

Blok's Apocalypse: A Poet's Elusive Revolution

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A characteristically modern apocalyptic current runs through many of Aleksandr Blok's works. But despite their fervent calls for revolution, Blok's poems were classified as unnecessary in post-revolutionary Russia and Blok was pushed to the outskirts of the new Soviet literary circles. In the months following the Revolution, Blok stopped writing poetry, withdrew from his official responsibilities, and soon died, rejected and belittled by the new world for which he had yearned so strongly. At the bottom of it all is the poet's conception of revolution and its implications. As Viktor Zhirmunsky notes, "It is not the political fortunes of his native land that concern the poet, but the salvation of its living soul."¹ Blok called for revolution as an agent of nationwide, even worldwide, spiritual rebirth. He lamented the bankruptcy and shallowness of his age more than he ever did labor conditions or workers' rights. Unfortunately, Blok's revolutionary hopes did not coalesce into reality, and as his apocalyptic dreams were brushed away, so too, was Blok.

It would be wrong to classify Blok as a poet *of* the revolution. Rather, he is a poet *for* the revolution. Blok's poetry is not the art of the proletariat, but rather the lofty speech of a prophet. Blok scorns the common masses, as if insulted by their banal and unfeeling lives. He characterizes the average nobodies of the city as "heaps of human trash, [...] human roast beef, grey specters of wet boredom."² This disdain for everyday man, as well as Blok's noble personality and pedigree, prevents his inclusion in the pantheon of wholly revolutionary literature. Blok grew up in the arms of Russia's established upper class, describing his childhood as "a veritable Christmas tree of aristocratic overindulgence."³ Of

course, Blok puts down his silver spoon in both his life and his art, but as a revolutionary poet he can't help but battle with his past: "His art was at odds with his way of life. What he lived by in his life he burned to ashes in his art."⁴ These ashes, scorched as they may be, still smudge the pages of Blok's work. We find them in the poet's unyielding spirituality, elevated speech, and his messianic tone. These ashes color Blok's revolution as one distinctly different from that of the Bolsheviks, a discordance that ultimately led to the poet's marginalization in the years that follow 1917.

The greatest disconnection between Blok's anticipated revolution and the October revolution lies in Blok's spirituality. Indeed Blok speaks more generally of apocalypse than of revolution. Blok's work is permeated by a cataclysmic drive from his very earliest poems all the way to "The Twelve," but this is the cataclysm of Revelation, not revolution. In "Autumnal Love," Blok equates Russia's disarray with a profound spiritual suffering, and, casting himself as a Christ, calls for God's intervention on the country's behalf:

Oh, Christ, My Lord! My land is sad.
I faint upon the cross, I die!
When will Thy bark now reach the shore
Where I hang, crucified, on high?⁵

Blok often returns to this motif of poet as prophetic Christ figure. He repeatedly likens his occupation to a sacrifice made on behalf of the Russian people, building himself up as a vanguard of the coming apocalypse, a spiritual leader taking a nation of lost souls to their redemption. Boris Eikhenbaum titles this shade of Blok the "dictator of thought of an entire generation [...] [the] dictator of feelings."⁶ With this characterization in mind, it becomes clear why so many of

the poets who follow him look up to Blok as a God figure. His poetry is “The grim hangman, railing, [who] drives / Into my palm the iron nail”;² it burdens the poet and at the same time indebts all those who hear his voice to his martyrdom.

At times Blok’s prophecies are terrifying and sobering. In “A Voice from the Chorus,” Blok warns of “the darkness of the days ahead!”⁸ Russia, drunken, frivolous Russia, must experience the worst before she can receive her redemption:

And we shall see the apocalypse,
the last, worst age descend.
Repulsive evil will eclipse
the sky, laughter freeze on all lips,
a longing for life’s end...⁹

The “last, worst age” is Russia’s final trial before the end of history, before a “New Petersburg city, coming out of heaven [...] will return *transformed* ‘on the last day.’”¹⁰ Blok expects of the revolution not just a political power shift, but a complete transformation of the world and of the souls of men. His righteous “New Petersburg” is God’s kingdom on earth and ingrained in this city is an optimistic, overarching sense of hope that refrains throughout Blok’s works. In “Russia,” Blok bemoans his homeland’s abundant suffering, but nevertheless is filled with hope for her future:

And the impossible is possible,
the highroad is light and long,
and the glint of an eye far off
glances from under the scarf
as prison-weary, sorrowful,
begins the troika-driver’s song.¹¹

Blok, who is never afraid to criticize his country for her shortcomings, firmly believes in Russia’s potential for absolution. He looks to the nation’s reverent past, criticizes the superficiality of the present, and then sees retribution, onerous as it may be, on the horizon. The poet is convinced that the coming upheaval will bring salvation, that “the revolution [is] omnipotent, and he [makes] enormous demands of it without doubting that they [will] be satisfied.”¹²

No one piece captures all the nuances of Blok’s voice better than “The Twelve.” In this masterpiece we see prophecy, denunciation, and hope alongside one another. Published in 1918, “The Twelve” is rooted in the events of the October Revolution and yet, as Viktor Zhirmunsky relates, the tone is spiritual, not political: “Like the poet’s entire work, it is completely removed from politics, programs, and the like; the problem it poses is not a political, but a religious and moral one, and its message is individual rather than social.”¹³ Blok takes the world as he sees it, dark and uncertain, and relays it with the full force of his prophetic voice. We enter this world in the midst of a maelstrom:

Darkness—and white
snow hurled
by the wind. The wind!
You cannot stand upright
for the wind: the wind
scouring God’s world.¹⁴

The contrast between the dark of night and the white blinding snow defines the poem’s color palette. The only shade present to stain the city’s drab grayness is blood red. The Revolution’s haze sets a stage of grotesque moral ambiguity. This is Russia in the same darkness that Blok predicts in “A Voice from the Chorus.” Even nature gets caught up in rebellion. Amidst the blackness of night, the wind torments the city’s inhabitants. And still, the “Black sky grows blacker”;¹⁵ the night’s chaos entrenches Russia even further into darkness.

The wind plays up: snow flutters down.
Twelve men are marching through the town.

Their rifle-butts on black slings sway.
Lights left, right, left, wink all the way...
Cap tilted, fag drooping, everyone
looks like a jailbird on the run.

Freedom, freedom,
down with the cross!

Rat-a-tat-tat!¹⁶

With several vivid, tight stanzas, Blok introduces a company of Red Guardsmen on a march engulfed in wind, pierced by gunshot, illuminated by the fires burning all around. These soldiers, who at once become raucous troops, angels of death, and Christ's disciples, are not majestic, glorious harbingers of the Revolution. Instead, they are a ragamuffin band, each one looking "like a jailbird on the run." The lowness of this description and of the soldier's forthcoming behavior casts the setting of "The Twelve" as the vulgar, bankrupt Russia that Blok often denounces in his poetry. These soldiers, consorting with the same prostitutes as their counter-revolutionary enemies, represent Russia and all of its deficiencies tearing itself apart. "Let's take a crack at Holy Russia, / Mother Russia / with her big fat arse!"¹² they cry, as if the careless violence of their march makes them any holier than the old world which they overthrow.

Leaving the old world behind them, and "Abusing God's name as they go, / all twelve march onward into the snow ..." ¹⁸ The Guard's blasphemous words are the penultimate step before they are redeemed, before the second coming. A red flag is seen in the distance, shots are fired, and the target is presumably hit:

"Come out, comrade, or you'll regret it—we'll fire when I've counted five!"

Crack—crack—crack! But only the echo answers from among the eaves...¹⁹

And suddenly, as if from nowhere, Christ:

carrying a blood-red flag —
invulnerable where bullets crossed —
crowned with a crown of snowflake
pearls,
a flowery diadem of frost,
ahead of them goes Jesus Christ.²⁰

Enveloped in white purity, arisen unscathed by bullets, Christ—and Blok's long-awaited salvation—has arrived as Russia's new leader. This single line shocked and confounded Blok's contemporaries—what does Christ have to do

with the people's uprising? For Blok the relationship is clear:

He seems to suggest, as he pauses in his work on "The Twelve," that the revolution is neither a question of politicians ("Lunacharsky or even Lenin"), nor of freshly provoked territorial disputes ("neither Rumania, nor Finland, nor Ukraine"), but "the end of the historical process."²¹

After the revolution, Blok was positively giddy with a sense of the end. Korney Chukovsky writes, "when the revolution came, Blok greeted it with a kind of religious exultation as the festival of the *spiritual* transfiguration of Russia."²² Unfortunately for the poet, the actual events that transpired never approached anything like a "spiritual transfiguration." Life was as tedious as ever, if not more so. The old world had been destroyed, and yet nothing new was put in its place. Bureaucrats, the foot-soldiers of *Byt*, still flooded every office floor, and in the midst of it all, Blok lost his gift for prophecy: "I have forgotten how to write poems and how to think about poems."²³ A far cry from the resplendent sonorous kingdom of God that he had envisioned, the new Russia was dull, silent, and stifling. Blok gave up hope in his vision; it had been crushed under a wave of reality that hope and poetry could no longer hold back. In but a few months, all Blok's accomplishments were sucked into the past:

Life has changed (but it is not new, not nuova). We have conquered the whole world, this is now an accomplished fact, and everything will now change in the opposite direction, not [the direction] in which we live and which we loved.²⁴

Blok died after a long illness, purportedly of starvation in the midst of food shortages, but his poetry died long before this event. Essentially, there was no room for it anymore—the Soviets didn't need any mystical "Poems to the Beautiful Lady," and calls for revolution had already become dated. When they did publish Blok's works, they did so disdainfully. Even while he was still alive,

publishers told Blok that “The Twelve,” while one of “the best works of Russian literature,” was only valuable because of its “historical significance.”²⁵ Others were not so kind in their interactions with the fallen poet. As Boris Pasternak recalls:

Blok had been told a pile of monstrous things and they had not been ashamed to tell him to his face that he had outlived his time and was inwardly dead—a fact with which he calmly agreed. And all this was said to him just a few months before his actual death.²⁶

One can imagine a post-revolutionary Russia in an alternate universe in which Blok comes out on the other side of the apocalypse as a triumphant messiah, having led his people to the promised land. Blok was such a prophet, such a Christ, that he could only have survived if the new art of the Sovi-

ets, and even the new Soviet world, had been rebuilt in his image. In the real world, however, what can you do with a “Dictator of Feelings” when you already have a “Dictator of the Proletariat” in place? Autocracy by its very nature saves only one seat, and Blok, because of his nobleness, his spirituality, or perhaps his naive hope for change, had his chair pulled out from under him before he was offered a chance to sit down. Blok’s legacy, however, lives on in his words, and those of the generations of writers who grew up under his towering shadow.

We are traitors in life and friendship,
we are spinners of empty words.
So What? We are clearing the way
for those who come afterwards.²⁷



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