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| Blok, Aleksander (БЛОК, АЛЕКСАНДР) (1880-1921) |
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| One of Russia’s greatest twentieth century poets, Aleksander Aleksandrovich Blok (1880-1921) was a representative of the “second wave” of Russian Symbolists. Two books of poetry, *Verses on a Beautiful Lady* (1904) and *Inadvertent Joy* (1907), and his lyric drama, *The Showbooth*, staged in 1906, made him famous. Paradoxically, Blok began to openly mock his former Symbolist ideals after 1905, even as he was considered by many to be the leader of Russian Symbolism. In particular, Blok was concerned with the widening gulf between the common people and the intelligentsia. As his disillusionment deepened, his poetry was haunted by a sense of imminent catastrophe. Therefore, his initial response to the revolution of 1917 was positive, seeing in it an apocalyptic moment that would bring renewal and regeneration after a period of chaos and destruction. This idea was realized in his poem *The Twelve* (1918) which celebrates the October Revolution and placed Christ at the head of a gang of Red Army soldiers. Blok, however, soon realized that the Bolsheviks would not embody the revolutionary ideals that he wished to support, causing him to become disenchanted and deeply depressed. Blok only lived for another three and a half years, dying in August 1921. |
| Aleksander Aleksandrovich Blok (1880-1921) is considered one of Russia’s greatest twentieth century poets and one of the leading representatives of the “second wave” of Russian Symbolists, along with Andrei Bely and Viacheslav Ivanov. Russian Symbolism was mainly known for its poetic attempts to evoke the phenomenal (spiritual) world, rather than to depict the noumenal (or terrestrial). Symbolists believed that there was a more ideal world that paralleled our present reality and through a language of symbols, they could induce this spiritual world.  By birth and upbringing, Blok belonged to the Russian gentry and was a typical member of the liberal intelligentsia. More than other Symbolists, Blok exemplified the tendency to weave life with art, to live and write the same story. As a result, Blok’s poetry captures a personal and poetic evolution from that of a youthful, mystical romanticism, through a period of decadent disillusionment and, finally, on into a period of hope that the February and October Revolutions of 1917 might bring positive renewal and regeneration after a period of chaos and destruction.  File: Photograph of Blok 1907.jpg  Figure 1Blok 1907  Source: Image is available at <http://russiapedia.rt.com/prominent-russians/literature/aleksandr-blok/>  As a young man, he fell in love with and eventually married in 1903 Liubov Mendeleeva, the daughter of the famous chemist Dmitry Mendeleev, the creator of the periodic table of elements. This marriage was not successful in a conventional sense, but did prove important for Blok’s poetic development as Mendeleeva inspired most of his early and late verse. In 1904 Blok’s first book of poetry, *Verses on a Beautiful Lady*, was enthusiastically received by both younger and older (such as Valery Briusov and Konstantin Balmont) Symbolists.  File: Blok’s Verses on a Beautiful Lady.jpg  Blok’s Verses on a Beautiful Lady  Blok’s Verses on a Beautiful Lady  Source: Image is available at <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ee/Alexander-Blok-stihi-o-prekrashoj-dame.jpg>  His second book of verse, *Inadvertent Joy* (1907), and his lyric drama, *The Showbooth*, staged in 1906, made him famous. By this time, Blok could consider himself a professional poet and a leading member of the literary-philosophical intelligentsia of St Petersburg. In his youth, Blok wrote for a small circle of friends who were smitten by a mystical love for the Divine Sophia (a philosophical ideal that came out of Vladimir Soloviev’s poetry). These young poets accepted Soloviev’s philosophy of a mystical second coming, when Christ would join with the Divine Sophia, creating heaven on earth. Blok assumed, along with the other Symbolists that elements of Soloviev’s higher truth could be found in the material world around them. Their poetry then was an expression of this divine truth – the symbols of a higher, mystical way.  The turning point in Blok’s poetic development was the failed Revolution of 1905. The next year, he openly mocked his former Symbolist ideals in *The Showbooth* and then in the poem *The Stranger* – in this, the Beautiful Lady is now a prostitute. In his play *The Song of Fate*, the poetic cycle *On the Fields of Kulikovo* and in the article *The People and the Intelligentsia*, all from 1908, Blok was concerned with the widening gulf between the common people and the intelligentsia. For this problem he blamed the intelligentsia, whose privileged position imposed upon them certain responsibilities, which they were unwilling or unable to enact in order to change the political and social systems of Russia. As his disillusionment deepened, his poetry indicated revulsion for the contemporary urban scene, as shown in his third volume of poetry, *Terrible World* (1909-16), which is haunted by a sense of imminent catastrophe.  Night, street, lamp, drugstore,  A meaningless and muted light.  Live another quarter century -  Nothing will change. There’s no way out.  You'll die – you’ll start from the beginning,  And it will all repeat, as before:  Night, icy ripples on a canal,  Drugstore, street, lamp.  10 October 1912  File: Konstantin Somov’s portrait of Blok 1907.jpg  portrait of Blok 1907  Source: Image is available at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/distan/3801455353/>  Blok was determined to break out of the narrow circle imposed on him by being a Symbolist poet. Therefore, his initial response to the revolution was positive, seeing in it an apocalyptic moment that would bring heaven to earth. This idea was realized in his poem *The Twelve* (1918) which celebrates the October Revolution and places Christ at the head of a gang of Red Army soldiers. At the time of the poem’s publication, Blok’s former friends were aghast. The idea that revolutionaries could be compared to Christ and the disciples was shocking. Soon after, however, Blok was greatly disappointed when it became evident that the Bolsheviks would not embody the ideals of the Divine Sophia. Blok only lived for another three and a half years and died at the age of 40, in 1921. In those final years, he suffered from mental illness, malnutrition, and the accumulative effects of venereal disease. Those who met him in this last period were often influenced by political considerations in penning their memoirs: émigré Russians tended to emphasize his growing disillusionment and exhaustion, while Soviets preferred to stress his continuing devotion to the Bolshevik cause. In either case, Blok was widely accepted among both groups as a great poetic influence on the entire twentieth century.  File: Photograph of Blok 1913.jpg  Photograph of Blok 1913  Source: Image is available at <http://www.litres.ru/aleksandr-blok/>  List of Works Poetry Stikhi o prekrasnoi Dame (*Verses on a Beautiful Lady*) [1904]  Snezhnaia maska (*Snow Mask*) [1907]  Nechaiannaia radost’ (*Inadvertent Joy*) [1907]  Zemlia v snegu (*Earth in Snow*) [1908]  Na pole Kulikovom (*On the Fields of Kulikovo*) [1908]  Strashnyi mir (*Terrible World*) [1909-16]  Vozmezdiie (*Retribution*) [1910-21]  Nochnye chasy (*Nocturnal Hours*) [1911]  Skazki (*Fairytales*) [1912]  Kruglyi god (*All the Year Round*) [1912]  Stikhi o Rossii (*Poems about Russia*) [1915]  Skify (The Scythians) [1918]  Dvenadtsat’ (The Twelve) [1918]  Iamby (*Iambs*) [1919]  Sedoe utro (*Grey morning*) [1920]  Za gran’iu proshlykh dnei (*Beyond the Last Day*) [1920] Plays Balaganchik (*The Showbooth*) [1906]  Korol na ploshchadi (*The King on the Square*) [1907]  Pesnja sudby (*The Song of Fate*) [1907-1908]  Roza i krest (*The Rose and The Cross*) [1912]  Neznakomka (*The Stranger*) [1914]  Ramzes (*Ramses*) [1921] |
| Further reading:  (Berberova)  (Chukovsky)  (Mochulsky)  (Pyman)  (Pyman, The Life of Aleksandr Blok Vol. II: The Release of Harmony). |