

# The Broken Music of the Revolution: Trotsky and Blok

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### Abstract

This article explores Lev Trotsky's claim in that, while not being a poem of the revolution, the symbolist poet Aleksandr Blok's *The Twelve* (1918) was the most significant literary product of the revolutionary epoch. It places Trotsky's encounter with Blok in the context of *Literature and Revolution's* stance on the 'art of transition', and identifies the contrast between an elemental (or romantic) and a teleological (or rationalist) conception of revolution as the crux of Trotsky's critical estimation of Blok. By way of conclusion, the article tries to query the determinacy of this distinction between the elemental and the teleological, by considering the dialectic of form and formlessness as the locus for a tragic conception of the revolution.

### Keywords

Aleksandr Blok, poetry, revolution, tragedy, Lev Trotsky

The spirit is music. Once upon a time, the daimon intimated to Socrates to listen to the spirit of music. With your whole body, with your whole heart, with your whole consciousness – *listen* to the Revolution.

– Aleksandr Blok, 'The Intelligentsia and the Revolution' (1918)

The revolution, like all great events, brings into relief the darkness of the background.

– Aleksandr Blok, 'Catilina' (1918)

Blok had found a new voice in the Revolution. The wind of the Revolution breaking through a poet whistles through him as through a bridge. It passes through him like a breath between lips.

– Viktor Shklovsky, *Mayakovsky and His Circle* (1940)<sup>1</sup>

The discussion of the verse of the great symbolist poet Aleksandr Blok in Lev Trotsky's *Literature and Revolution* plays a role at once crucial and eccentric. Eccentric, in that the bulk of Part I of *Literature and Revolution*, the one concerned with the ideological and aesthetic tendencies of post-

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<sup>1</sup> Shklovsky 1972, p. 104.

revolutionary literature,<sup>2</sup> is preoccupied with elaborating a nuanced if trenchant position on the claims of various literary groupings – above all ‘fellow travellers’, futurists and the Proletkult – on the Bolshevik leadership, as well as with estimating their repercussions for the broader question of socialist culture. Blok – as indicated by his being the only poet to whom a separate chapter, albeit a concise one, is dedicated – stands largely on his own by virtue of the break with his symbolist milieu, but also by his aloofness from the para-political activism of the avant-gardes. And yet Blok’s poem *The Twelve* also stands out amid Trotsky’s abiding concern with the nexus of poetry and revolution, as the only poem produced out of the rupture of 1917 which can make a claim both to grasp something of its tumultuous uniqueness and to be of lasting aesthetic value. Trotsky’s evaluation of Blok repays closer scrutiny, opening up a unique angle of vision through which to reconsider the intense debates in the wake of October on the possibility of representing revolution; it also reveals a set of tensions and contradictions, or perhaps antinomies, criss-crossing the very idea of a poetry of revolution – above all the one repeatedly stressed by Trotsky between the revolution as elemental force and the revolution as rationally-ordered telos. It is my contention here that by reconsidering Trotsky’s response to *The Twelve*, but also the revolutionary metaphysic underlying Blok’s poetics, as evidenced in some of his essays, we can also deepen our understanding of another theme of signal importance to the argument of *Literature and Revolution*, that of the possibility of a socialist or revolutionary tragedy.

With a gesture that would be repeated by most of those seeking to accord Blok the title of poet of the revolution on the basis of *The Twelve*, Trotsky makes a sharp cut between Blok’s symbolist origins and his verses of 1918. Blok’s symbolist poetry up until *The Twelve* is deemed a reflection – or more precisely, in view of the particularity of symbolist poetics, a transfiguration – of a definite class and cultural milieu. This is how Trotsky begins and frames his discussion:

Blok belonged entirely to pre-October literature. Blok’s impulses—whether towards tempestuous mysticism, or towards revolution—arise not in empty space, but in the very thick atmosphere of the culture of old Russia, of its landlords

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2 Part II, which collected Trotsky’s writings on literature in the counter-revolutionary doldrums of 1907-1914, has never been fully translated into English; all extant editions of *Literature and Revolution* in English are variously truncated. For complete versions in languages other than the original Russian, see Trotsky 1974 and 2015. The 2015 Argentinian edition goes far beyond the original Russian to include over 300 pages of texts by Trotsky on literature. Thanks to Luiz Renato Martins and Sebastian Budgen for bringing this edition to my attention.

and intelligentsia. Blok’s symbolism was a reflection of this immediate and disgusting environment. A symbol is a generalized image of a reality. Blok’s lyrics are romantic, symbolic, mystic, formless, and unreal. But they presuppose a very real life with definite forms and relationships. Romantic symbolism is only a going away from life, in the sense of an abstraction from its concreteness, from individual traits, and from its proper names; at bottom, symbolism is a means of transforming and sublimating life. Blok’s starry, stormy, and formless lyrics reflect a definite environment and period, with its manner of living, its customs, its rhythms, but outside of this period, they hang like a cloudpatch. This lyric poetry will not outlive its time or its author.<sup>3</sup>

As we know from his strenuous defence of the enduring worth of the classics against futurist calls to throw them from the ship of modernity and Proletkult anathemas against bourgeois culture, Trotsky was anything but a partisan of a scorched earth strategy in the domain of arts and letters. It is not as the poetic expression of a bourgeois culture that symbolism is relegated to the scrapheap of forms, but as the correlate of a morbidly degraded class milieu, that of the landed intelligentsia – a social ‘content’ whose form, qua escapism, disavowal, and sublimation, could only be vaporous, insubstantial. In other words, while a historical materialist method indicates that all art can have a documentary value vis-à-vis its time, only certain patterns and conjunctures of ‘reflection’ allow for the creation of aesthetically valuable works.

It is worth noting here that Trotsky adamantly discounts the notion that poetry foresees or propethises the coming of the revolutionary storm. The formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky, target of some of Trotsky’s sharpest barbs in Chapter V of Part I of *Literature and Revolution*, eloquently articulated the idea of poetic prophecy with reference to Mayakovsky, writing that a ‘great poet is born out of the contradictions of his time. He is preceded by the inequality of things, their dislocations, the course of their changes. Others do not yet know about the day after tomorrow. The poet defines it, writes and receives no recognition’.<sup>4</sup> Blok’s Italian translator Angelo Maria Ripellino perceives Russian symbolism itself, with Blok as its greatest and most conflicted representative, as just such a record of contradiction – not just the contradiction of a time, but the

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3 Trotsky 2005, p. 105.

4 Shklovsky 1972, p. 10.

contradiction *between* times (of reactionary decadence and revolutionary upsurge). In his incisive afterword to his translation of Blok's poems, he observes that Blok was the most conspicuous poetic figure among those who 'perceived in a spasmodic manner the subterranean rumble of events, the crisis of bourgeois culture, the coming of the storm. Having matured on the frontier between two epochs, with all the disquiet of one living on an uncertain borderland', the young symbolists repudiated a Europhilic positivism and turned to mysticism and the messianic. Blok's poetry, 'pervaded by the desperate presage of the nearing catastrophe, the fevered anxiety about the collapse of the old world' is 'a poetry of the border. His verses herald the cataclysm with the vibratile subtlety of seismic instruments'.<sup>5</sup>Trotsky's position is diametrically opposite, it seems, to that of Shklovsky and Ripellino. Leaning on the conception of the uneven, class-conditioned rhythms of social time, and their artistic effects, that underlies *Literature and Revolution* (to which we'll return), Trotsky sees belatedness where poetry's apologists see anticipation:

The nightingale of poetry, like that bird of wisdom, the owl, is heard only after the sun is set. The day is a time for action, but at twilight feeling and reason come to take account of what has been accomplished. ... As a matter of fact, all through history, mind limps after reality. ... The traditional identification of poet and prophet is acceptable only in the sense that the poet is about as slow in reflecting his epoch as the prophet. If there are prophets and poets who can be said to have been "ahead of their time," it is because they have expressed certain demands of social evolution not quite as slowly as the rest of their kind.<sup>6</sup>

If Blok is not to be celebrated for his anticipation of the revolution, how does Trotsky's conceive the symbolist poet's entry 'into the sphere of October'?<sup>7</sup> Far from the product of a total subjective or formal novelty, it is in Blok's pre-revolutionary psychology and poetic practice (and their revolutionary crisis) that Trotsky finds the clues for the greatness of *The Twelve*.

In however decadent a manner, the celebrated purity of Blok's lyricism was grounded in an interpenetration of art and life which, while

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5 Ripellino in Blok 2016, p. 197.

6 Trotsky 2005, p. 34.

7 Ibid., p. 105.

miles away from a materialist poetics, nevertheless strongly repudiated any separation of aesthetic from social facts. It is in Blok's synthetic image of a single musical chord harmonising the different facets of life that Trotsky sees the lineaments of a position that is 'much bigger and stronger and deeper than a self-sufficient aestheticism, than all the nonsense about art being independent of social life'.<sup>8</sup>This 'musical' ear for the social whole, however undialectical and romantic in character, is what permitted Blok, while never abandoning his position as 'a true decadent' to write, in Trotsky's eyes, a poem about the revolution that would last for centuries.

The fact that the greatest poem that takes the revolution as its theme and material was not written by a revolutionary poet is perfectly in keeping with Trotsky's critiques of the Proletkult writers, the futurists and Mayakovsky, as well as his estimation of poetry and art's social delay – how at the beginning of a great epoch plastic and poetic production always manifests 'a terrifying helplessness'.<sup>9</sup> For Trotsky, aesthetic production requires not just material abundance (perhaps the most questionable of his premises) but the required time for the maturation of forms adequate to new contents, a time which is unavailable in the throes of civil war and socialist construction under largely cataclysmic circumstances. This matter of formal maturation also involves the individual class-conditioned psychology of the artists themselves, who, formed before October, enter into it with their outlook and capacities largely formed; their transposition of pre-existing tones, themes and techniques onto the revolution is for the most part negatively affected by their extraneousness to the revolutionary tradition, and the latter's conception of the events of 1917 as part of a historically rational and purposive, if tremendously disruptive process. Writing in exile, and long having lost the struggle over the cultural (not to mention the political) direction of the revolution, Trotsky would judge that:

The current official ideology of 'proletarian literature' is based - we see the same thing in the artistic sphere as in the economic - on a total lack of understanding of the *rhythms and periods of time* necessary for cultural maturation. The struggle for "proletarian culture" – something on the order of the "total collectivization" of all humanity's gains within the span of a single fiveyear plan – had at the beginning of the

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8 Ibid., p. 106.

9 Ibid., p. 37.

October Revolution the character of utopian idealism, and it was precisely on this basis that it was rejected by Lenin and the author of these lines.<sup>10</sup>

In this respect, it is instructive to contrast Trotsky's positive estimation of *The Twelve* with his comradely if unsparing criticisms of Mayakovsky's attempt at creating an allegorical epic of revolution in *150,000,000*. In the rush to monumentalise the revolution in verse, Mayakovsky can only project his outsized lyrical 'I' onto the revolutionary process, and forge allegories of Capital and Revolution which fail both to grasp their internal dynamism and to create a popular idiom in which they may be grasped. Notwithstanding the energy of his language, the force of his verse, the inventiveness of many of his lyrical figures, 'Mayakomorphism' – obliging the revolution to be measured by Mayakovsky's turbulent ego and thus missing the proper measure of revolution<sup>11</sup> – shows the misfit between the poet as lyrical subject and the revolution as his object, however much he may try to fuse the two. That is why for Trotsky Mayakovsky's 'Cloud in Trousers' (1913) remains 'his most significant and creatively his boldest and most promising work'. This is to the very degree that the 'individualistic' axis of Mayakovsky's poetry belongs essentially to the pre-revolutionary revolt of an oppressed Bohemia which, for all of its enthusiasm and participation in the revolutionary process, does not share its inmost logic or tradition. Ever concerned with the unity of the artwork, and its dialectical fit with the psychology and epoch of the artist, Trotsky finds an 'organic quality' in 'Cloud' missing in Mayakovsky's revolutionary poems. Such a quality could only be given a 'social direction' by the extremely arduous forging of 'a self-reliant mastery, which signifies not only a mastery of the word, but also a broad historical and experiential grasp, a penetration into the mechanism of the live collective and personal forces, ideas, temperaments, and passions' (the broader sense of the 'realism' espoused by Trotsky in these pages).<sup>12</sup> Writing after Mayakovsky's suicide, Trotsky would put his finger more forcefully on the nerve-centre of the nexus between poetry and revolution, one which again

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10 Trotsky 1977b, p. 176.

11 The question of measure is a veritable *leitmotiv* in *Literature and Revolution*, and a key point of conversion between the political and aesthetic dimensions. Criticising the tonal excesses of Mayakovsky and his futurist comrades, Trotsky declares: 'It is true that hyperbolism reflects to a certain degree the rage of our times. But this does not offer a wholesale justification of art. It is hard to shout louder than the War or the Revolution, and it is easy to break down. A sense of measure in art is the same as having a sense of realism in politics. The principal fault of Futurist poetry, even in its best examples, lies in this absence of a sense measure; it has lost the measure of the salon, and it has not yet found the measure of the street'. Trotsky 2005, pp. 129-130.

12 Ibid., p. 135.

concerns the question of social time. While reiterating his own 'classical' penchant for harmonious or organic form, he acknowledged the historical reasons why Mayakovsky's could not be a 'harmonious talent':

After all, where could artistic harmony come from in these decades of catastrophe, across the unsealed chasm between two epochs? In Mayakovsky's work the summits stand side by side with abysmal lapses. Strokes of genius are marred by trivial stanzas, even by loud vulgarity. ... Mayakovsky was not only the "singer," but also the victim, of the epoch of transformation, which while creating elements of the new culture with unparalleled force, still did so much more slowly and contradictorily than necessary for the harmonious development of an individual poet or a generation of poets devoted to the revolution.<sup>13</sup>

It is not just Blok then who is a 'poet of the border', in Ripellino's fortunate phrasing. This is a condition of all that *art of transition* which dwells in the 'unsealed chasm' between the excellences and verities of bourgeois art, on the one hand, and a merely imaginable but yet unformed, new (socialist) art, on the other. While the Proletkult movement advances the substitution of bourgeois art and culture by a chimerical proletarian art and culture, on the basis of the wholly fallacious analogy between the constitution and trajectory of the two contending classes,<sup>14</sup> the futurists force an unwarranted identification between the art of transition and the new art, and present themselves as monopolists of a formal innovation able to match and accompany the party's own monopoly over the political form to be taken by the future society. For Trotsky, both the Proletkult's and the futurist's pretensions reveal a familiar tendency of artistic groupings to compete for political privilege, along with a real misunderstanding of the social temporality of artistic creation, of 'the rhythms and periods of time' required for formal maturation.

By contrast, it could be argued that it is not just in the searing, disquieting lyricism of Blok's *The Twelve*, its troubled poetic mastery, that Trotsky locates its singular achievement – as the only poem of transition, so

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13 Trotsky 1977b, pp. 174-5.

14 'The formless talk about proletarian culture, in antithesis to bourgeois culture, feeds on the extremely uncritical identification of the historic destinies of the proletariat with those of the bourgeoisie. A shallow and purely liberal method of making analogies of historic forms has nothing in common with Marxism. There is no real analogy between the historic development of the bourgeoisie and of the working class.' Trotsky 2005, p. 155.

to speak, whose voice rings across the epochs – but in the specificity of Blok’s personal experience of the chasm, the border. It is as though the intensity and sincerity with which the revolutionary rupture is experienced by Blok raises him above the exorbitant aesthetico-political claims of vanguard groupings, or indeed of Mayakovsky’s own tendency to fill that chasm with the expansion of his ego to titanic and collective dimensions.<sup>15</sup> The psychological penchant of Trotsky’s analyses is also on evidence in his treatment of Blok, when he points to the correlation between the poet’s own anguished inner sense of chaos and formlessness as a reflection of his precarious pre-revolutionary position, and as the background of his tragic affirmation of the revolutionary break:

As he himself said, Blok carried chaos within himself all his life. His manner of saying this was formless, just as his philosophy of life and his lyrics were on the whole formless. What he felt to be chaos was his incapacity to combine the subjective and the objective, his cautious and watchful lack of willpower, in an epoch that saw the preparation and afterwards the letting loose of the greatest events. ... Blok’s anxious state of chaos gravitated into two main directions: the mystic and the revolutionary. But in neither direction did it resolve itself to the end. His religion was unclear and infirm, not imperative like his lyrics. The Revolution, which descended on the poet like a hail of facts, like a geologic avalanche of events, refuted or rather swept away the pre-revolutionary Blok, who was wasting himself in languor and presentiments. It drowned the tender, gnat-like note of individualism in the roaring and heaving music of destruction. And here one had to choose.<sup>16</sup>

For Trotsky, *The Twelve* is the poetic record of this choice. What makes it ‘the most significant work of our [revolutionary] epoch’ is arguably the way in which it gives expression to the very contradictions of the transition, as experienced by a poet whose psychology and style is firmly anchored in pre-revolutionary decadence, but who, in an admirable act

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<sup>15</sup> ‘The universalization of one’s ego breaks down, to some extent, the limits of one’s individuality, and brings one nearer to the collectivity – from the reverse end. But this is true only to a certain degree. The individualistic and bohemian arrogance – in contrast, not to humility, but to a necessary sense of the measure of things – runs throughout everything written by Mayakovsky.’ Trotsky 2005, p. 129.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

of self-directed violence, tries to enter into the sphere of October.<sup>17</sup> Mayakovsky, writing in the wake of Blok’s death, told of how he ran across the symbolist poet standing by a bonfire on the streets of revolutionary Petersburg. Asking him about his views of the ongoing clashes he received a lapidary ‘Good’, followed by a report of how his precious library had been burnt down by peasants on his family estate.<sup>18</sup> As Mayakovsky observed in his obituary: ‘The choice between celebrating that “good” and complaining about the fire was one that Blok never made in his poetry.’<sup>19</sup> *The Twelve*, in Trotsky’s estimation, composes the ‘music of the terrible events’ across the revolutionary laceration of present and future from the past. The poem is ultimately ‘a cry of despair for the dying past, and yet a cry of despair that rises in a hope for the future’, a hope that involves the affirmation of the victory of new people over the poet and his class, and over everything he deems precious. The aptness of Trotsky’s judgment is corroborated in Blok’s own reflections on the caesura between his own past and the surge of the revolution, reflections saturated with a staggering self-directed negativity:

I remember when I experienced the flame of a deep love, based on the same old basic elements, but with a new content, a new meaning, from the fact that Lyubov’ Mendeleyeva and I were ‘special people’; when I experienced this love, of which people will read in my books after my death, I used to love galloping through a wretched village on my fine horse; I loved asking the way, which I knew perfectly well, either to show off in front of a poor yokel or a pretty girl, so that we could flash our white teeth at one another and our hearts flutter in our breast, for no particular reason, except youth, the damp mist, her swarthy glance, and my own tapered waist. ... They *knew* all this. Knew it far better than I did, for all my self-awareness. They knew that the master was young, his horse handsome, his smile attractive, that his bride to be was a beauty and that

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<sup>17</sup> Shklovsky’s own appreciation of the poem and its relation to Blok’s affirmation of the revolution adds an interesting nuance to Trotsky’s position, by complementing the tragic tenor of *The Twelve* with an attention to its ironic means. While the ‘motivation’ may be revolutionary tragedy, the ‘device’ of *The Twelve* is irony as ‘either the simultaneous perception of two contradictory phenomena or the simultaneous relating of one and the same phenomenon to two semantic norms’. For Shklovsky, ‘the poem remains ambivalent and the effect is calculated. Blok himself, however, accepted the revolution without ambivalence. The noise made by the fall of the old world bewitched him’. Shklovsky 2004, pp. 239-240.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Asor Rosa 2011, p. 86. For Asor Rosa, the tragic predicament and ultimate defeat of the poet who sympathises with the revolution is crystallised by this anecdote.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Jangfeldt 2014, p. 180. Jangfeldt also provides some grim background on the Central Committee’s ambiguous response to Blok’s ultimately mortal illness.

both were 'masters'. And whether the masters are decent or not, just wait, one day we'll show them. And they did show us. And they're still showing us. And so even if with hands dirtier than mine (and I'm not sure of that, and, O God, I don't mean to condemn them for it) they throw out of the printing-house the books of the comparatively deserving (in the eyes of the revolution) writer A. Blok, *even then I cannot complain*. It is not their hands that throw out my books, or not only theirs, but those distant unknown millions of poverty-stricken hands; and it is watched by millions of the same uncomprehending, but starving, agonized eyes, which have seen a handsome well-fed 'master' prancing down the road. ... And now those eyes twinkle – how's that, the prancing, ogling master, and now the master's on our side, is he? On our side, is he just? The master's a demon. The master will wriggle out of it, and he'll always remain a master. But we just think 'the time may be short, but while it's ours, it's ours'.<sup>20</sup>

For Trotsky, the violence of the images in *The Twelve* – and the acceptance of all the revolutions' brutality and waste that they channel – was a function of Blok's need to incinerate the bridges that linked him to his landed class and decadent milieu. Thus, far from any kitsch sublimation of the revolution into an object of lyrical celebration, *The Twelve* turns to the revolution 'in its uncouth forms and only in its uncouth forms – a strike of prostitutes, for instance, the murder of Katka by a Red guard, the pillage of a bourgeois home – and, he says, I accept this, and he sanctifies this all this provocatively with the blessings of Christ'<sup>21</sup> – a reference to the famous conclusion of the poem, when the twelve Red guards (whose number is often viewed as allegorising a new apostleship) at last step behind the saviour, in what seems a consummate affirmation of revolutionary messianism.

In *The Twelve* the hinge between the hatred of the old bourgeois world and its messianic transfiguration, as channelled by the extremely rough justice of the twelve red guards, can be found in the image of the 'hungry cur', first employed to allegorise the bourgeois:

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 20 Blok quoted in Thomson 1978, pp. 44-5. Blok's abnegations could perhaps be countered by his own qualified criticism of the Russian intelligentsia's misguided populism in the article 'The People and the Intelligentsia', from November 1908: 'Perhaps, at last, *the soul of the people too has truly been understood*; but understood, how? To understand *everything* and love *everything*, even what is hostile and demands renouncing what is dearest to you, doesn't this perhaps mean not having understood *anything*, not loving *anything*?'. Blok 1978, p. 23.

21 Trotsky 2005, p. 109.

A bourgeois's standing at the crossroads,  
 nose buried in his collar.  
 and near him, tail between its legs,  
 a mangy mongrel cowers.

The bourgeois stands, a hungry cur,  
 a question mark, a question begged,  
 behind him crouches the old world –  
 a mongrel tail between its legs.<sup>22</sup>

It returns, as the shooting Bolsheviks advancing through the city amid the ceaseless blizzard (a fusion or elision of two 'elemental forces') is precariously, interrogatively crowned by a kind of hallucinatory messianism:

Crack-crack-crack! And the only answer  
 is echoes, echoes, echoes.  
 Only the whirlwind's long laughter  
 criss-crossing the snows.

Crack-crack-crack!  
 Crack-crack-crack!

... From street to street with sovereign stride,  
 a hungry cur behind them ...  
 While bearing a blood-stained banner,  
 blizzard-invisible,  
 bullet-untouchable,  
 tenderly treading through the snow-swirls,  
 hung with threads of snow-pearls,  
 crowned with snowflake roses –  
 up ahead – is Jesus Christ?<sup>23</sup>

We could hazard that the reason why Trotsky can both emphatically claim that *The Twelve* is not the poem of the revolution while it is the most significant product of its epoch are fundamentally the same. Namely, the fact that in this intensely disarming and disturbing 'swan song' of the decadent art of individualism, consuming itself in the revolution it is drawn towards but cannot join, are expressed some of the great

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 22 Blok in Dralyuk 2016, p. 60.

23 Ibid., p. 63.

psychological, figural and class contradictions – as well as ‘rhythms’ – of the time. In this singular but lacerating capture of the ‘broken music’<sup>24</sup> of the revolution – one that Trotsky thinks is inevitably followed by Blok’s poetic silence – the fatal political limitations and the poetic greatness seem to converge. But this convergence seems also to hint at some of the vacillations in Trotsky’s own perspective.

While the greatness of *The Twelve* rests in great part on how it captures 1917 in images of arresting extremity, on the lyrical and psychological tension that Blok’s affirmation of the revolution’s negativity conveys, Trotsky is adamant that those ‘uncouth’ phenomena, while very real, are also peripheral to the revolution’s essential line, which is also to say to its poetics. Here, the fundamental distinction between a revolutionary poetics of elemental force and one of purposive (if zigzagging, ‘tragic’ or even ‘catastrophic’) development, a distinction that undergirds much of Trotsky’s argument throughout *Literature and Revolution*, is critical. The former poetics is ultimately romantic, it requires a revolution which proceeds by great jolts, powerful surges, a grandiose movement. It is the absence of that dynamic that explains the depletion of the poet’s revolutionary inspiration. As Trotsky observes:

Blok could have been kept going perhaps only by a continual development of revolutionary events, by a powerful spiral of shocks that would embrace the whole world. But the march of history is not adapted for the psychic needs of a romanticist who is struck by the Revolution. And to be able to maintain oneself on the temporary sandbanks, one has to have a different training, a different faith in the Revolution, an understanding of its sequential rhythms, and not only an understanding of the chaotic music of its tides.<sup>25</sup>

For Trotsky the uncouth, the shocking, the elemental, which dominates Blok’s musical ear for the revolution, is but a ‘parallel’ fact, an unfortunate, but ultimately inessential by-product – like the looting that accompanies the downfall of the old regime, but which revolutionary ‘sobriety’ is quick to severely repress.<sup>26</sup> When Trotsky argues that Blok

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24 Trotsky 2005, p. 108.

25 Ibid.

26 As Trotsky pointedly notes: ‘As early as the beginning of 1918, the Revolution put an end to anarchistic unruliness, and carried on a merciless and victorious struggle with the disintegrating methods of guerrilla warfare’ (p. 109).

‘feels [the revolution’s] sweep, the terrible commotion in the heart, the awakening, the bravery, the risk, and that even in these disgusting, senseless, and bloody manifestations is reflected the spirit of the Revolution, which, to Blok, is the spirit of Christ rampant’,<sup>27</sup> he is in many ways faithfully conveying the peculiar poetics and fidelity to the revolution ruptured by the symbolist poet, even before 1917.<sup>28</sup>

If we turn to Blok’s essayistic prose from the period following the suppression of the 1905 revolution, the fervent desire for a cataclysmic collapse of bourgeois culture, and its association with some kind of elemental, geological or meteorological force (a theme not unknown to Mayakovsky, with his insistence on the ‘flood’ of revolution<sup>29</sup>), is a veritable *leitmotiv*, beginning with his encomium to Bakunin from July 1906, where he writes of a new sea of theses and antitheses stretching out before the Russian intelligentsia, and enjoins it to take up the ‘fire’ of Bakunin, for ‘only in fire does pain melt away, only in the lightning is the storm brought to its resolution’, going on to quote Bakunin’s lines from his article on German reaction to the effect that ‘the passion for destruction is simultaneously a creative passion’.<sup>30</sup> Blok had once commented to the Bolshevik Commissar of Education Anatoly Lunacharsky that ‘in you Bolsheviks I still feel our Russia, Bakunin. I

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27 Ibid., p. 110.

28 Further corroboration of the centrality of the ‘elemental’ perception of the revolution can be drawn from the reminiscences of the artist George (Yuri) Annenkov: ‘In the years 1917-1919 Blok undoubtedly was captivated by the *elemental* side of the Revolution. The “world-wide conflagration” seemed to him an *end*, not a stage. The world-wide conflagration was not even a symbol of destruction for Blok: it was a “universal orchestra of the nation’s spirit.” Street lynchings appeared to him more justified than court inquiries. “Turmoil is the unfailing companion of revolution.” And again and always – Music. “Music” with a capital “M.” As early as 1909 Blok said: “He who is filled with music shall hear the sigh of the universal spirit, if not today, then tomorrow.” In 1917 it seemed to Blok that he heard it.’ Annenkov 1967, p. 131.

29 The whole allegory of the revolutionary ark in the 1918 play *Mystery-Bouffe* plays on this elemental identification of the revolution: ‘The gist of Act One is as follows: / the world is leaking. / Then comes a stampede: / everyone flees Revolution’s flood. / There are seven pairs of The Unclean, / and seven pairs of The Clean / (that is, fourteen poor proletarians / and fourteen important bourgeois), / and in between, / with a pair of tear-stained cheeks, / a miserable little Menshevik. / The North Pole is flooded, / the last refuge is gone. / So they all begin building, / not just an Ark, / but a great big super-duper one’. Clearly, a ‘meteorological’ imaginary of revolution need not be tragic, but can issue into this kind of elemental farce. Mayakovsky 1995, p. 46.

30 Blok 1978, p. 14. Note too, from his essay on ‘The Forces of Nature and Culture’, Blok’s use of the metaphor of a bomb detonation to argue against economic determinism: ‘History, the very history that, some argue, is simply reducible to political economy, has really put a bomb on our table. And not a simple bomb, but an incredibly perfected one, like that perforating projectile that produces carefully researched lacerations, invented by the English to repress the Indians. This projectile has already been shot; while we reasoned about integrity, welfare, infinite progress, it turned out that carefully researched lacerations have been carried out between man and nature, between man and man; ultimately, in every man the soul had been disjoined from the body, reason from will’. Blok 1978, p. 43. See also Ripellino in Blok 2016, p. 232.

love much about Lenin, but not his Marxism'.<sup>31</sup> In his 1908 essay on 'The Forces of Nature and Culture', allegorising on the Italian earthquake in Messina as a kind of Lisbon earthquake of the early twentieth century, Blok wonders whether, just as the Italian South will be prey to further tremors given the lacking consolidation of the earth's crust in its latitudes, so the crust has yet to harden over 'another element, just as terrible, and not subterranean, but terrestrial: the popular element'.<sup>32</sup> What's more, as Blok argued in his 1919 essay on 'The Downfall of Humanism', it was the emergence of the mass as the new motive force of European humanism which signalled its crisis.<sup>33</sup> It is in the fresh, 'barbarian' masses that the culture wasted by the decadent bourgeois elites is paradoxically safeguarded – in what we could see as a true short-circuit of the symbolist mysticism and anarchist revolutionism that, as Trotsky intimated, vie for supremacy in Blok's imaginary.<sup>34</sup> As Blok declaims: 'In our catastrophic epoch [which sees the conflict between humanitarian culture and the spirit of music] all cultural initiatives should be imagined as the catacombs in which the first Christians safeguarded their spiritual heritage',<sup>35</sup> with the signal difference that salvation lies not in underground hiddenness but in exposure, and in the action of barbarian masses who, like aesthetic proletarians without reserves, possess nothing but 'the spirit of music', while civilisation turns into the enemy of culture. Blok's music, as Ripellino explains, 'is the connective that amalgamates in a single substance earthly events, the turmoil in the blood, the shudder of vast spaces, the inebriation of the passions, the anguish of living. But it is also the identity of the storm, the symbol of revolt, the liberation from the desperate pettiness of the bourgeois world'.<sup>36</sup>

In his crucial talk on 'The Intelligentsia and the Revolution', delivered on 9 January 1918, Blok will write of how imperative it became for his generation, in the repressive lull after 1905 to '*Remake everything*. To make it so that our false, filthy, tedious, monstrous life becomes a just, clean,

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31 Cited by Ripellino in Blok 2016, p. 234. Blok would also initially judge that: 'The Bolsheviks are just a group acting on the surface, and behind them there lurks something that has not yet manifested itself'. Quoted in Thomson 1978, p. 35.

32 Blok 1978, p. 48.

33 Blok 1978, pp. 127-8.

34 On the 'ancient myth of barbarian regeneration' and its prevalence among the fellow-travelling poets of 1917, see Asor Rosa 2011, p. 84.

35 Blok 1978, p. 143.

36 Ripellino in Blok 2016, p. 239.

happy, beautiful life'. The revolution, in this view, is a product (*contra* Trotsky's axiom of the delay of poetry and ideas) of the 'torrent' of these spiritual negations, this lyrical revolt against everything confining life and culture in the deadness of the present. The identification of revolution with *nature* is here again at the very antipodes of Trotsky's celebration of its singularly modern efficacy, rationality and purposiveness – not to mention its will fully to subject nature itself to its own will (literally moving mountains, as the notoriously Promethan passages of *Literature and Revolution* forecast). But like nature and its elements, for Blok revolution does not allow the reasoned parsing of its essential teleology from its secondary waste-products:

The revolution, like a whirlwind, like a snowstorm, always brings something new and unpredictable; many are cruelly deceived by it; much of value is mutilated in the maelstrom; frequently the undeserving are washed up ashore unharmed. But these are only the details; it doesn't alter the general direction of the current, nor the fearful and deafening roar of the torrent. This roar is always and inevitably – *about something great*.<sup>37</sup>

In the same essay, Blok would enjoin his peers not to fear the inessential ruin of 'kremlins, palaces, canvases, books' – not out of faith in the clarity of revolutionary planning, but in the conviction that essential forms were unaffected or indeed even potentiated by the cleansing fire of the social upheaval. But he would also castigate intellectuals for imagining the people in revolt to be a 'good child', for thinking the revolution could be some kind of idyll. As Shklovsky reports, in one of his memoirs of the period: 'Blok saw and heard the new music of that time; he isolated himself from his friends; he used to say: "Unfortunately, the majority of mankind are Rightwing Socialist Revolutionaries." He had already isolated himself from that part of mankind he knew when he walked with the man Mayakovsky'.<sup>38</sup> This 'Right-Wing SR' intelligentsia is guilty, in Blok's striking judgment, of a profound 'amusicality', a 'tone-deafness' as or even more culpable than the arsons and lynchings carried out by the people in revolt. Blok would even scour the annals of Ancient history, to produce in his essay on the Roman anti-aristocratic conspirator Lucius Sergius Catilina ('Catilina: A Page from the History of the World Revolution') a striking apologia by analogy for the more amoral

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37 Blok 1978, p. 62. Translation from Thomson 1978, p. 37.

38 Shklovsky 1972, p. 105.

dimensions of Bolshevism, with this (rather Nechaevian, it might be argued) portrait of the revolutionary:

The simplicity and horror that characterises the spiritual order of the revolutionary perforce consists in the fact that in him there appears to have been eliminated a long chain of dialectical and sentimental premises, so that the deductions of his brain and heart appear absurd, casual, ungrounded. Such a man is demented, maniacal, obsessive. Life flows in him as though subject to other laws of causality, of space and time; thanks to that, his entire physical and spiritual complexion results completely different than that of 'gradual' men; it acts in another time and another space.<sup>39</sup>

As Blok himself affirms in 'The Downfall of Humanism', with more than a hint of debt to the early Nietzsche, the only true conception of revolution, the only one able to grasp its essential feature – 'its élan of will, of music, of synthesis [which] is always undefinable and cannot be channelled and contained' – is a *tragic* one. Only such a tragic perspective is capable of grasping the world's complexity and affirming its negativity. In his poetry too, namely in a poem contemporaneous with *The Twelve* but passed over by Trotsky, *The Scythians*, this tragic image of revolution will be figured by an affirmation (so contrary to the mainstream of Bolshevik thought, which always associated Russia's Eastern past with retardation) of the Asiatic character of the revolution, over against Europe's use of 'extremely refined methods in the struggle against music'.<sup>40</sup>

We shall abandon Europe and her charm  
We shall resort to Scythian craft and guile.  
Swift to the woods and forests we shall swarm,  
and then look back, and smile our slit-eyed smile.

[...]

We shall not stir, even though the frenzied Huns  
plunder the corpses of the slain in battle, drive  
their cattle into shrines, burn cities down,  
and roast their white-skinned fellow men alive.

.....  
<sup>39</sup> Blok 1978, p. 87.

<sup>40</sup> Blok 1978, p. 139.

O ancient world, arise! For the last time  
we call you to the ritual feast and fire  
of peace and brotherhood! For the last time,  
O hear the summons of the barbarian lyre!<sup>41</sup>

Not only does Trotsky reject the elemental, 'Asiatic' affirmation of the revolution's as uncontrollable force and inevitable waste or excess, but the diagnosis of the reasons for the poetic penchant to imagine the revolution in that guise is at the heart of his criticisms not just of Blok, but of the 'fellow travellers' – writers rallied to the revolution for a time from non-proletarian and non-Bolshevik perspectives. In the preface to *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky had noted that, in the wake the disintegration of the bourgeois axis of Russian literature, it was the specific physiognomy of 'the people' which explained the limitations of the fellow travellers, including Blok, who could only perceive 'those workers who cannot be separated from the protoplasm of peasant and folk'. There is both a strong anti-populist strain and an effort at historical-sociological realism in Trotsky's stance:

The peasant basis of our culture – or rather, of our lack of culture – reveals indirectly all its strength. Our revolution is the expression of the peasant turned proletarian, who yet leans upon the peasant and lays out the path to be followed. Our art is the expression of the intellectual, who hesitates between the peasant and the proletarian and who is incapable of merging either with one or with the other, but who gravitates more toward the peasant, because of his intermediary position, and because of his connections. He cannot become the peasant, but he can sing the peasant.<sup>42</sup>

It is against the rustic or peasant-singing (in Strada's Italian translation, *contadineggianti*, peasant-acting or 'peasantifying') writers that Trotsky levies the criticism, already specifically directed at Boris Pilnyak, to fail in the representation of the revolution because of an inability to grasp what Trotsky, in a recurrent metaphor, calls the 'historic axis of crystallisation'<sup>43</sup> which orders what otherwise appear as scattered revolutionary episodes: 'The invisible axis (the earth's axis is also invisible) should be the Revolution itself, around which should turn the

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<sup>41</sup> Blok in Dralyuk 2016, p. 66.

<sup>42</sup> Trotsky 2005, pp. 30-31.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

whole unsettled, chaotic, and reconstructing life. But in order that the reader should feel this axis, the author himself must have felt it and at the same time thought it through'.<sup>44</sup> Without such an ordering of intangible principle, it is impossible to picture the revolution as a *totality* and it consequently 'disintegrates into episodes and anecdotes which are either heroic or evil' (or perhaps both, if *The Twelve* is anything to go by). Trotsky goes on to make this crucial pronouncement: 'It is possible to make rather clever pictures, but it is impossible to recreate the Revolution, and it is, of course, impossible to reconcile oneself to it – because, if there is no purpose in the unheard-of sacrifices and privations, then history is a madhouse'.<sup>45</sup> Writers like Pilnyak, Vsevolod Ivanov and Esenin, according to *Literature and Revolution*, can only immerse themselves in the vortex of revolution, but they cannot attain reflection and responsibility, which demand distance (another form of 'measure') and perspective. Socially, due to the aforementioned peasant basis of their ideology and perception, the fellow travellers are incapable of 'merging' with the revolution without 'dissolving' into it. They may accept the revolution as a 'madhouse' but that's because 'they are not revolutionists, but fools of the Revolution'.<sup>46</sup>

Trotsky itemises a number of the symptoms of this demented sympathy, including the tendency to accept the Bolshevik revolutionary while rejecting the communist politician, and the singularly rustic wish to pillage the city, ignore its leadership and centrality. What is left in this violently romantic, peasant-singing utopia, is 'no Revolution, but a violent and bloody process of retrogression'. And the elemental metaphors affixed by fellow-traveling poets to the revolution are signs of this ideological retrogression. 'Elements, blizzard, flame, maelstrom, whirlpool' are just some of the poets' chosen figures, but whether their framing is tragic or clownish, 'all show the same passive contemplative, and philistine romantic attitude towards the Revolution as towards a national elemental power unleashed'.<sup>47</sup> Trotsky contrasts this with the poetry (or poetics) of revolution articulated by historical materialism itself, a poetry that is synthetic rather than portable, totalising and not anecdotal – but also one which, we could hazard, counters the elemental, Dionysian formlessness of Blok's tragic 'spirit of music' with a dialectical conception of tragedy, one in which the determinate violence

.....  
44 Ibid., p. 78.

45 Ibid., p. 86.

46 Ibid., p. 87.

47 Ibid., p. 91.

of contradictions, in all their temporal and material conflict, maintains a horizon not of pacifying reconciliation, but of rational emancipation.<sup>48</sup>

Though Trotsky's anticipation of a rebirth of tragic art under the sign of socialism and revolution is merely sketched out in *Literature and Revolution*,<sup>49</sup> his identification of Marxism with the poetics of revolution is unequivocal: 'Out of the Revolution grew the materialist method, which permits one to gauge one's strength, to foresee changes, and to direct events. This is the greatest fulfillment of the Revolution, and in this lies its highest poetry'. This rather dry and dogmatic pronouncement, is enlivened as Trotsky tries to put his far from negligible literary talent to work in bringing to life the cadences of conflict, in all their tumultuous manifestation and inexorable purpose:

The Revolution began to grow with the first factory wheelbarrow in which the embittered slaves carried out their foreman; with the first strike in which they denied their hands to their master; with the first underground circle where Utopian fanaticism and revolutionary idealism fed on the reality of social wounds. It flowed and ebbed, swung by the rhythm of the economic situation, by its high points and by its crises. With a battering ram of bleeding bodies it bursts open for itself the arena of the legal system of the exploiters, puts its antenna through and gives them, when necessary, a protective coloring. It builds trade unions, insurance societies,

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48 Lunacharsky, writing on the tenth anniversary of the poet's death, would substantially echo Trotsky's judgment: 'Blok displayed at the instant of the physical death of his class the maximum of revolutionary character of which a nobleman's consciousness was capable. This maximum left Blok, nevertheless, at the threshold of the genuine revolution puzzled, uncomprehending, and excluded from its sweeping march forward, the musicality of which was not understood by him, because it already contained notes of a great rational plan, completely alien to the past to which Blok was chained by his very nature.' Quoted in Annenkov 1967, p. 133. But consider too Blok's disillusion with the revolution, and with the poetics of destruction, as evidenced by his own remark to Mayakovsky: 'I hate the Winter Palace and the museums no less than you do. But destruction is as old as construction, and as traditional. Destroying something you no longer care for, you yawn and are as bored as when you watched its construction. History's fang is more venomous than you think, you cannot escape the curse of time. Your cry is still a cry of pain, not joy. Destroying, we are the same slaves of the old world; a breach with traditions is a tradition ... Some build, others destroy, for 'there is a time for everything under the sun,' and all will be slaves until a *third* thing appears, equally dissimilar to construction and destruction' (pp. 134-5). Annenkov also reports Blok's striking retrospect on *The Twelve*: 'It would be wrong, along with that, to deny any relationship of 'The Twelve' to politics ... The poem was written during that exceptional and always very brief time when the revolutionary cyclone sweeping past causes a storm on all seas-nature, life, and art; in the sea of life there is a small back-water, such as the Marquesas Pond, which is called politics ... The seas of nature, life, and art raged, the spray rose in a rainbow over us. I looked at the rainbow when I wrote 'The Twelve'; that is why a drop of politics was left in the poem' (pp. 135-6).

49 See the perceptive comments by Vittorio Strada in Trotsky 1974, p. xlii-xliv.

cooperatives, and self-educational circles. It penetrates into hostile parliaments, creates newspapers, agitates, and at the same time makes an indefatigable selection of the best, of the most courageous, of the consecrated elements of the working class, and builds its own party.<sup>50</sup>

Where Blok affirms the tragic in the guise of the saving barbarism of the revolting masses, the destructive creativity at work in negating the rotten edifice of bourgeois civilisation, whatever tragedy is to be found in revolution is for Trotsky to be located at the hinge between 'the elemental flood of mass rebellion', on the one hand, and 'the exact computation of forces' and the 'chess-like movements of strategy', on the other.<sup>51</sup> This fundamental dissonance is ultimately projected by Trotsky on the temporal unevenness that Russia's class structure brings to both its politics and poetics:

Because of its peasant foundation, and because of its vast spaces and its patches of culture, the Russian Revolution is the most chaotic and formless of all revolutions. But in its leadership, in the method of its orientation, in its organization, in its aims and tasks, it is the most "correct," the most planful and the most finished of all revolutions. In the combination of these two extremes lies the soul, the internal character of our Revolution.<sup>52</sup>

Trotsky was hardly deaf to the broken music of the revolution, but for him the fissure, and the tragedy, lay not in the formless force of the revolution as element, as purifying negation, but in its articulation of the mass energy of violent upheaval with the firmness of direction – an articulation in which materialist dialectics as the 'algebra of revolution' played the governing cognitive and strategic role.<sup>53</sup> The revolution was tragic because of its need to synchronise the unhealed chasm of epochs,

50 Ibid., p. 92.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., p. 95. Note how 'formless' is repeatedly used by Trotsky to qualify Blok's verse.

53 'The materialistic dialectics of the class struggle is the true algebra of revolution. In the arena visible to the external eye, are chaos and floods, formlessness and boundlessness. But it is a counted and measured chaos, whose successive stages are foreseen. The regularity of their succession is anticipated and enclosed in steel-like formulas. In elemental chaos there is an abyss of blindness. But clear-sightedness and vigilance exist in a directing politics. Revolutionary strategy is not formless like an element, it is finished like a mathematical formula. For the first time in history, we see the algebra of revolution in action.' Ibid., p. 96.

to confront the catastrophic violence and waste it perform unleashed, and, perhaps above all, because of the titanic tension between its proletarian form and its peasant formlessness. And yet in acknowledging *The Twelve* as the most accomplished poetic product of the violence of transition, perhaps we can also recognise Trotsky's implicit, even disavowed recognition, that to give tragic form to the revolution is also to recognise that its formlessness, its waste, its barbarism cannot be relegated to the realm of the parallel, the inessential, the collateral. These may not demand to be affirmed with the self-abnegating fervour (but also irony) that Blok brought to the construction of *The Twelve*, but they must be viewed as constitutive of the process of revolution, if tragedy is not merely to be the antechamber of reconciliation. Trotsky recognised as much when, reflecting on the travails of the Bolsheviks in 1920, a year in which he declared their position to be 'in the highest degree tragic', he declared: 'Revolution opens the door to a new political system, but it achieves this by means of destructive catastrophe'.<sup>54</sup>

54 Trotsky in Lih 2007, p. 125. A similar note is struck in Trotsky's 1926 *Pravda* article on the occasion of Sergei Esenin's suicide: 'Bitter times, these, perhaps among the bitterest in the history of so-called civilized humanity. A revolutionary, born for these decades, is obsessed by a wild "patriotism" for his period, which is his fatherland-in-time. Esenin was not a revolutionary'. And here again the 'peasant base' is invoked: 'Esenin passed the inspiration coming to him from his peasant origins through the prism of his creative gift and thus made it finer; solidly rooted in him, this peasant background's very solidity was what explains the poet's special weakness: he was uprooted from the past, and had not been able to sink his roots into the new times'. And Esenin's personal tragedy was to be located in the very contradiction between his lyrical vocation and the revolution's epic: 'Violently the revolution broke into the structure of his verses and his images, which, at first confused, later grew clearer. In the collapse of the past, Esenin lost nothing, missed nothing. Alien to the revolution? No indeed; but it and he were not of the same nature: Esenin was an inward being, tender and lyrical; the revolution was "public," epic, full of disasters; and so it was a disaster that snapped off the poet's brief life. ... The poet is dead, because he was not of the same nature as the revolution, but, in the name of the future, the revolution will adopt him forever'. Trotsky 1977a, pp. 163-6. For a contrasting judgment of the tragic nexus between the poet and the revolution, see Jakobson 1992, pp. 209-245.

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Volume 4 /  
Issue 2