"I know how you love to make up different stories, when I'm talking to you I invent a lot too."—The narrator(s) of A School for Fools

Gogol', an apparent ancestor of Sasha Sokolov, once said the secret of success for any writer was merely to "describe a room and a street that were familiar to him." Perhaps thinking along similar lines, Andrei Bitov's narrator in Pushkin House tells us, "And if a man has wisdom of heart, and he wants to inform the world about what is on his mind, then he will inevitably possess the talent of the word if only he believes in himself." Of course, despite their seductive simplicity, such comments probably do more to mystify the creative process than to clarify it. But each writer in his own way points to the simplicity and the personal conviction that must lie at the heart of good writing. Both writers also implicitly indicate the unlimited panorama which inevitably opens up before any writer who contemplates creating...
a work of imaginative literature. Ultimately, the possibilities of a literary work are endless since writing is limited only by the writer's imagination and his powers of observation.

Discussions of Sasha Sokolov's *A School for Fools* have heretofore tended to focus on that novel's complexities, and rightly so. It is, after all, a profoundly puzzling work whose beauty at times seems to rise mysteriously out of its contradictions. But Vladimir Nabokov's cryptic, oft-quoted characterization of the work as "charming, tragic and touching" appears upon reflection to be highly judicious, for despite the novel's complexity, the feeling with which a reader is left upon finishing it is one of warmth and profound understanding rather than puzzlement. Despite the false starts, the loose ends, the deliberate mystifications, the baffling interchange of narrative voices, and the unexpected transformations of one character into another, the "wisdom of heart" displayed by the young schizophrenic narrator remains constant throughout and sets the tone of the work.

*A School for Fools* is an anti-intellectual work in that its revelations almost always derive from the realm of the senses. The narrator's power of insight lies in his unique vision of the world, which is the result of his own particular mental deficiency. His capacities of perception, intuition and imagination (concepts which are inextricably linked) are highly developed, even if his powers of rational reasoning are not. Describing a morning meeting with his imagined lover Veta, he recalls hearing "the uncut grass growing on the lawns," and the sounds of "a blind man wearing dark glasses, the lenses of which reflected the dusty foliage of the weeping acacias and the scudding clouds..." (E158/R116). He can hear two old men talking through an open window, and he even remembers that the subject of their conversation was the New Orleans fire of 1882. Whether such observations are the product of memory or of imagination is beside the point; to refer once again to Bitov's formulation, the young narrator has something to tell, and he tells it well, believing in himself. Describing what he experiences when out for a walk, the narrator says he easily finds "things and phenomena," both in his surroundings and his memory, which he loves to think about, but which cannot be memorized. He continues, "No one is capable of memorizing: the sound of rain, the aroma of night violets, premonition and many other things" (E158/R116). It is the immediate perceptions themselves—most