

The Great Bolshevik Epic

By Isadore Levine

In the vast Russian literary field, where the last five years have witnessed the springing up of dwarfish manikins that shouted with might and main in their futile endeavor "to assert themselves before the world"—there is but one gigantic figure that towers above the dingy clay and reaches far into the rainy, misty heaven; the soft, melancholy, yet vigorous oval face of Alexander Block that at once suggests Chopin with its eyes and mane and Rachmaninoff with its thick lips.

The greatest poet Russia has produced for the last two decades! The most modern, the most attractive and sympathetic, the most talented and the deepest and sincerest of all the glorious and numerous Pleiade—with a glimpse of real genius in him. He's dead now. He died last year. So were the sad tidings brought by the papers. He died in his prime, died, as one says, from starvation, although, as one who was accounted as having adhered to the Bolsheviks, he could avail himself of all the privileges of the elect. He supported the Bolsheviks from the very first day they took over the reins of authority, a fact that was of no little influence in attracting the sympathy of the youth and the youthful intelligentsia to the side of the Bolsheviks.

I doubt very much whether Block officially belonged either to the Bolshevik or to any other socialist party. He was a member of the so-called Volfil (Volnaia—free—philosophical association) which counted among its members some of the greatest living radical Russian writers, such as Andrei Bely, Vourchaiev, and others. To those who have known Block, this

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shift of his, brusque as it might have seemed to an outsider, was not brusque at all. Always absorbed in mystic revelations, always in quest of hidden, mysterious beauties which it is the duty of the true poet to discover, he did not find anything incompatible in his quest for higher forms of beauty and poetic ecstasy and this serving the ignorant people. The individual soul is one thing and the social order is another. As an individual with a subtle soul, whose match we may in vain look for among the great poets, he wrote his "Lady Unknown" (*Nieznakomka*) and "Doll House" (*Balaganchyk*), the modernistic intricacies of which are equalled only by their extraordinary poetic merit. Quest of beauty—two worlds, visible and hidden—surface of things and essence of being: those are invariably the themes of Block's creative power. If there ever were a man not interested in the illusory visibility of things, it was Block. If there ever were a man who with profound insight grasped words unsaid, tears unseen, faces faded, thoughts ungerminated yet, it was Block. That's why to translate him is a task almost superhuman.

His influence was very great. And it will grow as time winnows away all the glamor of loud poetasters. Casting aside their bitter chaff, it will leave the ever-sparkling modesty of Block's unequalled and penetrating similes. There was not another like him in Russia, who could combine the sweetness of metre, the unusualness of musical and original rhymes, nay, the very music of choice words and glowing passion, with depth of thought and melancholy mysticism. Russia of our days is rich in great poets. But all of them have their weak spots. Valerian Brusov is too erudite; verily he is the Anatole France of Russian literature, but without France's poignant sarcasm and jeering witicism. Maximilian Voloshin is reactionary and turned from his great classical tableaux to pictures

in nagging patriotic style. Balmont has always been too conceited, a trait which always injures a poet's transcendental fervor. Now he is rambling around somewhere in Europe, bitterly opposed to all factions and suffering doubly. Zynaida Hippis, the author of "Green Ring," and wife of Merezhkovski of the "Christ and Antichrist" fame, is, if I am not mistaken, abroad with her husband, and as reactionary as she was symbolistic and incomprehensible. Where is Igor Severianin, whose eccentric talent was the talk of the day for many years? All those that remained in Russia were inferior to Block, who dominated them in the classic, Olympic lucidity of his character, if not of his verse.

In 1918 he turned out his poem "Twelve," which sounded like thunder in a blue sky. The whole of Russia was startled. And the whole world (wherever the poem was available) gasped at the blasphemous insolence of a man who made Christ himself a Bolshevik with a red, bloody banner leading the twelve Krasnoarmeitsy (red guard) through the storm. The idea of comparing these twelve murderous scoundrels to the twelve apostles! Be it as it may, "Twelve" is the greatest literary event of the Bolshevik activity. Whatever the further development of events be, be the power retained by the Bolsheviks, be it not—1918 will forever remain a memorable date in Russian literature (and perhaps in world-letters). For Russia, "Twelve" is a national epic, just as the anonymous "Saying of Igor's Army" (the greatest epic, in my estimation, that has ever been written anonymously) and Lermontov's "Song of the Merchant Kalashnikov" are essentially national. But whereas the last two poems are merely national (in spite of their high artistic merits), Block's poem, written in our turbulent days, under circumstances that command our strenuous attention, will become the property of mankind. I

have no doubt that it would already have become a precious asset of every literature had it not been for its technical intricacies that must needs baffle every translator and which are only partly resolved in the following translation (to which utmost condescendence is invoked). It has already become an essential part of the Russian language and literature. Its phrases are gradually wedging themselves into the language; its distichs are becoming proverbial. And only a genius (we know only of Pushkin and Lermontov who achieved an equal feat) could slough off so thoroughly artificial poetic traditions and write in a style that is taken straight from the factory songs and popular chastoushki, and yet a style so intricate in its metrical structure and rhyme sequence, so deep in its mysterious beauty, as to delight the most sophisticated Russian readers of poetry. Not only in the history of literature but in that branch of science that's called psychology of creation Block's poem will forever remain a dazzling example of what a strict relationship between a genius and his people can achieve.

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"Twelve," as I said, is essentially national. To be penetrated by its titanic power one must understand the numberless poetic shadings of plain Russian words; one must know all the national traditions of Russian poetry to feel that in "Twelve" we have a mighty link in the uninterrupted chain of creative impulses, a chain that has been weakened by two decades of modernistic experiments, tawdry popular imitations and national poems made to order. Every stanza is suggestive of this true popular structure. To be sure, Block starts out in the free verse; assonant and rhymed, of the modernists. But he can't keep on in this vein. His genius is too powerful for the pallid formlessness of free verse. The music of ungyved

speech does not mean to him rhymeless and rhythmless talking. Even at the end of the first canto he turns to his inexhaustible wealth of unusual rhymes. Sometimes they are chiming, wonderfully dazzling rhymes; sometimes are suggestions, innuendoes.

Abrupt four-five-line scenes so suggestive in their choice of words! An old woman worrying about her ragged tots; how many leggins could one cut out of the huge rag that has gone to waste with its "All power to constituent assembly"; a long-haired poetaster, or journalist, gnashing his teeth at the Bolshevik posters, the social revolution has thwarted his ambitions, all he had served before has crashed down, his novels with happy endings are not needed any more, no more good times, fiery speeches and good pay for novels with happy endings * * * "Vates!" thoughtfully drops Block * * * Aside stands the long-flapped priest, his belly not so arrogantly shoving ahead. What is he about to do? A lady in astrakhan scudding to another to tell about—what? Requisition, plunder, perhaps. All are drowned in the raging whirl, in the purga that twists and twirls everyone and everything. The great moment of the Russian revolution has nowhere been caught with such masterful insight as in Block's poem; you see the dinginess of the street; the stooping tramp forgotten by all; you see the whiteness of the snow—snow that is falling, falling, falling endlessly * * * In the whirl, in the tornado you get the first glimpse of the twelve Apostles * * * Yes, apostles of new creed. Murderers, plunderers, bandits, all crimes on their soul, steeped in ignorance,

"On faces glowing the brand of Cain."

They should be in jail—or should they send to jail those who made them stoop so low, those who gave them starvation

wages and kept them in a brutal state during their entire lives? This is the underlying idea of the poem. For not in vain is the poem called "Twelve" apostles; divided in twelve cantos; and not in vain is Jesus Christ himself hoisting the red bloody banner and carrying it through the fog, leading the twelve beasts and showing them their way.

Deep in sin, with no idea of the tremendous part they are playing in the revolution, having but a few coined standard tawdry phrases, they march before us. True, true. Thus the Russian revolution has been made. Escaped prisoners, murderers, former sleuths and fileurs and inquisitors, all cast off their old skin and put on a new one. Look at Vanka:

"...Vanka is rich, he is a wise duck,
He was one of ours, he's now a buck!..."

with vast opportunities of looting. They have heard a few inciting words of a travelling agitator—one of those who get paid for exciting the suitable revolutionary spirit in the dark masses—and their vocabulary has greatly increased by expressions such as:

"...Keep up your staunch revolutionary pace...
...We shall all the suckers spite,
We'll blow up an arson bright...
...Run, profiteer, like a sparrow,
I'll get at your marrow..."

and many others. All that happened in Russia. Half of his expressions Block did not invent. But he remoulded them so that they will remain proverbial forever; he blew a new spirit into them, and from meaningless, every-day words, they suddenly rose to heights of poetic significance.

There are a few lines in the poem which marvellously sum up one of the great causes of the Russian revolution—the motive of drowning one's grievance in fighting, murder and ra-

pine. This is true of the people in any war. But it was particularly true of the dark masses in Russia. Petruha, after killing Kate in a fit of mad jealousy, is lamenting before his pals. His pals reprimand him severely for his nagging. Is this momentous, trying time fit for nagging? * * * Heavy burdens will come to crush all the molly-coddles. And

“...Petruha slowly slackens
His uneasy quavering step,
Up he throws his head that dropped
Full again of mirth and pep...”

with an immediate decision to raise hell and drown his sorrows in plunder and cruel amusement.

Those who know Russian folk songs will understand that had Block issued his eighth canto without his signature, it would be hailed by all linguists and critics as a newly discovered popular song. Its parallelism, its music, its melancholy beginning, charming in its slowness, are unsurpassed in Russian “stylistic” poetry, that poetry which made a special point of adapting itself to various styles.

It is impossible to write a worthy comment on the poem. Understanding souls will be overwhelmed by its subtle beauty; those who will not, will not be helped by any commentaries at all. When you read through the poem—you forgive the brutal Krasnoarmeitsy. You are not ready yet to include them in the category of apostles, but you forgive them. The figure of Christ before them does not shock you. You think it should be so. Is it not great, powerful art?

TWELVE

I The evening's bleak
 And snow is deep.
 Wind, wind!
 One can hardly stand on one's feet.
 Wind, wind...
 For all God's kind.

The wind sweeps
 The white crisp snow.
 Deep ice below.
 The ice is slippery, makes sigh
 Poor, miserable passers-by.
 They slip and bend low.

From building to building
 There's stretched a cord
 With a poster on th' board
 Inciting people to yielding
 "All power to Constituent Assembly."
 An old woman worries, weeps,
 Can't understand why such heaps
 Of stuff are needed for a sign;
 Such an enormous tatter! It'd be just fine
 For ragged kids, for leggins o' some kind.

Like a hen the old croon
 With pain jumped o'er a clod...
 Oh, holy Virgin, Mother of God!
 Oh, the Bolsheviks'll drive us to th' grave soon!

The frost is biting.
 The wind hard blows
 And the bourgeois on the curb
 In his furs hides his nose.

Who is this?...Long mane,
 And whispers with pain:
 Traitors!
 Ruined Russia!
 Must be from writers, creators...
Vates...

Do you see there, on the side
 The long-flapped...behind the slope...
 Why so sad? Where's your pride,
 Comrade "pope"?

Do you remember you were wont
 To push your belly ahead?
 On it shone a cross, on the blunt
 Paunch, petted and well fed...

A lady in astrakhan trying
 To scud to another slidingly...
 How we were crying, crying...
 Slipped!
 And...bang...tripped!
 Ay, ay...
 Lift her, pray!

The wind's delighted,
 Angry and benign,
 Twists flaps with might,

Mows down the passers,
Tears, rumples, and presses
The huge sign
"All power to Constituent Assembly"
And carries abrupt messages:

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Late evening.
Empty's the street.
One tramp stooping
On his quavering feet.
And the wind cleaving...
Hey, scamp,
Come here...
Let's embrace...

Bread!...
What's there?...
Away! fare!...

Sky is dead, dead...

Rancor, sad rancor,
Boils in the breast.

Black rancor, holy rancor...

Comrade!...With zeal and zest
Look!...

II The wind meanders, the snow's adrift,
There go the twelve, through snow they sift.
Shoulders tight with gun-straps bound,
And fires, and fires, and fires around.
The cap atilt and pipe in mouth
The brand of Cain on face uncouth.
Liberty, liberty!
Ay, crossless trash!
Crash! Crash!

Cold, comrades, cold!
And Vanka and Katka drink and quack.
She's got in stocking a raft of jack.
Vanka is rich, he is a wise duck...
He was one of ours, he's now a buck!

Hey, Vanka, rascal, profiteer!
Kiss mine, try to kiss her, dear!...
Liberty, liberty
Ay, crossless hell!
Katka and Vanka are busy, well...
Busy with what?...
Tut!...
Fires and fires and fires, around,—
Shoulders tight with gun-straps bound.

Hold on the staunch revolutionary pace!
Keep up with the wide-awake foe in the race!

Comrade, keep fast your gun, don't fear!
Let's shoot for fun in holy Russia dear...
In the solid,
Stolid
Fat backed!...
Ay, ay, crossless!

- III Thus our chaps have gone away
In the red guards serve their day,
In the red guards serve their day,
Leave their fearless heads in clay.

Ah, you, bitter, bitter dole,
Sweet one!
Ragged, wretched coat,
Austrian gun!

All the sharks of world to spite,
We shall fan a fire bright,
World-wide arson with bloody stains,
Bless us, Lord, in our pains!

- IV The snow's awl, the driver roars,
Vanka and Katka lead the horse...
Electric globe
On the shaft...
Com' on, boy!...

He is in a soldier's coat,
With a mug of Billy goat,
Twists his pointed fine moustache...
He does caress,
And jokes and jests.
Look at Vanka—what a walk!
Look at Vanka—what a talk!
He embraces foolish Kate,
Starts to prate.
Katka tilted on her seat.
Pearl-like teeth are sparkling neat...
Ah, you, Katia, ah, my Katia,
Sweet fat-faced!...

- V On your neck, my little Katia,
There is still that bloody gash...
Under your breast, little Katia,
Are there still marks of the lash?

Hey, hey, dance and prance!
Give your lovely feet a chance.

You wore silk and laced linen...
Go ahead, go!

And with officers were sinnin'...
You fell low, low!

Go, sin, pest!
Heart fell low in my chest!

Kate, don't you recall that buddy...
Did not miss him my sharp blade.
Don't recall, you, harlot bloody?
Your memory did so fade?

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You wore spats then, gray and handsome,
You were munching chocolate...
You were harloting with ensigns;
Now with soldiers sinning, Kate?

Hey, hey, deep in sin...
Our souls are akin!

VI ...Again against them the fiery horse...
The driver howls and shouts and roars...
Halt, halt! Hey, Andy, come, assist ...
You, Pete, get in the rear, and twist!

Crash! And crash! And look there—lo;
To sky atwirl flees powdered snow.

The horse amuck...and Vanka...too...
Once more! And pull the trigger, you!

Crash! and again! Now you shall know,
How with another's sweetheart go.

The scoundrel fled! Now wait, we'll see,
I'll square it up some day with thee!
And Kakta's where?...She's dead, she's dead!
A heavy bullet in her head!

Well, Katka, glad?...She speaks no more...
Well, lie, then, carrion, on the floor.

Keep up the staunch, revolutionary pace!
Keep up with the wide-awake foe in the race!

VII And again the twelve are pacing,
Rifles behind their shoulders tight.
Only poor assassin's visage
Dimly looms in its new plight.

Downcast, issuing no sound,
He accelerates his pace.
Round the neck his 'kerchief wound...
Livid pallor on his face...

DELAWARE NOTES

Well then, pal, why are you blue?
 Why upset, my friend, why sad?
 Pete, ah, Pete, aren't you yet through?
 Do you pity her who's dead?

Oh, my comrades, oh, my kin,
 How I loved this little maid!
 Nights of love and maudlin din
 She has with her passion paid...

For the dashing, sparkling challenge
 In her fiery, flaming eyes;
 For a mole weird in its purple
 That near her round shoulder lies,
 I have ruined her, ruined her, brainless
 In a fit of crushing vice...ah!

Again you start your nagging, pest!
 Pete, are you yourself a Jane?
 Bury your grief in your breast,
 Don't denude your smarting pain.
 Pull up your chin! Throw out your chest!
 And your unbridled tongue restrain!

'Tis not a time we're living now
 To fumble around and fuss with you!
 For heavier burdens'll come in row,
 Dear comrade, of all kind and hue.

And Petruha slowly slackens
 His uneasy quavering step;
 Up he throws his head that dropp'd,
 Full again of mirth and pep.

Well, well,
 There is no sin in raising hell!

Close the houses, close the doors;
 Plunder's coming, loot and wars.

Open garrets, open cellars...
 Out in the street are reg'lar fellers!...

VIII Oh, my bitter, bitter dole!

Boring ennui,

Deadly!

Well, and my time away
 I shall while, I shall while...

Well, and my pate
 Scratch I will, scratch I will...

Well, and peanuts in bliss
 I shall crack, pile on pile...

Well, and with my blade
I shall kill, I shall kill...

You, profiteer, flee like a sparrow!
I'll get at your marrow
For my Jane,
For the slain...
In peace hold, Lord, the soul of Thy defunct slave...
How boring!

- IX The City's hubbub's no more heard,
O'er Nevski tower silence crawls
That is by cops no more disturbed...
Come out, chaps,—no wine in bowls!
Stands on the curb a profiteer,
His nose in his expensive fur.
With tufty hair to him sticks near,
Her tail turned up, a mangy cur.

He stands there as a dog that's hungry;
He, speechless, stands, like problem frail;
And the old world, as homeless mongrel,
Behind him stands with turned tail.

- X What a tempest now has started,
What a whirl, raging and mad!
One has from another parted,
Can't discern four feet ahead!

Snow is swirling funnel-like,
Snow is rising as a pillar...

Some tornado, Lord our Jesus!
Pete, don't lie, don't lie, He sees us!
Did not save you from the grave
The gold icon, blooming knave?
You can't think, you can't, indeed...
Brains with sounder thoughts you'd feed...
Aren't your hands with blood yet stained
On account of Kate, the slain?

Keep up the proud revolutionary pace,
It's near, the fiend's unswerving face,
Forward, then,
Working men!

- XI Thus they go without a Holy name,
All twelve... in the vast;
Everything's their aim,
Nothing in their past.

Pointed sharp the rifles steel
On the fiends and foes unseen...
In forsaken by-streets reel

DELAWARE NOTES

Hidden by a snowy screen...
 In soft bottomless ravines
 Where the boots stick by the heel...

Bloody pennant
 Strikes the nose...

Rhythmic beats
 Of soldier's rows...

There'll awake
 The cruel foes...

And the whirl sifts right in th' eyes,
 Day and night defies
 Men.
 Forward, then,
 Working men!

XII Far they go in kingly pace...
 Who's there hiding? Out, I said!
 That's the wind that pranking plays
 With the red flag right ahead.

Cold ravine before them lying...
 Who's there hiding? Of what kind?...
 Out!...The cur, like beggar, prying,
 Toddles helplessly behind...

Get away, you filthy beast,
 With the bayonet I'll nip you!
 World decayed, be croaked, disceased!
 As a cur,...I'll whip you, whip you!

...Grinning smile... as wolf it's hungry...
 Bowed its tail... sticks like a plague...
 Frozen dog...oh, homeless mongrel...
 Hey, give voice, You, shadow vague...
 Who's there waving the red banner?
 Can you see it?...What a gloom!
 Who runs there in wavering manner,
 Hiding out from his doom?
 Makes no difference, I'll get you;
 You'd surrender, while alive!
 Comrade, trouble there'll be, I bet you,
 Out you come...or dead you'll lie.

Crash! And in the dwellings mighty
 Echo found its sinuous way...
 And the tempest with its sprightly
 Laughter in the snow's depth lay.
 ...Rat—ta—ta!—Rat—ta—ta!...
 ...Rat—ta—ta!—Rat—ta—ta!...

Thus they marched in a pace steady,
And behind the starving cur;
Before them... with pennant bloody
Hind the gale, unseen, aloof,
Frail and soft and bullet proof,
Tender pace above the whirl,...
Like a mist of snowy pearl,
In a crown of rose embraced...
Jesus Christ...before them paced!