Notes on Sasha Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren’t reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

The "Finnegans Wake" of Russia, And Its Translation Problems

There are two principal voices in "Between Dog and Wolf": a knife sharpener, Ilya; and a man presented as his son, Yakov. Ilya writes in a kind of rough, wild colloquial speech; Yakov writes measured, 19th-century style prose. Yakov also writes rhymed verse, and there are also chapters in a different voice, which Sokolov, in an NPR interview, identifies as his own voice. The book alternates chapters by Ilya, by Yakov, and chapters of Yakov’s poems. I read the poems and prose by Yakov, but I couldn’t stand the chapters by Ilya: they are ruined, I think, by a bad translation. More on that in the last section.

1. Precedents
"Between Dog and Wolf" is touted everywhere as the Russian "Finnegans Wake." The Columbia University Press website quotes it this way: "Intricate and rewarding—a Russian Finnegans Wake." It turns out this isn’t a review, but a one-line "In Short" notice which reads, in its entirety, "Sasha Sokolov’s classic Between Dog and Wolf (Columbia University) is intricate and rewarding—a Russian Finnegans Wake." Such is the depth and detail of contemporary reviewing! In fact the parallel with "Finnegans Wake" doesn’t help.

The chapters written by Ilya come from a long line of inventive pseudo-patois, a tradition that includes Faulkner and Peter Matthiessen’s wonderful "Far Tortuga." The alternating prose and poems by Yakov are rich with allusions to Russian literature and culture, and one of their inevitable points of reference is "Eugene Onegin"—which also fits because Nabokov, who once praised Sokolov, wrote 4 volumes of commentary on Pushkin’s "novel." (I have a review of that elsewhere on Goodreads and Librarything.) "Finnegans Wake" shares as much with "Between Dog and Wolf" as it does with Arno Schmidt or Marianne Fritz, which is to say very little.

The Yakov character writes a kind of surreal, associative prose, which is reminiscent of Peter Handke’s meditations on landscape. I think its ultimate model is Rilke or Trakl, in their hallucinatory poetic imagery, and in their twisting and folding of time and place. Yakov’s poetry is reminiscent of a number of models, from "Eugene Onegin" to folk songs and ballads, and poets like Rimbaud and Verlaine.

2. Philosophy
In terms of the history of novels and of philosophy, "Between Dog and Wolf" has a deep romanticism, mingled with a modernist interest in words and writing. Yakov expresses the romanticism especially clearly:

"Waters are splashing,
Flow by themselves
To reach their goal;
The years are passing,
And we ourselves
Just live, that's all." [p. 143]

Or:

"Why did I, the hunter-ragpicker,
On the face of existence a blemish, a scab...
Compose all these Notes at this river’s spring
And floated [sic] them down in a hurry?
Such a meaningless loss of candles and ink...
How annoying: All these years irretrievably lost,
Playing, singing, and having much fun;
You gaze in the tumbler--and you're just a ghost.
Alas, things look bad, you are done." [p. 230]

Or again, even more ecstatically, in the mode of Joyce:

"Lonely and lone among all the lone and lonely who are countless, burn, burn brightly--there, at the cobblestone highway; here, at the crossroads of turnouts, and at the dead end, where the burdock grows. Burn with white light, sinless flower, burn, bitter, burn, timid, burn, enchanting. Burn for Yakov..." [p. 180]

Yakov's prose chapters are the centerpiece of the book's modernism or postmodernism, because of what they do to time and place. The narrator's monologues fold back and forth through time, suffering from "symptoms of terminal temporal disease that distorted the natural flow of events and years, the flow of being, the course of the flow" (p. 176). Yakov's thoughts are swamped by unexpected links: not only Rilkean tropes and unexpected analogies, but constructions like "at first--just once; later--occasionally and then--constantly," and "when and whether, and if, and wherever, and while--then, therefore, and consequently" (pp. 174-75). For me these chapters are the heart of the book, because they articulate the narrators' (in the plural) sense of the sfumato of time, signaled in the book's title (which refers to the end of twilight, when it's not possible to tell a dog from a wolf) and in the setting (which is full of imagery of rivers, seasons, and time passing).

3. Translation
Stylistic contrasts are the engine of the book, and I can imagine that in Russian it might be a powerful experience. But in English it is serious hampered, even crippled, by poor translation choices.

The translator, Alexander Boguslawski, says the NPR interview (January 28, 2017) that when he first found the novel his English wasn’t good enough to translate it. Actually what he says is "But what was the problem, you know, that I read it very early, and my English wasn't good enough." Given, it's a radio interview, and no one is perfectly spoken on radio, but the Russian-English expression "what was the problem" is a warning sign. May I suggest that when it comes to idioms, his English still isn't good enough?

In the chapters written in Sokolov's voice, and in Yakov's voice, and to some extent in the poetry, the translation isn't an insuperable obstacle: I can usually tell what tone or idiom Sokolov was aiming at. But the chapters presented as written by Ilya are nearly unreadable. Here is the first line of the book:

"The moonth's clear, no catchin up with the dates, the year's current."

The translator's notes at the end of the book gloss "moonths" this way:

"Moonth: The Russian expression "mesiats iasen" has two meanings: the moon is bright, and the month is clear. To signal this duality, and the importance of wordplays throughout the novel, "moon" and "month" are combined into one word here. Such a combination resembles similar
constructions created by the narrator and, at the same time, indicates the derivation of the word "month" in many languages (including Russian and English) from the word "mooon." [p. 231]

I think this is wholly misguided. It's bad reasoning: "mooonth" sounds stupid (as if the narrator is stupid, which is partly the case), and it sounds a bit drunken. It doesn't conjure the philosophic and linguistic meanings Boguslawski thinks, especially because as Ilya's narrative goes on, there are no parallels to it.

It is extremely difficult to translate dialect, because every choice of an un-grammatical or local usage will conjure a particular ethnicity, period, or place in a native reader's mind. A translator can't just pick and choose different usages assuming they all coalesce into a new pidgin or patois. If you're going to invent a way of speaking, it's necessary to be consistent, and to have a pitch-perfect ear, as in "Clockwork Orange"; otherwise it's necessary to pick one ethnicity, time, or place, and just let it represent the speech in the original text. Chapters written by Ilya are, I think, absolutely unreadable:

"Wherever they'd settle me, I didn't mind bein down and out, didn't seriously hanker after a family, and made ends meet by askin folks for help in proportion to their means and possibilities. About that I remain remorseful, havin chosen for this purpose a co-op of individuals named after A. Sharpenhauer." [p. 1]

This is typical in its obtrusive invented abbreviated word endings (always lacking apostrophes, even though they are conventional, and even though contractions and possessives retain apostrophes). Ilya is wildly inventive and imaginative, and has a large vocabulary (and sly references to all sorts of figures in history, including Schopenhauer), so his supposedly hokey grammar rings consistently false. I have no idea what Sokolov's original sounds like: but I can't believe it raises this sort of distracting problem.

4. The novel's place in history
The comparison with "Finnegans Wake" is right in the sense that this book belongs in the 1920s and 1930s: it is a late-romantic, post-symbolist, first-generation modernist experiment in voices and language. It isn't postmodern, although it is in a sense post-Gombrowicz and post-Schmidt.