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Art, Theurgy and Tragedy in Aleksandr Blok's *The Twelve*

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Expounding on the interrelationship between religion, revolution and symbolism in 1908, the father of “mystical anarchism” Georgy Chulkov commented on the historical significance of the French Revolution. A failed but necessary event, the French Revolution became the “bearer of a myth about the incarnation of freedom on earth” (Peterson, 93). Chulkov perceived in this event a religious pathos and extolled it for its belief in “future freedom.” As an example of “mytho-creation” (“мифотворчество”), the revolution had propelled us towards this “final liberation” in which the individual would recreate himself in the greater, religious community. The artist as preserver of myths would aid man in this task.

This idea of discovering religion through art belongs to a larger phenomenon associated with the second generation of Russian symbolists: the aspiration to move symbolist art into the realm of theurgy, or divine collaboration. Arguably the finest poet to emerge from the Silver Age of Russian poetry, Aleksandr Blok (1880-1921) envisioned the revolution itself as an artistic medium. Yet in his poem of the 1917 October Revolution, *The Twelve*, Blok realized that the event, while advancing history as Chulkov maintained, also amputated the artist from the past and left him superfluous in a new era. The tragedy of the artist was his sacrifice for posterity, in which recreating the self made the individual's history a *tabula rasa*. As will be discussed below, the appearance of Jesus Christ in *The Twelve* proved that Blok was incapable of relinquishing

his heritage. The path to *The Twelve*, however, demands an overview since it is complicated by the internal crises of symbolism and Blok's changing perception of the role of the artist.

The younger generation of Russian symbolists inherited and developed Vladimir Solovev's teaching on theurgy, in which the mystic and sage hailed the future synthesis of art and religion (Соловьёв, 6). Solovev, and later other symbolist theoreticians, hearkened back to the "priests" ("жрецы") of antiquity who spoke the symbolic "language of the gods" in their rites and were recognized as the "pastors of the people." Emulating their pagan predecessors, the new poets—specifically, the triad of Sergey Solovev, Andrey Bely and Aleksandr Blok—made it their vocation to serve Sophia, Solovev's conception of the ethereal feminine presence "that was with God at the Creation" (Evtuhov, 512).

The paradox, however, is that Blok's poetry was inherently non-religious; ever wary to adopt Bely's ideal of neo-Christianity, Blok accepted only half of the theurgic idea: Sophia minus Christ. Blok's deity (if it may be thus called) became the "Beautiful Lady" ("Прекрасная Дама")—an offshoot of Sophia.¹ By reserving the right to serve Her rather than Christ, and simultaneously believing in the mysterious nature of art, Blok assimilated the theurgic element of the new poetry, even when the rift between the symbolists was worsened by the events of 1905: the Russo-Japanese War and the First Russian Revolution. These events sparked intense polemics on the capabilities and limitations of theurgic symbolism. With the movement thus enfeebled, symbolism had by 1910 entered the "mainstream of Russian literature" (Pyman, "A History," 285). In

¹ Not only lacking an English equivalent, the adjective прекрасный in this context might better be translated as "splendid" or "ideal." The Прекрасная Дама in Blok's poetry was a Muse of sorts, a fusion of Sophia and the poet's wife, Lyubov Mendeleeva.

other words, symbolism was relieved of its divine pretensions and became nothing more than art.

For Bely and Sergey Solovev, religion filled the ideological vacuum left by the rupture of dogmatic symbolism. Yet for Blok the impact of 1905 and the hope for another revolution began to acquire the eschatology formerly associated with the image of the Beautiful Lady. Outdated theurgy and Blok's philosophy of the Revolution led to a revision of the meaning and justification of art and artist, but left the author unable to execute his task in *The Twelve*.

The Twelve begins with a juxtaposition of elements—"Black evening/ White snow"—and depicts the procession of twelve Guardsmen through St. Petersburg following the overthrow of the Constituent Assembly. The mob seems to be pursuing Kat'ka and Van'ka, a prostitute and a soldier who are gallivanting around the city in a sleigh. When the two appear, the Guardsmen open fire, vanquishing Kat'ka but missing Van'ka. Petrukha, who finds Kat'ka's corpse in the snow, laments her death momentarily, but when the others remind him that there will be "harder times ahead" ("потяжеле будет время") he continues to participate in the mayhem. In the twelfth and final part of the poem, the revolutionaries catch sight of a red flag swaying in the wind and open fire on the "invisible enemy" ("незримый враг") holding it. They approach only to find Jesus Christ unharmed by their bullets. There ends Blok's last major poetic masterpiece.

Blok's contemporaries were dumbfounded by the appearance of Christ at the head of the Red Guardsmen. Those critics who attempted to pick out the clues in Blok's earlier work to rationalize the Christ-figure either missed the point completely (as in

Bely's case) or attributed them to something else.² While some of these interpretations have a limited validity, they largely overlook the shift in Blok's philosophical orientation. In order to understand the Christ of *The Twelve*, it is necessary to note the growing dominance of the Revolution in Blok's ideology and how Christ, the symbol of theurgy, came to be marginalized. Christ is the echo of Blok's affinities with theurgic symbolism, the memento of the failed mission of the symbolists. In the end the Revolution, not art, was successful in transfiguring the world. This paper suggests that in the wake of 1905 Blok responded to the shortcomings of symbolist aesthetics by enlisting the Revolution as the panacea for artistic crisis; when the Revolution displaced the poet himself, the image of Christ became the reminder of the artist's second failure and, by extension, the indication of personal tragedy.

The Twelve is not only the culmination of earlier ideas and motifs, but also the poet's break with the traditions of second-generation symbolism. This paper will examine two of Blok's essays, "On the Present Status of Russian Symbolism" and "The Disaster of Humanism" in order to show the predominance of the Revolution in Blok's thought and the poet's transition from passive observer to sacrificial victim. It will then revisit *The Twelve* to discuss the function of the Christ-figure and its relationship to the content of the poem and to Blok's own tragedy. Finally, it will summarize the ideas of Nikolay Berdyaev, a Russian philosopher who recognized the "crisis of symbolism," and relate them to Blok's experience as author of *The Twelve*. The aim of this paper will be not to reengage an exhausted debate and propose an interpretation on the meaning of the poem, but rather to use a literary text as a measure of the personal tragedy of the artist.

² Viktor Zhirmunskij claimed that "the changes in the symbolic imagery embodying the love object in Blok's poetry correspond[ed] to the successive stages of [his] inner experience" (117).

I. *The Twelve* and Synthesis?

In 1910, Russian symbolism experienced its so-called apogee. Though there were dissenters earlier, perhaps the first catalyst for dissolution came from Mikhail Kuzmin, whose call for “clarity” later led to the founding of Acmeism. In a similar vein (but with intentions of preserving the movement) Vyacheslav Ivanov predicted in a lecture that symbolism would not overcome its crisis unless it could move in the direction of “simplification” (Pyman, “A History,” 333). Symbolism, as Ivanov saw it, had made life more complicated during its antithesis. Less than a month later, Blok decided to participate in the symbolists’ apologia and wrote the annotations to Ivanov’s disquisition. “On the Present Status of Russian Symbolism” (“О Современном Состоянии Русского Символизма”) is Blok’s attempt to illustrate the progress of the symbolists in an autobiographical context.

As he and other symbolists were wont to do, Blok traced the history of the movement in dialectic terminology. He writes that the symbolists begin to recognize one another by the common understanding that “a schism lies between this world and ‘other worlds’” (Peterson, 158); the symbolist experiences unbounded freedom to create in these “magical worlds.” By virtue of his vocation the artist is also a theurgist, “a possessor of secret knowledge, behind which secret action stands” (“обладатель тайного знания, за которым стоит тайное действие”) (Блок, “Поэзия,” 605). The source of the symbolist’s secret knowledge is Sophia’s “gaze,” and each creates with a golden sword, “cutting the purple of violet worlds” to become closer to Her. As he begins to catch sight of Her face, however, the violet worlds overwhelm the sword’s radiance, and the curtain falls on the stage of expectation.

In the period of antithesis, the symbolist's sword grows dull, he is no longer alone, and the face that he managed to glimpse belongs to a "dead doll"—an allusion to the cardboard heroine Colombine in Blok's 1906 play, *The Puppet Booth* (*Балаган*). The symbolist ceases to differentiate between life and art. Though rapturous, the question of reclaiming the golden sword is central to his predicament. If anything has been gained, it is the knowledge of the "objectivity and reality of 'those worlds'" (Peterson, 161). It follows that what took place in the antithesis has external application.

Thus, for example, in the period of this searching the *Russian Revolution* is evaluated according to its essence, that is, it stops being conceived of as *semi-reality*, and all its historical, economic, and similar partial causes receive their own higher sanction. (161)

The "higher sanction" of the Russian Revolution will be discussed below. Here one should note simply that Blok first apprehended the significance of the Revolution during the antithesis. In conclusion he offers a rather vague, four-fold antidote—"apprenticeship, self-absorption, a persevering gaze, and a spiritual diet"—that will cure the symbolists of their artistic malaise. To fulfill the promises of the thesis the artist must be wary of fusing art and life, and "must take on himself the role of witness rather than participant in the great events of those other worlds" (Pyman, "A History," 334).

"On the Present Status of Russian Symbolism" is Blok's moment of introspection in which he yearns not quite for a synthesis but rather a return to the halcyon days of the thesis, when the Beautiful Lady still retained her mystery and divinity. This attachment to the past is crucial to understanding Christ's appearance in *The Twelve*. Although the fall from grace has to an extent left the poet disillusioned with his art, this essay preserves some hope of triumph for Symbolism. Artistically, though, this meant becoming a

spectator of the Revolution, advocating the overthrow of the Old World without actively taking part in it. For Blok the poet fulfills his duty through observation.

True to his own dictum, the poet's voice in *The Twelve* is reduced to a minimum, and much space is devoted to the outbursts, jingles and government slogans rather than strict narration. For example, by employing an artificial genre of folklore—the *chastushka*—to transpose street slang into rhymed couplets, Blok discovers the rhythm of the Revolution.

Keep in revolutionary step! Make no mistake,
 The restless enemy keeps wide awake. (Hackel, 219)
 (Революционный держите шаг!
 Неугомонный не дремлет враг!) (185-186)

However, the poet must also renounce his right to moral judgment. The reader is therefore struck by the rupture between the silly limericks and the horrors of the Revolution. The sheer brutality of the Red Guardsmen is exposed when Petrukha finds his love, Kat'ka, dead in the snow. The Guardsmen exult over her body:

But where is Katie?—Katie's dead.
 She got a bullet through her head.
 Please, are you, Katie?—No one's to know.
 Just lie there, carrion, on the snow. (Hackel, 219)
 (А Катька где? Мертва, мертва!
 Простреленная голова!
 Что, Катька, рада?—Ни гу, гу...
 Лежи ты, падаль, на снегу!) (181-184)

Blok absolves himself of any obligation to decry the Guardsmen's crime. He adheres to passive spectatorship, allowing the revolutionaries to carry out their work. If Blok's endorsement of the Revolution was a response to his moral passivity, *The Twelve* is the ideal expression of his position.

At the same time, though, "On the Present Status of Russian Symbolism" establishes the Revolution as one of the dominating themes of Blok's "understanding of the world" ("миропонимание") and the cure for artistic crisis. Since the original theurgic task of remaking the world through art had failed, the Revolution would carry the theurgists' cause to conclusion through violence. Yet in his essay Blok did not state to whom this lot would fall. While some of the ideas expressed in 1910 survived the eight-year interval to *The Twelve*, it was not until he wrote "The Disaster of Humanism" ("Крушение Гуманизма") that his thoughts were finally synthesized. This latter essay explains how the Revolution acquired its higher sanction and ultimately superseded the artist.

II. "The Disaster of Humanism" (1919)

The reforms of Peter the Great in the eighteenth century irrevocably separated the nobility from the "folk" ("народ") in Russia, marginalizing the latter for some two-hundred years. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, Europeans and Russians alike began to sense the appearance of the "man of the masses" ("массовый человек") and the intelligentsia had varied opinions on this new historical subject. Lenin became its figurehead, while Merezhkovsky, expressing his intense disdain, labeled it the "coming boor" ("грядущий хам") (Голубков, 73). Blok, unlike Merezhkovsky, accepted the inevitability of the man of the masses and professed the necessity of

“throwing under the legs of the uncivilized barbarian hordes the remnants of all previous culture” (“бросить под ноги нецивилизованных варварских полчищ всю предшествующую культуру”) (74).

Much like Oswald Spengler in his *Decline of the West*, Blok distinguished between the concepts of civilization and culture. “Culture is a musical rhythm,” he writes in 1919. When culture is drained of its musical lifeline, it becomes civilization, mechanical and inhuman. Music is the “spiritual body of the world,” and the folk are the “unconscious carrier[s] of the spirit of music” (Hackel 26, 27). Blok claims that European culture was defined by humanism (its hallmark being individualism) through the nineteenth century, and having made the transition from culture to civilization, it had to give way to an “uprising of the masses” as a means of self-preservation. And though the masses know nothing of culture, they wield the spirit of music—the only power capable of saving humanity from sterility.

The stage preceding civilization is man’s displacement from his natural environment. Blok writes that “one of the primary motives of any revolution involves returning man to nature” (“один из основных мотивов всякой революции—мотив возвращения к природе”) (Блок, 331). Europe’s splendor has long faded, her greatest artists are dead. So with childlike naïveté, Blok encourages the toppling of civilization (and humanism with it) in hopes that the masses will raze the earth in the spirit of music and prepare it for the flourishing of a new era. To confirm his ideas, Blok cites the Razin and Pugachev uprisings which, though ultimately unsuccessful, embodied the musical beginning of the world, as well as the resistance to the customs of the Russian

aristocracy. For Blok (as for a host of others before him) the folk represent the organic, undefiled soul of Russian culture.³ They thus become the purging spirit of *The Twelve*.

Read as a profession of poetic faith, *The Twelve* presents the theurgist, the possessor of secret knowledge, as powerless before the Revolution. The artist has been sidelined, as he wished, and he watches as the masses, behind whom *secret action* stands, uproot the Old World. And yet this is another crucial moment because Blok accepts the event only conditionally. Most explicitly reflected in the poem is his uncertainty of the ensuing consequences, and this in part explains his neutral depiction of the Guardsmen. As L. Kolobaeva notes, the symbols of the Old World—the frightened dog, the wailing babushka, the disgruntled bourgeois—all are mocked by the narrator (193). The Twelve, by contrast, cannot be condemned because all values, like the world which instituted them, are antiquated and rendered meaningless. For Blok, this is a Nietzschean moment beyond good and evil, and with civilization in flux, those who sweep away the dust of the Old World can be judged only *ex post facto*, in the dawn of the New.

In juxtaposing “On the Present Status of Russian Symbolism” and “The Disaster of Humanism,” it was intended not only to establish a precedent of thought, but also to observe the ideological adjustments of that precedent. If in 1910 Blok exhibited his willingness to be demoted as a theurgist, then by 1919 he is determined to be destroyed. Blok’s conciliatory attitude is doubtless an outgrowth of the waning years and “overcoming” (“преодоление”) of symbolism. That second-generation symbolism at its inception was a response to the European crisis of culture that preached active participation in society’s renewal is a long-forgotten dream. Reading *The Twelve*, one

³ This is a fundamentally Russian belief that has its roots in nineteenth century intellectual thought. Blok is only the latest in a long line of writers to champion the common people.

senses that the former “possessor of secret knowledge” has become the insignificant and intentionally passive witness of catastrophe.

Thus, for our purposes, the most salient change in Blok’s journalistic reflections is the move toward self-annihilation; what concerns us is how personal ideology and historic cataclysm are transformed into the poetic masterpiece. Blok had resigned himself to this fate when he asked, “shall we have the right to say that the flame [of the Revolution] is entirely destructive if it destroys only *us*, the intelligentsia?” (Hackel, 47). Indeed, while simultaneously writing *The Twelve*, Blok composes “The Intelligentsia and the Revolution,” in which he posits that self-sacrifice accompanies the Revolution, and that he who “listens to the Revolution” will understand that It proceeds under the banner of “Peace and Brotherhood of nations” (“Мир и братство народов”) (Блок, 310). In *The Twelve*, the revolutionaries ironically ask for divine blessing:

Beware, you bourgeoisie, beware!

We’re going to set the world aflame.

Blood and universal fire—

Lord, bless the pyre! (Hackel, 215)

(Мы на горе всем буржуйам

мировой пожар раздуем,

мировой пожар в крови—

Господи, благослови!) (123-126)

The revolutionaries are wholly justified, and the artist of his own will perishes in the conflagration.

This resignation to death, the literary suicide of sorts that we encounter in Blok's latter essays resembles the *imitatio Christi*, especially in view of His appearance in *The Twelve*. The poet bears a higher calling in the name of Revolution. Blok likens the sacrificial acts of Christ and poet, knowing that though both die, they are not entirely destroyed. The legacy of Christ is preserved in the Gospels; Blok's in *The Twelve*. Self-destruction becomes a means of self-assertion because the former "ends by creating new life" (Colie, 507). The poet's place in the Revolution mirrors Christ's role in the world of the Second Coming. It may be that Blok's identification with Christ was later developed into his essay "Catiline" (as will be discussed later), but He presented more of a problem than resolution for Blok. The symbolic acceptance of the Christ-figure proved to be Blok's outward reconciliation of his personal, artistic tragedy.

III. Whence Christ? And Why? Critical Reception of *The Twelve*

...Thus they their sovereign march pursue:

Behind them skulks the hound half-dead;

Ahead (with flag of sanguine hue)—

Invisible within the storm,

Immune from any bullet's harm,

Walking with laden step and gentle

In snowy, pearl-strewn mantle,

With small, white roses garlanded—

Jesus the Christ walks at their head. (Guerney, 1024)

(...Так идут державным шагом—

Позади—голодный пес,

Впереди—с кровавым флагом,
 И за вьюгой невидим,
 И от пули невредим,
 Нежной поступью надвьюжной,
 Снежной россыпью жемчужной,
 В белом венчике из роз—
 Впереди—Исус Христос.) (Блок)

It should be noted immediately that the meaning of the appearance of Christ in *The Twelve* has not been—and, alas, probably never will be—determined conclusively. Of course, this did not prevent certain groups from appropriating the work to be used as a celebration of their cause. The Bolsheviks, most notoriously, found the temptation irresistible. After all, who better than Christ to sanction their rag-tag army? Yet, there were those (Lenin and Trotsky) who confessed that the poem did not lend itself to such facile interpretations (Pyman, “The Last,” 3). More disheartening than a thousand subjective exegeses was Blok’s concession that he himself could not explain Christ (Hackel, 189). We can accept Blok’s assertion that he simply scribbled down what he saw (which was fully in accordance with what he had professed since 1910), but the literary milieu of Russia in 1917 and 1918 shows that *The Twelve*’s conclusion was not accidental.

There was an abundance of apocalyptic literature in the inter-Revolutionary period, and those who had been expecting a New-Testament style end of the world since 1905 felt the changes most acutely. The February Revolution was perceived by many both as a result of cultural degradation as well as an eschatological event. As Sergei

Hackel points out, Vasily Rozanov, Ivanov-Razumnik and Alexei Remizov were all writing apocalyptic treatises and corresponding with Blok at the time of *The Twelve* (166). Immune as he always was to outside influence, the suggestion that the historical framework finds resonance in Blok's conclusion is quite plausible. What it lacks, though, is a direct—or at least potential—symbolic reference. The fallacy of the Bolshevik interpretation is that it places Christ in an imaginary context: saluting and leading the Guardsmen. By the same token, to interpret Christ eschatologically is to negate Blok's convictions on the role of the Revolution. Indeed, His Coming completely disenfranchises the revolutionaries and creates an awkward confluence of ideas: the life-renewing spirit of music with the Last Judgment.

These are some of the problems that we are confronted with when analyzing Blok's Christ. The crux of the matter is that, notwithstanding certain associations with Sophia in the *Poems About a Beautiful Lady* and occasional references in the cycle *Motherland* (*Родина*), there is no thematic precedent in Blok's work that would herald His appearance in *The Twelve*. Moreover, Blok's ambiguous and often negative relationship to Christianity creates further entanglement.

In *The Poet and the Revolution: Aleksandr Blok's 'The Twelve,'* Sergei Hackel examines a variety of sources from which Blok may have drawn to compose his enigmatic Christ. Hackel's work is much the antipode of Nikolai Gumilev's statement that the Christ-figure was added for "purely literary effect" (Reeve, 209). Indeed, there is hardly a work that has so exhausted the search for links. In his conclusion Hackel writes,

Blok's Christ thus emerges as an extremely comprehensive and mysterious figure. At one and the same time he represents Rus', the common people, the Old Believers, the forces of the Revolution, the Eternal Feminine, and the Jesus of the Second Coming. (188)

This is followed by a list of a dozen or so authors “who contribute, directly or indirectly, to His formation” (Hackel, 188). He then remarks that Blok struggled with this image for weeks, claiming that, indeed, it is Christ with the Revolutionaries, but perhaps there should be “Another” (“надо, чтобы шёл Другой”) (189). Until his death in 1921, Blok maintained that he was compelled by his vision of the poem to place Christ at the head of the Revolutionaries:

To Chukovskii he said, ‘When I finished I was surprised myself: Why Christ? Is it really Christ? But the more I looked into it, the clearer I saw Christ. And then, for my own benefit, I made a note: Unfortunately, Christ’.
(190)

Hackel infers that “conscious reluctance to accept this Christ was to be overcome by a deeper acceptance of the integrity of his intuition” (189).

Notwithstanding his reliance on possibility and his sometimes questionable conclusions, Hackel does (perhaps unwittingly) point to an established truth: Blok was surrounded by Christ not only through his symbolist-theurgic affiliations, but also through his cultural heritage. While one might be hard-pressed to accept Blok’s Christ as the product of multiple sources, Christ’s domination of Russian culture through Orthodoxy cannot be overlooked. Blok recognized Christ’s role in the Old World and His inextricability from it. In this sense, it is appropriate that Christ appears on the threshold of the New World, observing the cataclysm that is taking place in Russia and standing as the catch-all symbol of everything that is being demolished. One may not attribute one or any collusion of sources to the literary Christ, but His omnipresence in the Russia of Blok’s time is irrefutable. The function of the Christ-figure within and outside the poem, however, is a matter that Hackel does not resolve. Much of the answer can be found in F. D. Reeve’s thesis, *Aleksandr Blok: Between Image and Idea*.

IV. Towards a Half Symbol

In contrast to Hackel, Reeve challenges the validity of the symbol itself and finds it an inadequate resolution to the central “dilemma” of the poem. Like Viktor Zhirmunsky, Reeve claims that *The Twelve* is apolitical, and its meaning personal. Reeve shares S. G. Mangolin’s definition of a symbol, the “aim” of which is “to repress the painful circumstances of change.” All symbols, thus, “have a historical content and an emotional significance” (Reeve, 210). Reeve locates the core of the problem:

The difficulty with the Christ-figure is its historical and, therefore, poetic limitation: it is really only half a symbol. It is adequate to the content of the poem, but not to the poem’s meaning. It carries everything except the notion of ultimate freedom. This is the basic failure of the poem and the cause of our dissatisfaction with it: that it sets out to delimit just such a notion, but, at the end, seems to subvert its own system (212)

We should try, Reeve argues, to equate the Christ-figure with the idea of ultimate freedom. The idea of freedom, however, is independent of Christ and the cross, both of which Blok uses in a “non-Christian or even anti-doctrinaire understanding” (Reeve, 213). The dilemma, then, which Blok wants to resolve is the paradox of seeking freedom, knowing that the search “destroys the capacity to be free” (214). If the poem is essentially about this type of failure—“the failures of men”—then the Christ figure is anti-climactic and inappropriate. Because we do not acknowledge the Christ-figure as a symbol of the “experience of loss” or sequester it from our personal conceptions of Christ, the meaning of the poem is muddled. The poem is doomed to be a product of frustration.

Reeve’s diagnosis of the “poetic limitation” of the Christ-figure and its inability to mediate the outcome of *The Twelve* is certainly accurate: we cannot view Christ objectively because he is an undeveloped character of the poem. Yet there are a few

points on which one may disagree. First, even if *The Twelve* is about the contradiction of not realizing freedom by seeking it—a disputable deduction—Christ’s historical context should not be construed as any sort of poetic limitation. On the contrary, there is no other personage more capable of embodying the idea of ultimate freedom. Indeed, the Christ-figure transcends historical context and represents this “freedom in actual restraint” precisely because he is timeless. As Blok once summarized Mathew, “We know neither the day, nor the hour wherein the Son of Man cometh to judge the living and the dead” (Hackel, 84). The Second Coming evades historical context because it is unknown. If anything, the symbol is weak due to its generic quality. Potentially applicable to anything, it makes the twelfth segment read like a bad ending. The question of context does not carry much weight.

Second, one might disagree with Reeve’s remark about the Christ-figure being a half symbol. In fact, it is no symbol at all since it fails on the aesthetic plane of symbolism. A symbol, according to Bely and Ivanov, can have multiple meanings and even accommodate mutually exclusive things (Колобаева, 22). Moreover, as another theoretician wrote, each symbol “gravitates” (“тяготеет”) towards a certain “primary symbol” (“Перво-символ”) which supposedly exists between two worlds, the “symbol of all symbols” (Бычков, 4). The Christ-figure in the given context really represents the dissolution of the symbol. He appears all-encompassing, the primary symbol itself, but the easy accessibility and the fact that it expresses something unrelated to *The Twelve* (which, to his merit, Reeve states) makes Him unconvincing. The Christ-figure is a reflection of itself, and for this reason undermines the poem.

The Christ-figure more likely corresponds to Blok's nostalgia for the past and to the admission that his vocation as artist had officially expired. This is not to say that Blok realized that his creative energy was depleted, but that he lacked the strength to participate in the construction of the New World. By revisiting Blok's essays it was intended to show that he had already consigned himself to the pyre of Revolution before *The Twelve*. If we make allowances for his atheism, we can see how, having become disenchanted with the Beautiful Lady, he traveled, as Osip Mandel'shtam put it, "from cult to cult" (Hackel, 198) in search of something that could justify his art. That Blok did not take the path of theurgy had much to do with his rejection of Christ. Blok perceived the mistake in believing that art could lead to theurgy and embraced art as an end in itself (Pyman, 106-107). Yet with his proclivities to self-destruction and renunciation of all ties to the Old World, Blok outlived his period of creative activity. Taking his leave, he entrusted the moribund world to Christ. The Christ-figure becomes the conclusion not to the poem but rather to Blok's artistic life.

One scholar recently suggested that the Christ of *The Twelve* and His interpretation in "Catiline" share a common precedent. Judith E. Kalb points out that Blok attempted to establish the Roman conspirator as the forebear of Christ and to show that "Christ had fulfilled what Catiline had intimated" (417). With his cyclical vision of time, Blok equated the Catiline Rebellion with the Russian Revolution. Christ, therefore, "belongs at the head of the Red Guardsmen," standing "for the perpetual call to revolution" (422). Blok, however, wrote this essay several months after *The Twelve* (April and May), and it seems more plausible that the Christ of "Catiline" was an afterthought, perhaps an about-face to preserve the integrity of his poem against the

critics and finally explain the question he had been evading. Furthermore, the author of “Catiline” is hardly the poet who “surrendered to the elements” and expressed such fervor in *The Twelve*. Indeed, by April Blok could barely contain his dissatisfaction with the Revolution, writing: “How boring, all known in advance. Christ will come, and so what?” (Pyman, 305). The knowledge that the Revolution would fail left Blok crestfallen, and his own admission that he was “bored” is clearly a euphemism. Not even the Revolution could answer the questions that the Christ-symbol posed. Just two years earlier, though, the religious philosopher Nikolay Berdyaev had discovered why the artistic crisis of the symbolists had ended in disbandment, and not apotheosis.

In 1916, Berdyaev published *The Meaning of the Creative Act* (*Смысл Творчество. Опыт Оправдания Человека*), in which he gave symbolism the philosophical evaluation that the theoreticians could not—or perhaps would not—carry to conclusion (Бычков, 25). In his chapter, “Creation and Beauty: Art and Theurgy” (“Творчество и Красота. Искусство и Теургия”), Berdyaev expounds on the symbolists’ conundrum and, in his characteristic fashion, assigns symbolism its “universal meaning” (“мировое значение”).

V. Berdyaev. Acceptance of Failure.

Berdyaev writes that any creative art is, by its very nature, tragic because it exposes an unbridgeable gap: the division between “task and form” (“задание и осуществление”) (1). The final task of any creative art is theurgic, but transposed into form, it loses its grandeur. However, only certain forms of art—at times implicitly—designate theurgy as their aim. The difference between Pagan and Christian art was that the former assimilated everything terrestrial for its form and remained satisfied with the

beauty it created; Christian art was “transcendental” and negated any perfection of form, constantly yearning for the “other world.” Berdyaev writes that “Christianity understands beauty as that which speaks of the other world: the symbol” (“красота для [христианского мира] всегда есть то, что говорит о мире ином, т.е. символ”) (3).

In the nineteenth century, this opposition of classical (Pagan) and romantic (Christian) art acquired new forms, realism and symbolism, respectively. But it is “only in symbolism that the true nature of any artistic creation is revealed, and the tragedy of creation reaches its apex in symbolism” (“лишь в символизме раскрывается истинная природа всякого творчества художественного. И трагедия творчества в символизме достигает своей вершины”) (7). That is, symbolism elevates art to the last stage of crisis, beyond which it cannot pass. Beyond symbolism is mystical realism, and beyond art—theurgy. “Symbolism is the path, not the final aim; symbolism is the bridge to new existence, not the new existence itself” (“Символизм есть путь, а не последняя цель, символизм—мост к творчеству нового бытия, а не само новое бытие”) (8). Symbolism’s universal meaning is to “throw a bridge” in the direction of “new existence,” to take art closer to theurgy than it has ever been. To cross this bridge, however, is to forsake art. Theurgy reconciles the eternal problem of task and form. The symbolists, it follows, heralded a new age of art but were doomed never to realize the transition to “creation with God” because “the beginning of theurgy is the end of literature” and, consequently, all art. Theurgy is the liberation from art, and the boundary beyond which perfection is attained. In other words, there cease to be any demarcations of creation. The theurgist is like God, whose “word becomes flesh” (12).

Whether or not Blok was familiar with Berdyaev's *The Meaning of the Creative Act* is not as important as the parallels that can be drawn between the philosopher's analysis and the poet's experience. This chapter serves as a sort of commentary to Blok's life as a symbolist and the inevitable tragedy of the calling. Blok's ideas about the intelligentsia as sacrificial victim in "The Disaster of Humanism" correspond to Berdyaev's assignation of the symbolists as "forerunners of the future era of creation." Moreover, Blok not only sensed the fallacy of equating art with theurgy but also never championed the former as a medium to reaching the latter. In *The Twelve*, the disparity of task and form is exposed in the Christ-figure. The symbol disguises an idea that cannot be enclosed within the parameters of the work. Yet is befitting that the Guardsmen encounter no other than the Creator Himself, the figure who directs all theurgic action, though they are not engaging in divine collaboration. Their art (however destructive), too, is symbolic and yearns for something permanent. Seen through the prism of Berdyaev's philosophy, Christ stands as an homage to the thwarted hopes of second-generation symbolism and its efforts to remake the world through art.

Perhaps Blok was not alone in his struggle to overcome the tragedy of task and form, and rather belongs to the tradition of those who masked their own deficiencies with art. In his introduction to *T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land*, Harold Bloom posits that Walt Whitman was the most direct literary predecessor to the twentieth-century poet, and that "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is the poetic progenitor of *The Waste Land*. Locating the presence of "Lilacs" in Eliot's poem, Bloom claims that, like Whitman's work, "*The Waste Land*... enters the domain of mourning and melancholia, rather than

that of civilization and its discontents” (2). In other words, the poetic crisis is subverted and transformed into a greater tragedy: for Whitman, the death of Lincoln; for Eliot, the end of culture (5). The motif of the poetic guise is an “inescapable” literary inheritance.

Although there is no aesthetic connection between Eliot and Blok, there is something that we can take from Bloom’s analysis and apply to our own. Writing four years apart, the two poets certainly underwent an experience akin to a crisis of expression while crafting their respective masterpieces, and subsequently were unable to surpass their achievements. One might discover Blok’s pedigree in Solovev or Catullus, but the use of the text concerns us more than the anxiety of influence. *The Twelve* magnifies the artist’s demise by presenting it as catastrophe, but we find the author more reconciled to this necessity than his counterpart in London. Blok’s was not a nervous breakdown but rather the sigh of a man who loved the past and willingly wrote its denouement.

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