

Bryn Mawr College

Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

Russian Faculty Research and Scholarship

Russian

2021

Flap Your Wings for Goodbye: Avian Imagery in Sasha Sokolov's Between Dog and Wolf

José Vergara
jvergara@brynmawr.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.brynmawr.edu/russian_pubs



Part of the [Russian Literature Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Custom Citation

Vergara, J. 2021. "Flap Your Wings for Goodbye: Avian Imagery in Sasha Sokolov's Between Dog and Wolf." *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 55.3: 361–374.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.
https://repository.brynmawr.edu/russian_pubs/12

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Flap Your Wings for Goodbye: Avian Imagery in Sasha Sokolov's *Between Dog and Wolf*

José Vergara

Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, PA

jvergara@brynmawr.edu

Abstract

The present article explicates a selection of bird imagery in Sasha Sokolov's second novel, *Between Dog and Wolf* (1980). It analyzes the author's use of certain birds and their folkloric and mythological subtexts for symbolic purposes. In particular, he pairs his protagonists with key birds (hoopoe, lapwing, goose, magpie, albatross) to underscore aspects of their personalities, behaviors, relationships, and experiences. This ornithic imagery emphasizes how the characters cannot overcome their temptations and other base feelings to attain higher meaning and ultimately remain bound to the physical, natural world. (For a plot synopsis of *Between Dog and Wolf*, please consult the introduction to this issue of *CASS*.)

Keywords

Sasha Sokolov – *Between Dog and Wolf* – birds – ornithic imagery – avian imagery – mythology – folklore – hoopoe – magpie

As chapter 13 of Sasha Sokolov's *Between Dog and Wolf* (1980) begins, the narrator describes a flock of chickens' peculiar movements: "The chickens—may walk over the sand, looking surprised that they leave prints with their chicken feet. Not to like these birds, but to like

watching how they leave prints on the wet sand, without suspecting it, without suspecting anything.”¹ These birds, on one level, resemble the novel’s heroes themselves, who write and write without ever really stopping to consider their “prints” on the sand, surprised at times by what comes of their reflections on the page.

For instance, there is the moment when the one-legged knife-grinder Ilya Zynzyrela, author of a letter of complaint that makes up the bulk of *Dog*’s chapters, writes in both the first and third person about his missing crutches near the end of the book: “Wasn’t it ’cuz of these supports that the wardens bumped Ilya off, and he the hounds, and wasn’t it he who, accordingly, was restin at that moment on the stove bench? I’m rackin my brains back and forth and everythin seems to fit. [...] Only how did I manage to get without them after the wake to Gorodnishche, with what, I’d like to ask, did I overcome the wolf and ascended to my own haunts?”²

Throughout the book, the reader is confounded by contradictory events and reports, but here, the character himself acknowledges that he could hardly have engaged the hunter Yakov’s dog in battle when walking home one night if his crutches had already been stolen. Everything becomes murky because of such inconsistencies in the narrative. Like the birds’ senseless printing on the sand, there is something unexpected about Ilya’s words. He is shocked to realize that what he has written contradicts itself, as if his words took shape without his realizing it, “without [his]

¹ Sasha Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, translated by Alexander Boguslawski (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 173. Throughout the present article, I use Boguslawski’s English translation for ease of reading except when dealing with special nuances of the original Russian or in case of discrepancies.

² *Ibid.*, 226–227.

suspecting anything.” These words are all wrapped up in the startling manner they connect to other words, images, and their often dual, even triple, meanings. In short, they provoke the same sort of avian confusion, as Ilya and the reader glance back at what has been left on the preceding two hundred odd pages.

In a book full of animals, the titular dog and wolf foremost among them, birds nonetheless appear rather frequently and occupy an exceptionally prominent role, as the scene with the chickens suggests. Their variety is, indeed, impressive: pigeons, geese, songbirds, jackdaws, crows, lapwings, shrikes, magpies, hoopoes, cuckoos, chickens, mallards, orioles, cranes, sparrows, arguses, pheasants, ravens, gyrfalcons, kites, woodpeckers, rooks, oxpeckers, nightingales, chickens, albatrosses, midges, swifts, skylarks, and ducks, as well as the folkloric Fenist and Firebird. Sokolov even adds the archaic word *ptakh* (fugel in Boguslawski’s translation) for good measure. There are several means to explain the birds’ multiplicity. As most of the novel’s characters are hunters, the birds are clearly part of the scene setting. We could, perhaps, also look to Sokolov’s own name. He does after all habitually play with the *sokol*-falcon sound and image.³ Still, the birds in *Dog* signify much more.

³ Consider, for instance, *ibid.*, 96, where the minor character Kolya Helperov is said to turn into a falcon; Sasha Sokolov, *Palisandriia*, in *Shkola dlia durakov. Mezhdue sobakoi i volkom.*

Palisandriia. Esse. Triptykh (Sankt-Peterburg: Azbuka, 2020), 285, where a sentry “rises like a falcon;” and Sasha Sokolov, “Filornit,” in *Shkola dlia durakov. Mezhdue sobakoi i volkom.*

Palisandriia. Esse. Triptykh (Sankt-Peterburg: Azbuka, 2020), 709, where Sokolov playfully invokes his surname (“с околосоколиной, коллега, околосоколиной”) in the aptly titled “Philornist” (“bird-lover”).

Margaret Ziolkowski previously explored this topic in her article “In the Land of the Lonely Goatsucker: Ornithic Imagery in *A School for Fools* and *Between Dog and Wolf*,” where she primarily examines Sokolov’s first novel and its bird imagery in terms of how it undergirds the book’s transformation theme. Her analysis focuses on *School*, but it does extend to *Between Dog and Wolf*, where she claims that “the image of the metamorphosing bird plays a certain symbolic role,” particularly in Sokolov’s use of folktales about the Firebird and Fenist.⁴ Furthermore, according to Ziolkowski, this often metaphoric and self-referential ornithic imagery exhibits a pattern by which “nature becomes a reflection of the inner, psychological landscape” of the characters and their worlds.⁵ In other words, birds, like the dog and wolf imagery, offer insights into the characters’ mindsets, while at the same time, those emotions and feelings become something of realized metaphors in the novels, as the stories about Fenist, for example, are (partially) played out by Ilya and the other heroes in strange, metamorphosed forms.

As all but two pages of Ziolkowski’s article are devoted to *A School for Fools*, much more of *Dog*’s avian imagery still remains to be explicated, particularly Sokolov’s selection of certain species for symbolic purposes. Furthermore, while the centrality of the metamorphosis trope in Sokolov’s art is absolute, the ornithic imagery also serves a second, no less significant purpose. Namely, it underscores the inherent tie between the characters (humanity) and nature in the novel. That is, the natural world in the guise of various animals does not only *reflect* the

⁴ Margaret Ziolkowski, “In the Land of the Lonely Goatsucker: Ornithic Imagery in *A School for Fools* and *Between Dog and Wolf*,” *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 21, Nos. 3–4 (Fall-Winter 1987): 413.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 415.

characters' emotions and experiences. They may wish to overcome their status as beings of flesh, blood, and nature, but the bird imagery—among other things—constantly reminds them of their earthbound existence. They seek to escape the pull of the mundane and wearisome existence they live and to reach an ideal, but they are consistently dragged back down, left scratching in the sand with their styluses-cum-chicken feet on the banks of the Itil' river, the setting of *Between Dog and Wolf*. In many respects, the novel can be seen through this lens — as a tale about these curious, ill-defined characters who cannot overcome their circumstances, whether due to temptations, misunderstandings, or cycles of violence. The bird metaphors and their connotations of flight, freedom, and transfiguration would seem to offer respite from such cruelties, perhaps expectedly and in cliché manner, but, in fact, they more often than not only bind the characters more firmly to their circumstances through metaphoric, mythic, or folkloric subtexts. Flight, in short, offers no escape as they remain weighed down by their oppressive pasts and the implications of the birds. This process occurs on multiple levels, including imagery, subtext, and language.

Perhaps the most significant of the winged animals beyond Fenist and the Firebird, the hoopoe is mentioned at least nine times in *Between Dog and Wolf*. Known for its easily identifiable call (hoop-hoop-hoop), this bird can likewise be recognized by its striking crest, golden-brown plumage, dramatic black-and-white stripes along its wings and tail, and long, thin beak.⁶ It bears a mythic heritage to match its distinctive look. Most famously, the hoopoe is known from the story of Tereus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In this myth, the Thracian king rapes

⁶ V. E. Flint, R.L. Boehme, Y. V. Kostin, and A. A. Kuznetsov, *A Field Guide to Birds of the USSR*, translated by Natalia Bourso-Leland (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 185.

Philomela, his wife Procne’s sister, and cuts out her tongue to keep the secret. After Philomela manages to convey to Procne what happened, the sisters conspire to kill the latter’s son, Itys, and feed him to Tereus. Upon learning of their actions, Tereus in turn seeks them out, but before he can enact his revenge, the gods transform them all into birds: Procne into a swallow, Philomela into a nightingale, Tereus into a hoopoe. According to the folklore, the hoopoe’s hooting call is said to mean “where, where” in Greek — Tereus’s plea as he searches for his displaced family.



A common hoopoe (Upupa epops). Lake Tuzla, Karataş - Adana, Turkey (Zeynel Cebeci). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

The parallels to Ilya’s story in *Dog* are readily apparent, despite the absence of cannibalism in Sokolov’s novel. The hoopoe is introduced early in one of the book’s first poems: “It’s good that near the pond, / Sitting on a branch of oak tree, / The Hoopoe pipes with great

glee / And repeats on and on: How good I feel by the pond.”⁷ The same thread is then picked up in the next poem:

And the masses can notice much easier
The appearance, let’s not say: of a cuckoo,
But correctly, let’s say: of the Hoopoe
Who is cranking his grinding flint stone?

You bet. But what, one may ponder,
The sound of the Hoopoe’s loud grind
Resembles at this moment of wonder?
It sounds like someone is crunching
The old chicken bone you were munching,
But then left it, unfinished, behind.

[...]

What a dank, clammy autumn! It’s taxing.
But the Hoopoe is bothered not
By the fact he doesn’t have access
To dull scythes, or sickles, or axes,
But because nobody asks him:
Please, put on my scarf and my coat.

[...]

That’s life: By the invalids’ home,
Which, in winter, has a rink at its gate,
The Hoopoe approaches the lame,
Or rather, one-legged gnome,
Blind and mute, hunchbacked, and tame,
And keeps honing his lone figure skate.⁸

Here, the connection to Ilya the knife-grinder is made clear. The hoopoe shares Ilya’s profession of grinding, moves about on one leg, and lives in the same space as his human counterpart among the other invalids of Gorodnishche. In a transmutation of the Tereus myth, the cutting of

⁷ Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 32–33.

Philomela's tongue echoes Ilya-hoopoe's association with "scythes, or sickles, or axes," as well as the loss of his leg on a railroad track at some point in the novel (at least a couple variants of the story are given). In this case, of course, it is the man who suffers the dismemberment, but the cycle of violence from the original myth finds resonance in *Dog*'s plot where no bad deed goes unreciprocated. There is something Gogolian about the chain of events that ultimately leads to Ilya's murder at Yakov's hands, but the Tereus myth offers another subtext, one that intertwines the novel's natural imagery and mythic dimensions in arresting ways.

Likewise, the hoopoe's call ("where, where") being a sign of Tereus searching for his family is paralleled in *Dog*, as Ilya, too, seeks Orina, his lover, and their potential son, Yakov, throughout the novel. In fact, Ilya closes the loop, so to speak, when he calls Orina "you swallow of mine," while bemoaning how she took his son from him.⁹ He is displaced, like Tereus, in his various transformations and peregrinations, pursuing his idealized family, but constantly mired by the imagery he uses and that is used to describe him.

This tendency is emphasized at the book's end, in the final poem "Note XXXVII Post scriptum:" "How annoying: All these years irretrievably lost, / Playing, singing, and having much fun; / You gaze in the tumbler—and you're just a hoopoe. / Alas, things look bad, you are done."¹⁰ Despite his wanderings and experiences, Ilya remains transfigured into this avian symbol of violence, lost family, and longing. Even as he seeks to paint himself as a hero of his

⁹ Ibid., 169.

¹⁰ Ibid., 230. Curiously, despite the significance of the hoopoe in *Dog*, Boguslawski here renders "hoopoe" (*udod*) as "ghost" in his English translation. Cf. Sasha Sokolov, *Mezhdú sobakoi i volkom* (Moskva: OGI, 2017), 310.

own creation, a prophetic Elijah, at the end of the day, Yakov's poem emphasizes that for Ilya and the other heroes of Sokolov's novel there is no escaping this identity and his mistakes and traumas. The natural world, through this bird imagery, underscores this view by inscribing these myths upon the characters. Furthermore, the hoopoe image interweaves with *Dog's* fixation on alcohol as the revelation of one's hoopoe identity is found in the reflection inside a tumbler. In vino veritas, indeed.

It would be worth mentioning one other subtext related to the hoopoe. As Boris Ostanin notes, in the Koran, the hoopoe is said to arrive late to a congress of birds called by King Solomon.¹¹ Threatened with death, the hoopoe explains that he had been performing reconnaissance in Queen Sheba's kingdom, and for this act, Solomon spares the hoopoe's life and sends him with a message to the Queen. Thus, like Ilya who writes his letter of complaint to the local investigator Pozhilykh "after" his own murder, the hoopoe is associated with communication, the post, and messages sent and delivered after a death sentence.¹² A more optimistic aspect of the hoopoe's mythology, this ability to avoid death and attain a figurative immortality serves as a key link to Ilya here.

Another Solomon-inflected bird, so to speak, is the lapwing, who, as Beryl Rowland

¹¹ Boris Ostanin, *Slovar' k povesti Sashi Sokolova "Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom"* (Moskva: Pal'mira), 39.

¹² Yakov and the postman Sila Silych open other characters' letters together and, in fact, read Ilya's message to Pozhilykh, which complicates the narrative layers of the book, for, as Martina Napolitano suggests in this issue of *CASS*, it means that Yakov *may* be the authorial source of the entire text. Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 153–155.

writes, “was the most intelligent of the prophetic birds which attended King Solomon and it guarded his secrets.”¹³ But in addition, the lapwing has also been associated with misbehaving women.¹⁴ Her first appearance in *Dog* occurs when the narrator in chapter 2 describes Maria/Orina, the primary female figure in the novel, on a rendezvous with a young man: “She squealed like lapwings in the field, when you walk across in semidarkness [...] Or when the ship’s boy has led her by hand to the abandoned slips, and the lapwings have been flying about, and the slips are filthy [...] May Maria howl, running out on the dam, calling ‘Come home.’”¹⁵ Here, we see interconnections on various levels. First, Maria/Orina is regularly correlated with deceptions and betrayal, often sexual in nature, so the reference to the lapwings has some internal logic. Her squealing evokes the folklore of the naughty birds. The association between Maria’s cries, lapwings, and the boat—the scene of numerous sexual encounters in *Between Dog and Wolf*—is later picked up: “The rowlocks are cryin exactly like lapwings.”¹⁶ The sounds of the bird thus echo throughout the book’s architecture.¹⁷ Even when not physically present,

¹³ Beryl Rowland, *Birds with Human Souls: A Guide to Bird Symbolism* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press), 97.

¹⁴ *Idem.*

¹⁵ Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁷ The noisy rowlocks appear earlier in a poem, though with a different bird in tow: “With a glow of roll-ups, / Fragments of vulgar phrases, / A part of speech known by the name of cough, / And with the moaning of rowlocks / Resembling the mallard’s call, / Approaches a gaggle of ragged

Maria's presence can be felt here, as the longing the two heroes feel for each other manifests in the creaking sounds.¹⁸ Then, in the next line, the presence of the lapwings stands in for her many assignations with the boy by the boat. Finally, as Maria flees the scene, her call to "come home" resonates with the hoopoe-Ilya's plaintive calls for his family. In these ways, the avian imagery both establishes a common motif that runs throughout *Between Dog and Wolf* and reflects how sounds and words turn into characters, who then also turn into images and all over again in Sokolov's art.

These sexual connotations extend further via the prevalent goose imagery in the novel. Although today far more commonly considered silly or stupid, geese have a lofty mythology. In Rowland's words, the goose has traditionally been viewed as "an erotic symbol for both sexes, because it was the bird of creation, whether in the male solar form of the gods or the female lunar form of the mother goddesses."¹⁹ So when Ilya states that Orina "[w]ith her saucy figure [...] was teasin geese in [him] on purpose," it is clear that he is being aroused as he watches her, but the metaphor likewise alludes to this folklore.²⁰ The image recurs two chapters later when Ilya thinks about his familial misfortunes and how his life has dramatically changed: "The geese in

freeshooters." Ibid., 35. Here, the hunters' presence dictates the noise that the rowlocks make be that of their target.

¹⁸ A similar creaking sound ("скрипы") also appears in *A School for Fools*. See D. Barton Johnson, "Sasha Sokolov's Twilight Cosmos: Themes and Motifs," *Slavic Review* 45, no. 4 (Winter 1986), 643 for an analysis of its sexual undertones in Sokolov's first novel.

¹⁹ Rowland, *Birds*, 68.

²⁰ Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 106.

Ilya started rufflin their feathers, Fomich. 'Cuz, after all, what kind of a sucker, flashed thru my mind, I appear to [Orina] and to myself, what kind of stupid games were we playin, why did we have to drag and stretch everythin for months, why did I want to show her my respectability-humility?"²¹ Again, the geese underscore the symbolic nexus between stupidity and sexuality. Here, it is as if the birds are within Ilya—an outburst of his inner passions that he cannot overcome—and a fear of how others (may) view him. The geese also appear at the beginning of the novel under similar circumstances: "Well, when that dame appeared without warnin on the spit, they—mostly the local sitters out of the game wardens—sat there and observed the flight of geese."²² The mysterious dama, who is associated with Orina, tempts the men who live, work, and hunt along the river. After disappearing with them one by one, they die by suicide once they have apparently sated their desires. In all these cases, the presence of the female figure generates the appearance—in some form—of the geese, an image which in turn signifies the inevitability of what follows: sex and death. Again, they may idealize the woman, but their seemingly fated end is always much less lofty and certainly more grim.

Although the lines between characters, as well as those of or between their metaphoric representations blur, Yakov also receives an important ornithic avatar: the magpie. After an introduction in chapter 2,²³ this bird enters the spotlight in the poem "Note XI Casting a Spell"

²¹ Ibid., 126.

²² Ibid., 10.

²³ Ibid., 23.

alongside the crow²⁴:

May the Magpie be sick, may the Crow be sick too,
 May the Dog be healthy and glad.
 A cripple was walking around the world blue
 And his crutches were splattered with blood.

[...]

And in their shabby coats, in the blue world, outbound,
 Not concerned if it is night or day,
 Valiant hunters, making magpie-like chirping sounds,
 Chased the ermines from the copses away.

Village folks, but alert and rarely forgive.
 May Magpie the Thief still be sick.
 They've spied out the place where this fellow lives
 And lifted, the rascals, his sticks.

They drank them away and that would be all.²⁵

²⁴ According to Edward Armstrong's *The Folklore of Birds*, "magpie lore seems to be dependent upon, or derive from, raven traditions to a considerable extent and the folklore of the crow is confused with that of the raven." Edward Armstrong, *The Folklore of Birds: An Enquiry into the Origin and Distribution of Some Magico-Religious Traditions* (London: Collins, 1958), 72.

Unsurprisingly, some of this blending between birds (and people) takes place in *Between Dog and Wolf*, too. As for the crow, so consistently paired with the magpie, there is the story of Coronis, whose adultery is revealed by a tattling crow. After Apollo condemns her to death, he feels remorse and turns the crow's white feathers black as punishment. Here, again, we note the theme of transformations and the unfaithful woman, who in the form of Orina, would make the crow Ilya. See also Rowland, *Birds*, 36.

²⁵ Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 84–85.

The key parallel here, of course, is the magpie's tendency to pilfer all sorts of things to build its nest: "Regarded almost universally as a symbol of ill-omen," the "magpie's incorrigible addiction to pilfering has no doubt contributed to its unpopularity."²⁶ Accordingly, the poem recounts how the hunters steal Ilya's crutches in retaliation for the violence he committed against Yakov's dog after mistaking it for a wolf. Once again, the humans become linked to birds because of their actions. (Or is it the opposite?) The theft of Ilya's crutches by Yakov ultimately leads to the former's death, so it stands to reason that he should be entwined metaphorically to the magpie.

This rivalry between Ilya and the magpies is seen again when the knife-grinder mentions how he shouts at a group of magpies (and rooks) to not steal his money and suggests to his reader that he should not "leave nothing shiny" for fear of theft.²⁷ While Yakov himself is not present, his avian representative stands in for the hunter-thief. Additionally, when the magpies scatter in flight in response to Ilya's cries, "half of the sky is gone" — yet another instance of the novel's rich play with dualities of all sorts.²⁸

Even more significantly, the magpie is considered a symbol for poets thanks to the Roman satirist Martial, who wrote, "I, a loquacious magpie, greet you with intelligible speech, my lord, and were you not to see me you would refuse to believe that I was a bird."²⁹ This trait and classical link clearly align with Yakov, who is not only the thieving huntsman who takes

²⁶ Rowland, *Birds*, 103–04.

²⁷ Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 121.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Martial, quoted in Rowland, *Birds*, 105.

Ilya's crutches in response to the latter's assault on his dog, but also the author of the poems collected under the "Notes" heading. In these poems, as elsewhere, he demonstrates a particular talent for "imitat[ing] words in a distinct voice like men," that is, he adopts various identities, voices, registers, and so on, as if chattering away like a magpie who responds to the people around him.³⁰ Many of his poems consist of parodies and stylizations of nineteenth-century Russian poetry.³¹ Yakov incorporates bits and pieces of previous authors' works in these texts, along with their general styles, rhythms, and so on. The prose chapters that concern him, but which are not narrated *by* him, also include ekphrastic descriptions of paintings ("Pictures from an Exhibition") and an account of his ancestor, Nikodim Yermolaich Palamakhterov, that reads as if lifted straight from Gogol.³² Consider, too, the scene near the end of the novel where he suddenly begins speaking like Ilya: "and don't be angry that Krylobylchik and I treated the sharpener like that—anythin can happen in the daily grind. [...] Does he think that 'cuz he is an invalidual, everythin is permitted?"³³ Highly intelligent—experiments have shown that they can even recognize themselves in a mirror—magpies are crafty and remarkably adaptable; the magpie therefore serves as an potent symbol for Yakov the poet-thief.³⁴ Much like Ilya's hoopoe

³⁰ Rowland, *Birds*, 105.

³¹ For an analysis of these parodies, consider Gerald S. Smith, "The Verse in Sasha Sokolov's *Between Dog and Wolf*," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 21, nos. 3–4 (Fall-Winter 1987): 321–45.

³² Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 61–70.

³³ *Ibid.*, 222–223.

³⁴ Rachel Warren Chadd and Marianne Taylor, *Birds: Myth, Lore, & Legend* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 258.

with its positive *and* negative connotations and Orina's lapwings, who are closely tied to a sexuality that is both weaponized *and* treasured, the Yakov-magpie pairing is therefore multivalent, and it contributes to Sokolov's art of blended identities. On the one hand, Yakov's personality, his originality, becomes lost in this mirror-like text. On the other, he takes joy in his chameleon-esque nature: "The voice, the words, and the manner—everything in his speech smacks of artificiality and affectation, everything in his monologue seems strange to him. However, aware of this, [...] he derives pleasure from ingratiating himself with the coachman."³⁵ Although Yakov constructs his poetic "nest" deep in the Volga backwoods out of borrowed materials, the resulting product, like that of the magpie, is nevertheless highly original. Yakov's literary theft involves the recontextualization of his stolen materials, which transforms them significantly.

Along with general thievery, the magpie-Yakov hybrid is linked to illness and suffering. Ostanin writes that the magpie spell mentioned above is meant to reduce pain when a child falls.³⁶ Beyond the spell-casting, as Rowland describes it, "In the Vedic hymns, the magpie was associated with disease, according to Gubernatis. The association persisted in folklore, possibly strengthened by the fact that the magpie does have a knack for smelling out a lurking sickness and will attack and tear out the eyes of an ailing sheep or lamb."³⁷ The lines from the spell repeat again later in the novel, though this time through Orina in the scene where she saves Ilya from an oncoming train: "The magpie is sick, she claims, the crow is sick too, she says, and Ilya is

³⁵ Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 223.

³⁶ Ostanin, *Slovar'*, 56.

³⁷ Rowland, *Birds*, 105.

healthy and glad, she casts the spell.”³⁸ In the macabre inversion of the folklore presented in *Dog*, the spell cast by Orina would seem to call on the magpie—Ilya’s perceived enemy—to fall ill.

But what comes first — Ilya’s narrative-letter that quotes his exchange with Orina on the train tracks or Yakov’s poems? Once more it would seem that the bird imagery both describes the heroes’ actions *and* dooms them to their fates. With apologies for the cliché-pun, there is little resolving this chicken-egg scenario, but the ornithic imagery serves as an anchor between the various narrative levels of the book. Sokolov’s tapestry, as Olga Matich calls it in this issue, has noteworthy avian threads.

Such animal-human blending also occurs with the sailor Albatrasov. His name, of course, derives from Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798), which recounts how a sailor kills an albatross and, haunted by his actions, must wear the bird around his neck as penance. The connection to the literary subtext is literalized in the following line from Ilya’s letter of complaint: “Whatever happens, regardless of any scrapes or anythin else—to pay Meadow Saturday a visit in the future existence. And I tied a knot. On my necktie. And when together with the sailor Albatrosov we whistled ourselves all hands on deck.”³⁹ In some ways a more obvious connection than any of the others, Albatrosov is an embodiment of Ilya’s perceived betrayal by Orina, who it is said, sleeps with a number of sailors under the aforementioned

³⁸ Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 195.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 193. Ostanin, by contrast, suggests a link to Baudelaire’s “Albatross.” Ostanin, *Slovar'*, 91. However, Baudelaire compares the poet to the bird, which strays from Ilya’s role in *Between Dog and Wolf*.

overturned boat on the banks of the Volga, as well as guilt over his own actions. Ilya takes on his sorrow when he meets Albatrosov on a train after his separation from Orina. The avian-sailor thus serves to remind Ilya of the past he cannot escape. He lingers nearby in these strange scenes where Ilya and his companion jump from train to ship almost imperceptibly in a move that Sokolov has called cinematic.⁴⁰ The anthropomorphized bird imagery, in this way, underscores Ilya's lingering psychological trauma, both that which he himself caused and that which he received.

Finally, birds at times seem to spring up because of a linguistic resonance, as in the following paired lines from Ilya's story: "But there, where the Wintry Man is squeakin with his carriage—fall descended from heavens, at my colleagues' place, in Gorodnishche—a snowstorm began, and on my Wolf River—orioles and woodpeckers" and "it's pure December, and on our Wolf River, though it's hard to believe, orioles and woodpeckers."⁴¹ In both cases, the "*Volka-rechka*" seems to generate the *ivolga*, an echo of the river's other, more common name. Various words and images thus "fly" out of the novel's texture thanks to the phonetic reverberations, and furthermore, the oriole-*ivolga* pairing underscores the dualities of the novel—word and bird, river and animal—much as the characters slide into and out of one another. Likewise, in a separate scene, an oriole is said to "resew evening into night," and in this way, the bird emphasizes the notion of transformations, dualities of existence, as in the river with multiple names to which it

⁴⁰ Sasha Sokolov, quoted in Ostanin, *Slovar'*, 137.

⁴¹ Sokolov, *Between Dog and Wolf*, 100, 127.

has previously been linked.⁴² “When everything is at once two things,” as Ziolkowski writes, such a transformation “constitutes a change in form, but not in essence.”⁴³

The diegetic reason for these numerous winged animals’ appearances in *Between Dog and Wolf* is evident from the novel’s setting in the wilds of the upper Volga, where the author himself spent some time as a game warden. They are simply part of the hunters’ world. And yet, their metaphorical capital is much greater. They contribute to the novel’s rich linguistic texture, its web of symbolism, and its very plot, which is built upon these phonetic, mythic, and folkloric resonances that all echo and reflect one another in striking ways. More significantly, many of these associations reveal the characters’ boundedness to nature, whether it is in the form of flocking birds or a flowing river.

In his use of this ambiguous imagery, Sokolov, like Yakov with his parodies, is clearly tapping into a tradition *and* expanding it. Birds in Russian literature have a long history of symbolizing the poet as well as free thought and imagination. Marina Tsvetaeva’s “Your name is a bird in my hands” (1916), which is dedicated to Blok, is a touching example of this phenomenon, while Velimir Khlebnikov’s “Bird in a Cage” (1897) explores the topic of the natural world captured by humankind. Khlebnikov, one of Sokolov’s favorite writers and the son of an ornithologist, would continue to develop his avian theme in dramatic ways, as in the bird language of his “supersaga” *Zangezi*.

Sokolov, too, makes birds a key motif in his experimental novel. From the hoopoe to

⁴² Ibid., 39. I use a slightly modified translation here to emphasize the oriole’s *resewing* of the night. Sokolov, *Mezhdu sobakoi i volkom*, 59.

⁴³ Ziolkowski, “Ornithic Imagery,” 416.

Fenist, they are closely associated with the idea of transformation, as Ziolkowski has rightly explicated. At the same time, they emphasize how culture has “written” upon the birds, ascribing legends to each of them, but also how those same tales come to define the people that populate the world of *Dog*. In the shadowy world of the book, with all of its ricocheting allusions and subtexts, both Ilya and Yakov seek to attain some greater understanding of their situations—through art, through wandering, through violence, through language and philosophizing—but they end up only scratching in the sand with their chicken feet, unsure of what traces they have left, whether they are their own creations or external patterns that have been ingrained upon their world.