes on the wagon: [...].’⁴⁰ The parenthetical digression lasts some forty-eight lines in the original and, as evident from its beginning and conclusion, divides an otherwise succinct sentence. More importantly, it doubles down on its subordinate nature by both using parenthetical marks and explicitly referencing them. The latter device, of course, is entirely unnecessary if we assume *A School for Fools* to be simply the product of the Student’s mind. On the other hand, if we focus our attention on the written nature of the book, these dual parentheses have the effect of drawing attention away from the story, making a plot out of its very composition that occurs before our eyes. This, then, is what counts as character development in *A School for Fools*. Endlessly commenting upon its composition, Sokolov’s novel in effect merges its narrator with its plot.

Taken as a whole, these various visual signs — punctuation, capitalization, reversed words, transcription of sound itself, metaliterary descriptions of written discourse — together imply a style of writing, not of thought. They give substance to language in its visual representation and through the reader’s comprehension. Sokolov depends on this participation, whether it is by mentally adding missing periods or by catching the doubling of the parentheses. But exactly what kind of writing is this? Generally speaking, Sokolov is less interested in how the mind works than in the way language

³⁹ It is also worth noting that this same passage with the shop signs features citations from Pushkin, Dostoevskii and others.

⁴⁰ *Shkola*, pp. 31-32.

manifests on paper and, in turn, creates a reality unto itself. (That is, after all, one of the chief ironies of *A School for Fools*: despite its being narrated by a mentally handicapped hero, the psychology of the work is of less import than its linguistic experimentation.) Sokolov has written about how ‘nothing on the page should distract the reader from the “mellifluous flow” of the narrative’, resulting in works that omit paragraph breaks, footnotes, and other such perfectly everyday features of written documents in order to immerse the reader in the imagined worlds of his works, including his essays.⁴¹ This is not the flow of the mind, but the scratching of the pen. The uninterrupted passages of *A School for Fools* accentuate the constructed nature of the novel’s *texture* by disrupting typical writing and reading practices. In this way, Student So-and-So is both reduced to and personified by the text. His peculiar language becomes the only concrete thing the reader can identify with a character who remains nebulous in so many respects. While his language may be seen as something fluid in the stream of consciousness, it becomes a textualizing force.

To put the question differently, the interplay of thought and writing in *A School for Fools* may be viewed as the transformation (transfiguration) of the metaphysical into the physical, of thought into word. In addition to the strategies described above, Sokolov also achieves this effect through recurrent body imagery. He manipulates a set of images related to the corporeal that function as realized metaphors for this very process of giving shape to language. If the visual signs serve to cue the reader into the way the text presents itself as the thoughts of its narrator but ultimately reveals its textual, physical nature, then these various images amplify the effect by directing attention to the book’s metafictional foundations.

The anatomy of language

This technique can be seen in ways beyond how sounds and words become characters. For example, the framing stories of Chapter Two (‘Now, stories written on the veranda’), which consists of a series of vignettes told from a number of perspectives, vividly depict the transition from ideal to real.⁴²

⁴¹ Quoted in Alexander Boguslawski, ‘Introduction’, in Sasha Sokolov, *In the House of the Hanged: Essays and Vers Libres*, trans. Alexander Boguslawski, Toronto, 2012, pp. vii–xxi (pp. xiii–xix).

⁴² Though beyond the scope of the present article, the authorial source of these stories remains a matter of debate. Sokolov himself has provided contradictory statements. For example, speaking with Johnson, he said the author may be the subject of ‘The Last Day’, a young man discharged from the military who writes the short stories and, afterward, the extended tale of Student So-and-So that makes up the rest of the book. Later, however, he maintained that he himself does not know who wrote the stories, but perhaps some “third

The first story, 'The Last Day', begins with a young man visiting a woman as he is about to begin military service. Although she does not reciprocate his feelings, he recalls how 'in the evenings he had paced under her windows until very late, and when the windows went dark, for some reason he would keep standing there and standing there, glancing at the blackened glass'.⁴³ Sokolov uses the window to symbolize the penetration (or, in this case, non-penetration) of an admirer into the heart of the admired. It is a barrier that keeps the man from coming into direct physical contact with her, but it also allows for patient observation.

In 'Now', the chapter's final story, Sokolov inverts the situation. Having returned home early, the man takes up work as a morgue attendant. One day he realizes that a car crash victim is the same woman whom he had admired. In this shocking encounter, Sokolov's hero loses the window, the protective barrier that separates him from both death and the corporeal in 'The Last Day'. It is a bewildering experience, and he can neither come to a better understanding of the past ('he couldn't remember her last name'), nor of the future ('it was unclear what would come next').⁴⁴ All that remains is the titular 'Now'. Her body equally represents a transition from the immaterial to the physical, as the attendant is finally able to make contact with the young woman he once loved, albeit only as a corpse. *A School for Fools'* second chapter therefore offers a microcosm of the novel as a whole and of its thematic and stylistic interests in rendering the simultaneous gulf between and interconnectedness of romanticized thought (the girl behind the window) and materialized writing (the body in front of the attendant). The dramatic contrast seen when comparing 'Now' with the other four chapters of the novel is simply an illusion, much like style is not

force" behind the screen' composed some parts. See D. Barton Johnson, 'Background Notes on Sokolov's *School for Fools* and *Between Dog and Wolf*: Conversations with the Author', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 40, 2006, 2-4, pp. 331-40 (p. 334). Mark Lipovetsky, on the contrary, argues against Johnson's reading of the stories as the products of the Student's imagination. He suggests that they are written by the 'healthy' author who describes similar scenes in the first chapter and that this 'polyphonic structure of the narrative here becomes an embodiment of the peculiar "garden of forking paths"'. Mark Lipovetskii, 'Mifologiya metamorfoz: Poetika *Shkoly dlia durakov* Sashi Sokolova', in Lipovetskii, *Russkii postmodernizm: Ocherki istoricheskoi poetiki*, Ekaterinburg, 1997, pp. 176-96 (p. 178). Johnson's conversations with Sokolov concerning Chapter Two of the novel are available as part of the Sasha Sokolov Collection, UCSB SRC, tapes A13591/CS (12:39-14:05) and A13599/CS (33:20-35:50).

⁴³ *Shkola*, p. 54. For an extended analysis of this trope, see Russell Scott Valentino, *The Woman in the Window: Commerce, Consensual Fantasy, and the Quest for Masculine Virtue in the Russian Novel*, Columbus, OH, 2014.

⁴⁴ *Shkola*, p. 69.

equivalent to meaning in Sokolov's text. Just as the reader may approach *A School for Fools* as the romantic, unrestricted thoughts of Student So-and-So, the man previously considered his beloved in unrealistic, intangible terms. 'Now' seals the gap splitting thought and material; the reader must likewise pay attention to the book's emphasis on language as a means of simulating (that is, crafting) a physical reality.

The woman finds a counterpart in the 'untouched body' of Roza Vetrova, the 'chalky girl' whom Student So-and-So's mentor Norvegov worships and whose singing voice at one point seems to the pair the 'embodiment of purity, strength, and deadly triumphant bitterness'.⁴⁵ Again, the male hero expresses a desire to know the girl in person, and this same figure is associated with a death that is in turn linked with writing; chalk throughout the novel functions as a sepulchral symbol.⁴⁶ Put differently, to know Roza means to write her into existence, to construct a figure out of language. Until that moment, she remains an ephemeral image, a thought-ful desire that the narrator hopes to satisfy.

Student So-and-So himself expresses a similar idea when conversing with Norvegov near the end of the novel. His mentor, who, again, has died at some point earlier in the narrative, sold his skeleton before his death, and it found its way to the school. Student So-and-So says that he will do the same when he is no more, and 'whole generations of fools [...] will study the structure of the human skeleton by means of our imperishable carcasses. Dear Savl Petrovich, isn't that the shortest path to immortality?'⁴⁷ This skeleton of an imaginary hero (the Student) who invents other imaginary characters (Norvegov, Veta and so on) can only be the text of *A School for Fools*, which he weaves in collaboration with the purported author and the reader. Language itself is given this linguistic body that he shares with future generations of the school for fools, whether it be Soviet Russia or a wider readership.⁴⁸ The immortality that he seeks is the same immortality of Pushkin's monument: the legacy of his thought made real in the form of a written text.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 112, 127.

⁴⁶ See, for instance, *ibid.*, pp. 31–32. Sokolov has commented on the link between the colour white (for example, chalk) and death. See UCSB SRC, Sasha Sokolov Collection, tape A13599/CS (49:50–50:25).

⁴⁷ *Shkola*, p. 165. The skeleton might also be linked to the chalk described earlier, as they represent two forms of calcium, one more solid than the other.

⁴⁸ For readings of *School* that emphasize its allegorical or political undertones, see Boguslawski, 'Sokolov's *A School for Fools*', pp. 91–97, and Ludmilla L. Litus, 'Saša Sokolov's *Škola dlja durakov*: Aesopian Language and Intertextual Play', *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 41, 1997, 1, pp. 114–34.

Sokolov at various points vividly describes the difficulties that can stem from such a project. One scene of several depicting Student So-and-So copying newspaper articles at his father's command exposes the metaphorical, linguistic violence involved. As the father completes an inspection of his ward and domain, the son's body is described in the following graphic terms:

He sees how you sit at the desk diligently — the diligence is expressed in the way you bow your closely cropped head to the side and awkwardly bend your back, as if someone had smashed you, yes, as if you were thrown onto the rocks from a lofty cliff, and then they had approached you and smashed you some more with the help of blacksmith tongs, which hold the white-hot ingots — writing.⁴⁹

Everything that divides the subject ('you') and the verb ('writing') is caught up in the act of his writing. For the Student, this activity is simply torture. Rather than the liberating, special sensation that writing normally produces in the Student, this repetition brings him suffering, at least in his imagination. The composition becomes personified in his twisted body, as if giving form to the meaning and struggle of writing.

Sokolov's use of body imagery as a substitute for the concept of writing extends further and touches more characters. He sets up, for instance, a telling contrast between Student So-and-So's unnamed father and his teacher, Norvegov. In both cases, Sokolov links the characters to a printed page of text through evocative chiaroscuro. The father, who works as a prosecutor and an agent of Soviet power, is bathed in chalky white but without any of the potentially positive connotations seen in descriptions of Roza: 'He was white, like those places in the newspaper where there's nothing written.'⁵⁰ In opposition, Norvegov adorns his 'head' with a light hat covered with little holes to increase ventilation. Apparently, Student So-and-So informs the reader, they decided at the factory that 'the dark little holes against the light background must mean something, be worth something, that it's better than nothing, that is, it's better with holes than without them.'⁵¹ Each character symbolizes the pages of the book, perhaps even the one we hold in our hands, but their differences are striking. The father's figurative page remains as blankly hollow as the propagandistic newspaper articles that he has his son copy. Sokolov associates Norvegov,

⁴⁹ *Shkola*, pp. 110–11.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

on the other hand, with the black holes — that is, the letters — set against the backdrop of the white hat — the page.⁵² Norvegov expresses the values that Sokolov champions in the novel: freedom of thought, ties to nature and bravery in the face of oppression. If both the prosecutor and the teacher's images-*cum*-bodies are portrayed in terms of pages from a book, only the latter personifies something truly meaningful and fully realized. Norvegov may be considered an eccentric within the world of the novel, but his ideas are permitted to flourish and dictate the text's progression in some essential ways. After all, he becomes well known in the dacha community for his habit of walking barefoot.

To trace the podiatric theme further, perhaps the most significant transformation occurs at the novel's end when the Student and his author depart the scene in search of more paper: 'Happily chatting and counting our pocket change again, slapping each other on the shoulders and whistling silly songs, we walk out into the thousand-footed [*tysiachenoguiu*] street and in some miraculous manner are transformed into passers-by.'⁵³ That this line also concludes the pair's conversation about the creation of *A School for Fools* makes it especially noteworthy. Through this open-ended leap into the unknown, the Student becomes part of the fabric of life, while the author (Sokolov's stand-in, the transcriber) elects to join his character in the texture of fiction. Sokolov here welcomes the effervescence of the present moment, much as at the end of Chapter Two when the morgue orderly recognizes the woman from his past. Both hero and author are changed into part of this many-footed figure, Sokolov's recurring literary embodiment of life in all its complexities and movement. It in turn metaphorically acts as a symbol of thought become corporeal in the way the Student seems to escape the boundaries of the book. The imagined time of *A School for Fools* merges with the reader's real time, as the hero (language) becomes flesh in a kind of literary re-enactment of logos in its Biblical incarnation.

Their departure can likewise be productively compared to the scenes in which Student So-and-So recounts his transformation into a white water lily when he floats on his father's rowboat: 'And I tried to take up the oars, I extended my arms to them, but nothing came of it: I saw the

⁵² The same connection between Norvegov and the black/white contrast is picked up again later in the novel when he tells his students the tale of the 'Carpenter in the Desert'. The eponymous craftsman transforms into a 'large black bird with a straight white beak', and the man that is crucified upon the cross built by the carpenter states that he used to have a 'small zebra'. *Ibid.*, pp. 134, 136.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 169. This same image appears earlier in the novel (pp. 125, 154).

handles, but my palms didn't feel them.⁵⁴ In terms of the present analysis, the Student's confession might be read as the hero giving substance to his ideas in the form of a white lily: a symbol of purity and nature. To read somewhat against the grain, though, it may alternatively be understood as an imperfect conversion when placed alongside the novel's end. One of Student So-and-So's central concerns is to understand himself in terms of the physical world. His transfiguration into a flower, during which he feels his limbs become permeable, suggests a state of being that remains abstracted in a way; the flower lacks the physicality of the multi-footed mass that wanders with assurance and power into a bustling life at the end of *A School for Fools*. Only there does Sokolov achieve the *full* merging of character with author, imagined time with real time, immaterial thought with physical text.⁵⁵

Conclusion

This, then, is the central tension felt throughout Sokolov's novel: what might be considered real in a text where everything seems to spring from the mind of a schizophrenic hero? Put simply, what matters? Sokolov relieves this pressure by immersing his book in the differences between thought and writing as depicted on the page, as well as by deploying a string of images that constantly remind the reader that it is all an illusion. What remains by the time we reach the last page is the idea that language alone constitutes the core of the novel on all levels: narration, plot, character, style.

On the one hand, the subtle play with standard elements of writing such as punctuation emphasizes the constructed, text-based nature of *A School for Fools*' fictional world. It allows us to understand that we are not truly getting a glimpse into the mind of Student So-and-So, so much as a written transcription of his ideas and reality. The graphic signs, upon closer inspection, disrupt our sense of what the Student's narrative is, and in doing so, they elevate the written word as a source of being. On the other hand, when Sokolov describes his characters in terms of body imagery that is furthermore closely associated with concepts related to writing, they become emblems of the text's composition, not of people or ideas proper.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁵ The structure of a collection of water lilies as viewed from underwater can be said to resemble a 'thousand-footed' being with its many stems dropping into the water from the floating leaves atop the pond. Sokolov may well have had such connections in mind, but my focus here remains on the physical nature of his images and their connections to the human body.

This beguiling characterization is bolstered by the deceptive manner in which the narrative calls to be read as the Student's thoughts but must instead be viewed as a document that requires the reader's interaction for full effect. These two techniques function in tandem to shape a text that seemingly wills itself into being.

In addition to the novel's closing with its multi-footed street, one other scene best expresses its centripetal energy. Having learned that the Student visited his apartment and found an unfamiliar woman residing within, Norvegov becomes disconcerted. He asks his mentee to better describe this woman, if only through a metaphor, and Student So-and-So obliges by providing a series of recognizable images: 'the cry of a night bird, incarnated in human form', a wilting flower, the 'ashes of a burned love' and the 'chalky angel' statue that adorns the boy's grandmother's gravesite.⁵⁶ This catalogue, of course, includes several key images from *A School for Fools*' repertoire: the nightjar bird with which the Student associates himself, the flowers to which Veta and the Student (and, notably, their bodies) are compared, the young man's deceased beloved in Chapter Two and the chalky girl Roza Vetrova. This chain of comparisons found near the book's end thus fulfils two purposes. First, it reiterates some of the central ideas, images and characters that have been linked to the idea of writing. These various iterations highlight *School's* metafictional underpinnings. When Norvegov asks Student So-and-So to describe the unknown woman in his apartment, he tasks the Student with a creative undertaking; by describing her not directly, but through metaphor, he allows her to be transformed and rewritten, as it were. That the images the Student uses are quite familiar to the reader by this point and strongly associated with the concepts of the written and the bodily emphasizes the real conceit of the novel: word, not thought, is what makes the world. Not unlike how the reader must comprehend the unreliable quality of Sokolov's punctuation and visual markers to understand the text's true nature, reading the body parts strewn throughout as metafictional features of the work accentuates the same technique.

It is perhaps this approach to writing that has led some critics and readers to complain of Sokolov's total solipsistic aestheticism, a deep dive into style over substance. As has been demonstrated here, Sokolov's word-weaving involves much higher stakes than a simple play on words. He, in fact, invokes a (fictional) world through language and especially through the written word. It is therefore an issue of life and death. As he puts it in

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 150.

his essay, 'Kliuchevoe slovo slovesnosti' ('The Key Word of Belles-Lettres', 1985): 'The conversation concerning *what* and *how* is an echo of an eternal discussion between materialists and idealists. What came first, argue these philosophers: matter or spirit? Substituting matter with the concept *what* and spirit with the concept *how*, we attain the formula for our problem.'⁵⁷ Sokolov firmly aligns himself with the camp of artists who champion, in different ways, 'art for art's sake' and technical proficiency over a clear message and an emphasis on content. Nonetheless, his devices (characters as elements of writing, visual cues and so on) serve as a kind of collection of incantational material that brings language to life on the pages of *A School for Fools*. The reader becomes involved and must both discern the meaning of the various symbols, as well as notice and manipulate the visual signs to comprehend their significance. It is this never-ending shifting between presence and absence that allows Sokolov to invert the seemingly unshakable division of 'matter' and 'spirit' in art.

By manipulating the fabric of language itself, not the stream of consciousness, Sokolov crafts a work that reveals, as Samuel Beckett put it so succinctly, how 'form *is* content, content *is* form'.⁵⁸ *A School for Fools*, setting the groundwork for what would be developed further in his later novels, *Between Dog and Wolf* and *Palisandriia*, occupies this middle ground where style and character merge effortlessly, and by dwelling on what might be viewed as a given — that this is a *written* text encompassing a creative transcription not only of the narrator's thoughts but also his sensory input — we see how Sokolov proves that the literary word may come to embody thought itself.

⁵⁷ Sasha Sokolov, *Trevozhnaia kukolka*, St Petersburg, 2007, pp. 154–55.

⁵⁸ Samuel Beckett, 'Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce', in Samuel Beckett, et al., *An Exagmination of James Joyce: Analyses of the 'Work in Progress'*, Norfolk, CT, 1929, pp. 3–22 (p. 14).