**Blok, Aleksander (БЛОК, АЛЕКСАНДР) (1880-1921)**

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.

**Timeline of Blok’s life and most significant works:**

**1880**: Born into a gentry family in November, his parents separated and he was raised mainly by his maternal grandparents.

**1889**: His mother, Aleksandra Beketova, remarried and Blok moved to St Petersburg.

**1903**: Married Liubov Mendeleeva and joined the circle of Symbolists.

**1904:** Published his first book of poetry *Verses on a Beautiful Lady* in October.

**1906**: Wrote and staged *The Showbooth*. Premiere of the play was at the Theater of Vera Komissarzhevskaia under the direction of Vsevolod Meyerkhold in December.

**1907**: Published his second book of poetry, *Inadvertent Joy*, as well as the poetic cycle *Snow Mask.*

**1908**: Published the poetic cycle *On the Fields of Kulikovo,* the collection of poems *Land in Snow* and the article *The People and the Intelligentsia*.

**1909**: Traveled to Italy with wife, inspiring his poetic cycle *Italian Verses*; Father died and Blok traveled to Warsaw for the funeral in early December.

**1911**: Published a collection of poems *Nocturnal Hours.*

**1912**: Three-volume collection of his works is published.

**1913**: Completed the play *The Rose and The Cross* in January. It was published in August*.*

**1914:** The play, *The Stranger*, based on the poem of the same name (1907), was produced by Meyerkhold at the Tenishevskii Hall in St Petersburg.

**1915:** Published the collection of poems *Poems about Russia.*

**1916**: Drafted into military and was stationed near Pskov; Completed *Terrible World.*

**1918**: Wrote the essay *Intelligentsia and Revolution* in support of the new government; Published the poems “The Twelve” and “The Scythians.”

**1919:** Published the collection of poems *Iambs.*

**1920**: Elected head of Petrograd’s All-Russian Union of Poets; Published two collections of poems: *Beyond the Last Day* and *Grey Morning.*

**1921:** Published *Retribution*, which had been inspired by his return to Warsaw for his father’s funeral in 1909; Died most likely of venereal disease in August.

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| 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 | Photograph of Blok (1907) |

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.

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| 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. | Blok’s *Verses on a Beautiful Lady* |

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.

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| Ilya Glazunov’s *The Stranger* (1980) | 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.

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| Konstantin Somov’s portrait of Blok (1907) | 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 |

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

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| 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 | Last stanza of *The Twelve*  …So on they go with sovereign tread –  Behind them limps the hungry mongrel,  And wrapped in wild snow at their head  Carrying the flag blood-red –  Soft-footed in the blizzard’s swirl,  Invulnerable where bullets sliced –  Crowned with a crown of snowflake pearl,  In a wreath of white rose,  Ahead of them Christ Jesus goes.  Tr. Jon Stallworthy and Peter France | |
| 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. | | Photograph of Blok (1913) |

**References and Further Reading:**

Berberova, Nina. (1996). *Aleksandr Blok: A Life.* New York: George Braziller.

Nina Berberova (1901-1993) had intimate knowledge of Blok, his works and his cultural milieu. Brief and subjective, Berberova’s first-hand accounts cannot be read as a scholarly biography, but as personalized account of the poet’s life.

Chukovsky, Kornei. (1982). *Alexander Blok as Man and Poet.* Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis.

Kornei Chukovsky (1882-1969) was a friend of Blok’s and this book, originally published in 1924, provides a level of intimacy not found in Pyman’s more academic study of the poet (below).

Mochulsky, Konstantin. (1983). *Aleksandr Blok.* Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press.

Konstantin Mochulsky (1892-1948) provides a specific, personalized view of Blok’s symbolic system of mysticism, blended with a level of urban decadence. Molchulsky’s study has its significant flaws, but does provide certain insights into Blok’s spiritual life and the ways in which it might have penetrated his poetry.

Pyman, Avril. (1979). *The Life of Aleksandr Blok Vol. I: Distant Thunder*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pyman, Avril. (1980). *The Life of Aleksandr Blok Vol. II: The Release of Harmony*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Avril Pyman’s two volume study of Blok still provides the most complete scholarly portrait of Blok in English.

**Major 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]

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Figure 2 Cover *Verses on a Beautiful Lady*

<http://images.google.ca/imgres?q=блок+стихи+о+прекрасной+даме&hl=en&biw=1024&bih=691&tbm=isch&tbnid=fsVzFDxDQY1xHM:&imgrefurl=http://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/%25D0%25A1%25D1%2582%25D0%25B8%25D1%2585%25D0%25BE%25D1%2582%25D0%25B2%25D0%25BE%25D1%2580%25D0%25B5%25D0%25BD%25D0%25B8%25D1%258F_%25D0%2591%25D0%25BB%25D0%25BE%25D0%25BA%25D0%25B0_1897-1904&docid=yf7na48CnHQ84M&imgurl=http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ee/Alexander-Blok-stihi-o-prekrashoj-dame.jpg&w=323&h=459&ei=PTgkUNfcJqXY2QW8wYHAAw&zoom=1&iact=hc&vpx=707&vpy=292&dur=37&hovh=268&hovw=188&tx=118&ty=155&sig=118242156809064459849&page=1&tbnh=142&tbnw=100&start=0&ndsp=18&ved=1t:429,r:10,s:0,i:101>

Figure 3 Ilya Glazunov *The Stranger*

<http://images.google.ca/imgres?q=блок+стихи+о+прекрасной+даме&hl=en&biw=1024&bih=691&tbm=isch&tbnid=vyy3lEW8LVNhVM:&imgrefurl=http://www.liveinternet.ru/tags/%25E8.%25E3%25EB%25E0%25E7%25F3%25ED%25EE%25E2/&docid=p_kumVbaLiLwmM&imgurl=http://s52.radikal.ru/i137/0905/bd/bf86bd08e5e0.jpg&w=411&h=640&ei=lDgkUL22I-6A2QWcp4FA&zoom=1&iact=hc&vpx=349&vpy=121&dur=546&hovh=280&hovw=180&tx=95&ty=143&sig=118242156809064459849&page=1&tbnh=164&tbnw=115&start=0&ndsp=18&ved=1t:429,r:2,s:0,i:76>

Figure 4 Konstantin Somov portrait of Blok

*http://www.flickr.com/photos/distan/3801455353/*

Figure 5 Photo 1913

http://images.google.ca/imgres?q=блок+стихи+о+прекрасной+даме&start=63&num=10&hl=en&biw=1024&bih=691&tbm=isch&tbnid=rr4BVcks1PuzPM:&imgrefurl=http://www.litres.ru/aleksandr-blok/&docid=Y9l3Jhai6O7rsM&imgurl=http://www.litres.ru/static/authors/1/51674.jpg&w=282&h=400&ei=HzkkUJ7xAua42wWYmoB4&zoom=1&iact=hc&vpx=812&vpy=313&dur=64&hovh=267&hovw=188&tx=114&ty=202&sig=118242156809064459849&page=4&tbnh=154&tbnw=112&ndsp=24&ved=1t:429,r:11,s:63,i:185