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## The symbol of the symbolists: Aleksandr Blok in the changing Russian literary canon

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## 5. The Symbol of the Symbolists: Aleksandr Blok in the Changing Russian Literary Canon

*Olga Sobolev*

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Прославленный не по программе  
И вечный вне школ и систем,  
Он не изготовлен руками  
И нам не навязан никем.

Eternal and not manufactured,  
Renown not according to plan,  
Outside schools and systems, he has not  
Been foisted upon us by man.<sup>1</sup>

The turn of the twentieth century has always been regarded as a period of extreme dynamism in Russian culture — a time when many traditional values were questioned and transformed. During this period the genuine creative power in verse and prose came from the symbolists, who drew upon the aesthetic revival inaugurated in the 1890s by Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, and freed it of spuriousness and self-gratifying over-refinement. In turning their backs on civic ideals and echoing Stéphane Mallarmé's saying that poetry 'yields the initiative to

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<sup>1</sup> Boris Pasternak, 'Veter', *Izbrannoe*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1985), I, 439; Boris Pasternak, 'The Wind', *Poems of Boris Pasternak*, translated by Lydia Pasternak-Slater (London: Unwin, 1963), p. 90.

words',<sup>2</sup> the symbolists brought fascinating resources of language and craftsmanship to their metaphysical preoccupations. Often termed the Silver Age of Russian art, this trend produced a whole host of illustrious authors, including such figures as Valerii Briusov and Konstantin Bal'mont, Zinaida Gippius and Viacheslav Ivanov, Andrei Belyi and the most celebrated poet of the movement — Aleksandr Blok. Quite a few factors may account for Blok's special position in the constellation of these eminent authors, one of which is directly related to the notion of a poetic canon, considered in the broadest sense of this cultural term. Whether one looks at the idea of canonisation within the framework of institutionalised aesthetics or simply as a literary art of memory (as suggested by Harold Bloom<sup>3</sup>), Blok stands apart from the cohort of symbolist poets. Not only does he appear to be the only symbolist who was ever accepted in the Soviet-era literary canon, but he retained his status later, when the country was keen to dismiss anything related to the fallen Soviet regime. By analysing Blok's critical reception throughout the twentieth century and beyond, this study will attempt to establish what aspects of his oeuvre made it central to the country's literary agenda, as well as by what mechanisms this long-standing cultural value became firmly associated with the corpus of his works. Given that the formation of a canon is necessarily related to the questions of nationhood and self-determination, such an analysis will shed more light on some key issues faced by contemporary post-*perestroika* Russia, such as the shaping of national identity, and the ways of overcoming the division between the two cultures that was created by the policies of the Soviet authoritarian state.<sup>4</sup>

The word 'canon' was originally used to designate a rule, measure or standard; and many subsequent uses of the term similarly invoke

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2 Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Crise de vers', in *Divagations* (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1897), pp. 235–51 (p. 246); translated in Rosemary Lloyd, *The Poet and his Circle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 55.

3 Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), p. 17.

4 Russian dissident culture emerged in the 1950s and the 1960s as intellectual opposition to Communist rule in a form of grassroots practice; it was largely associated with *samizdat*, a key dissident activity in the dissemination of censored cultural production (classified as a criminal anti-government activity), and it became a potent symbol of the rebellious spirit and resourcefulness of the Soviet intelligentsia; see for instance, Ann Komaromi, 'The Material Existence of Soviet Samizdat', *Slavic Review*, 63 (2004), 597–618.

the notion of restrictive authority, as when literary critics speak of the need 'to open' the canon, 'to expand' the canon, or 'to dispense' with the canon.<sup>5</sup> In actuality, scholars agree that there neither is, nor has there ever been, any such thing as an inherent, strictly defined literary canon, and it is not 'the reproduction of values but of social relations'<sup>6</sup> that should be associated with canonical form; as John Guillory puts it, 'canonicity is not a property of the work itself, but of its transmission, its relation to other works in a collocation of works'.<sup>7</sup> While recognising 'the historicity of the cultural category of literature itself', recent theorists of canon formation have begun to examine the interaction of literary taste (or even fashion<sup>8</sup>) with some larger structures of social and economic power.<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, offers the concept of cultural capital to describe how, within a given socio-economic setting, the knowledge of certain literary texts (or art, music and so forth) can be used to describe social competition and stratification, and he points out some ways by which this knowledge is obtained and enhanced: through direct experience and education; through popular culture, and through secondary or tertiary contacts (book reviews, study guides, etc).<sup>10</sup> The work of Bourdieu and other scholars on nineteenth-century texts suggests that similar mechanisms might be at work within Russian post-revolutionary culture, although, of course, these must be carefully specified and analysed in relation to that particular socio-historical setting.

The Soviet notion of culture, far from being based on a simplistic Marxist conception of the ideological sphere as little more than a

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5 John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 34, 81.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

8 Isaac D'Israeli, an early promulgator of this view, claimed that 'prose and verse have been regulated by the same caprice that cuts our coats and cocks our hats [...] and every age of modern literature might, perhaps, admit of a new classification, by dividing it into its periods of *fashionable literature*' (Isaac D'Israeli, 'Literary Fashions', in *Curiosities of Literature* (Boston: Lilly, Wait, Colman & Holden, 1833), III, 35–39 (pp. 35, 39), quoted in Alastair Fowler, 'Genre and the Literary Canon', *New Literary History*, 11: 1, Anniversary Issue II (Autumn 1979), 97–119 (p. 97)).

9 John Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, p. 60; Alastair Fowler, 'Genre and the Literary Canon', pp. 97–119.

10 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984).

reflection of the social material base, emphasised the centrality of the cultural field in shaping and facilitating economic development. Moreover, from the early years of the Soviet state's existence, literature was considered an effective weapon of class warfare, and all interventionist post-revolutionary cultural campaigns (against illiteracy, religion and bourgeois morality) were conducted precisely in pursuit of this agenda. The official line was set out in a series of articles by Lenin, one of the most significant of which was *Pamiati Gertsena* (*In Memory of Herzen*, 1912) that outlined three stages in the history of the Russian revolutionary movement, and effectively defined both the periodisation and the methodology in all branches of the Soviet literary field.<sup>11</sup> The first stage was that of a liberally-minded nobility, from the Decembrists to Aleksandr Herzen (1825–1861); it was followed by the Populist period of 1861–1895, and culminated in the so-called 'proletarian' era, dating from 1895, the year in which Lenin's Union for the Emancipation of Working People was founded. When mapped onto the domain of scholarship and education, this later stage was commonly exemplified by the works of Maksim Gor'kii, and by the poetic writings of the Revolutionary Populists, such as Vera Figner, Petr Iakubovich, Nikolai Morozov, and German Lopatin, as well as by the group of certain younger proletarian authors with a distinct political concern. Chronologically, the major part of the symbolist movement also coincided with the 'proletarian' period, which immediately made it strictly out of bounds for Lenin and his supporters: symbolism was declared ideologically impoverished, aesthetically subversive, stimulating an unnecessary predilection for decadent romanticism that led away from the reality of socialist goals.<sup>12</sup>

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11 Vladimir Lenin, *Pamiati Gertsena* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1980).

12 As early as 1896 Gor'kii characterised symbolist literature as 'the songs of decaying culture', impregnated with the feeling of 'pessimism and complete apathy regarding actual events' (Maksim Gor'kii, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 30 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1949–1955), 23 (1953), 122, 136); Trotskii in his *Literature and Revolution* (1924) speaks of symbolism as an expression of old Russia's 'landlords and intelligentsia [...] disgusting environment' (Leo Trotskii, *Literature and Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), p. 105); and the chapter on symbolism, in the academic edition of *The History of Russian Literature*, entitled 'Poetry of the Bourgeois Decay (Symbolism, Acmeism, Futurism)' speaks for itself (*Istoriia russkoi literatury*, 10 vols., edited by N. F. Bel'chikov (Moscow-Leningrad: Akademiia Nauk SSSR, 1941–1956), X (1954), pp. 764–99).

Two authors, nonetheless, presented a rare exception to the accepted canon. From the early 1920s, Blok and Briusov began to feature in the *Narkompros* circulars and the lists of 'indicative reading'.<sup>13</sup> The choice of these two poets was far from coincidental, mainly because they were the only symbolists of the older generation who expressed a certain degree of sympathy (at least at the beginning) for the Bolshevik cause. By 1924 most of the major figures of the Silver Age had already fled the socialist country, and did not miss the opportunity to express their critical attitude towards the newly established regime: Gippius and Merezhkovskii had been residing in Paris since 1920, where they were soon joined by Bal'mont; Ivanov was the last to depart for Rome in 1924.<sup>14</sup>

Out of Blok and Briusov, who chose not to emigrate, Briusov seemed to be the most consistent supporter of the October upheaval, in which he saw a transformative historic event. In 1920 he became a member of the Communist Party and was very active in the People's Commissariat for Education, acting as the head of its printing and library divisions. Under Commissar Anatolii Lunacharskii, he became the head of Moscow's Public Libraries and the Chairman of the Union of Poets, and later on served as the Director of the Moscow Institute of Literature and

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- 13 *Narkompros* (the People's Commissariat for Education) was charged with the administration of public education and most other issues related to culture, until it was transformed into the Ministry of Education in 1946. Since the early days of its formation (November 1917) *Narkompros* gained control over the content of libraries accessible to the mass reader. Its series of circulars drew attention to the role of books as a main source of dissemination of mass literacy and culture, while emphasising the importance of political control over such a large-scale undertaking, 'so that the flow of these books was channelled in the right direction' (N. K. Krupskaiia, 'O plane raboty po BD Vneshkol'nogo otdela Narkomprosa', *Narodnoe prosveshchenie*, 6, 1918). In the context of Soviet official attitudes towards symbolist writers, it is interesting to note that the 1937 issue of the journal *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* dedicated to Russian symbolism was focused exclusively on three authors, Briusov, Blok and Andrei Belyi, who appeared in the spotlight because of his close connections with Blok.
- 14 Fedor Sologub also had a distinctly anti-Bolshevik orientation; in July 1921 he received permission to leave the country, but his wife's death, just two months later, left him in such a profound state of mourning that he gave up any thoughts of leaving Russia and died in Leningrad in 1927. Hundreds of Russian intellectuals were also expelled from the country in 1922–1923, and transported abroad on the so-called 'Philosophers' boats'; see Lesley Chamberlain, *Lenin's Private War: The Voyage of the Philosophy Steamer and the Exile of the Intelligentsia* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2007).

Arts until his death in 1924. Briusov edited the first edition of the Soviet Encyclopaedia and supported young proletarian writers (such as, for instance, Andrei Platonov), prioritising their work over the aestheticism of his fellow modernist authors (Osip Mandel'shtam's *Second Book* of poems (1923) was reviewed by Briusov in a very negative way<sup>15</sup>). In the words of Clarence Brown, 'his embrace of Bolshevism and the new order of things was more fervent by far than that of Maiakovskii, the unofficial poet-laureate of the Revolution'.<sup>16</sup> Briusov's own writing, on the other hand, never moved away from the elaborate symbolist experimentation of his pre-1917 work. Even his later post-revolutionary poems, such as the collections *Dali* (*Horizons*, 1922) and *Speshi!* (*Hurry up!*, 1924), were too sophisticated and too formalistic for the working masses. Classified as sheer 'academic avant-gardism' by Mikhail Gasparov,<sup>17</sup> they presented little material for the enlightenment and instruction of the working people. Blok's position in this respect was of a different order.

Surprisingly for his admirers, as well as for his closer literary circle, Blok also welcomed the proletarian coup. Gippius recalls that it was utterly frustrating to think of him as a friend of the Bolsheviks, to the extent that she was reluctant to shake hands with the poet when they accidentally met on a tram journey in Petrograd in September 1918.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the majority of his fellow symbolists, Blok refused to emigrate from Russia, claiming that he had to support the country during these difficult times. Never before able to cooperate with society (as he wrote in 1909 to his mother, 'either one should not live in Russia at all [...], or

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15 In Briusov's words, Mandel'shtam's poetry, 'cut off from contemporary life, from social and political interests, cut off from the problems of contemporary science, from the search for contemporary world view', had nothing to offer. Valerii Briusov, 'Vtoraia kniga', *Pechat' i revoliutsiia*, 6 (1923), 63–66 (p. 66); quoted in Donald Loewen, *The Most Dangerous Art: Poetry, Politics, and Autobiography after the Revolution* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008), p. 40.

16 Clarence Brown, *Mandelstam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 111.

17 Mikhail L. Gasparov, *Akademicheskii avangardizm: priroda i kul'tura u pozdnego Briusova* (Moscow: RGGU, 1995). Mandel'shtam viewed the late Briusov in a very negative way, saying in 1922 that 'such a vacuity is not to be ever repeated in Russian poetry' (Osip Mandel'shtam, 'O prirode slova', *Sobranie sochinenii*, 4 vols., edited by P. Nerler (Moscow: Artbiznestsentr, 1993), I, 217–31 (p. 230)).

18 Zinaida N. Gippius, *Stikhotvoreniia. Zhivye litsa* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1991), pp. 248–49.

else isolate oneself from *humiliation* — that is to say politics and “social activities”), he now accepted several administrative posts.<sup>19</sup> From 1918 to 1921 he worked as a lecturer at the Journalism School, as the head of the German Section of the World Literature publishing house, as the deputy head of the Literature Department of *Narkompros* in Moscow, and as the chairman of the Petrograd Section of the All-Russia Union of Poets; he served on the State Committee on the publication of Russian classics; in the repertoire section of the Petrograd Theatre Department of *Narkompros*; on the editorial board of the journal *Repertuar*; and quite a few others.<sup>20</sup> However, he quickly became disillusioned with the Bolsheviks and their methods — as he once put it in a conversation with Gor’kii, his ‘faith in the wisdom of humanity’ had ended.<sup>21</sup> He did not write a single line of poetry for three years: ‘All sounds have stopped for me’, he mentioned to Kornei Chukovskii, ‘Can’t you hear that there are no sounds any longer?’<sup>22</sup> From time to time he performed his verse for audiences in Petrograd and Moscow. His last public speech, ‘O naznachenii poeta’ (‘On the Poet’s Calling’, January 1921), was dedicated to the anniversary of Aleksandr Pushkin’s death. Centred on the conflict between freedom of expression and the absolutism of the Tsarist authoritarian state, it contained unmistakable references to the contemporary agenda;<sup>23</sup> and sounded like a doom-laden prophecy for literature in the oppressive climate of the socialist regime.

Nevertheless, taking into account Blok’s initially liberal (albeit only fleeting) attitude towards the Soviet state, and the fact that he was undoubtedly a major poet of his age, it was his legacy which was appropriated by the system, and for years to come was preserved,

19 Aleksandr Blok, letter to his mother, 13 April 1909, in Aleksandr Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 8 vols., edited by V. N. Orlov, A. A. Surkov and K. I. Chukovskii (Moscow-Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1960–1963), VIII, 281.

20 V. L. Shepelev and V. N. Liubimov, ‘“On budet pisat’ stikhi protiv nas”. Pravda o bolezni i smerti Aleksandra Bloka (1921)’, *Istochnik*, 2 (1995), 33–45 (pp. 34–42). For a more detailed account of Blok’s life and work see Avril Pyman, *The Life of Aleksandr Blok*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

21 Maksim Gor’kii, ‘A. A. Blok’ (1923), in *Sobranie sochinenii*, XXIV, 425–27 (p. 427).

22 Kornei Chukovskii, ‘Vospominaniia o Bloke’, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, 6 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1965–1969), II (1965), p. 311.

23 At this time Blok was already terminally ill (and died eight months later); his application for permission to leave the country in order to obtain the required medical treatment in Finland was rejected by the *Politburo* (and more specifically by Lenin) in spring 1921; see Shepelev and Liubimov, pp. 34–42.



reproduced and disseminated as an expression, or more precisely as an artefact, of the state approved culture. This fact in no way compromises the value of Blok's oeuvre; but the mechanism of his canonisation requires a more in-depth consideration in this context: firstly, because it consists of much more than a simple text-to-reader relation (as a carrier of cultural capital, a canonical work can become a vector of ideological motifs not necessarily embedded within the work itself); and secondly, because there may be several different canons circulating within a specific culture during a particular historical stage. When speaking of the formation of boundaries to existing literary knowledge or expression, Alastair Fowler describes six major types of literary canons: the *potential* canon would theoretically contain all works of written and oral literature; the *accessible* canon, in contrast, would consist of those works readers would actually come into contact with. Different criteria further narrow the *accessible* canon to produce *selective* canons. Some of these include the *official* canons shaped by mechanisms of patronage, education or censorship; the *critical* canons evidenced in trends in literary scholarship; and the *personal* canons of any individual reader's tastes and knowledge.<sup>24</sup> Below we shall examine Blok's position within the spectrum of the given canonical strands.

Considering the *official* canon, shaped through the mechanisms of censorship and education, it is worth bearing in mind that starting from the mid-1920s, Soviet Russia had begun to reconfigure the platform of its cultural agenda. Trotskii's idea of a world-wide revolution had been gradually phased out; and in 1925 the Party Conference put forward a different aim of constructing socialism in one country.<sup>25</sup> The emphasis was on building the nation, which involved creating a new ethnic entity — the Soviet people. This required a radical shift in the government's ideological policies: a step back to conservative values, a

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24 Alastair Fowler, 'Genre and the Literary Canon', p. 98.

25 The resolution was read by Lev Kamenev, who claimed: 'By pursuing the right policy, namely reinforcing the socialist elements in our economics, we will show that despite the reluctant tempo of the international revolution, socialism must be built, can be built together with the representatives of peasants in our country, and it will be built'; *XIV konferentsiia Rossiiskoi Kommunisticheskoi partii (bol'shevikov): stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow and Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1925), p. 267.

vindication of the past and a re-establishment of the concept of cultural heritage.<sup>26</sup>

The new focus referred to continuity and tradition, and Blok fitted nicely into the scheme. Due to his considerable output and the broad thematic spectrum of his oeuvre, his legacy presented a vast store of material for the Soviet principle of selective reading.<sup>27</sup> His first cycle of poems, *Stikhi o Prekrasnoi dame* (*Verses on the Beautiful Lady*, 1904) saturated with the religious mysticism of Vladimir Solov'ev, was completely sidelined; and attention was fixed entirely on the patriotic pathos of his writings, exemplified, for instance, by the cycle *Rodina* (*Native Land*, 1907–1916) or *Na pole Kulikovom* (*On the Field of Kulikovo*, 1908). The description of St Petersburg that Blok crafted for his earlier collection *Gorod* (*The City*, 1904–1908), was both impressionistic and eerie. Representing his idea of an 'artificial hell', it was often based on the conflict between the Platonic theory of ideal beauty and the disappointing reality of perilous industrialism ('Neznakomka' ('The Unknown Woman', 1906)). *Gorod* was read as an expression of disapproval and interpreted along the lines of social criticism of the Tsarist regime.<sup>28</sup> Generally speaking, Blok was seen as a useful resource for filling the gaps in the newly established cultural progression, since he was a generic example of a transitional author who highlighted the decay of the capitalist order in such poems as 'Fabrika' ('The Factory', 1903), 'Rossiia' ('Russia', 1908), or 'Na zheleznoi doroge' ('On the Railway', 1910). Due to his origins and imperfect class orientation,

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26 David Elliot, *New Worlds: Russian Art and Society 1900–1937* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1986), pp. 22–26.

27 Within the framework of *partiinost'* (party-mindedness), any literary work was considered from a purely political perspective, comprising such aspects as a selective approach to the content, which was supposed to direct its readers towards interpreting a text along the lines of the Party aims; an appreciation of the characters as representatives of a specific social stratum, and a class-defined viewpoint on the analysis of the form: 'Our analysis, conducted in a Marxist way, will open our eyes not only on the characters, but also on their author, who does have the power to guide them and who does determine everything in literature, but whose mentality, in turn, is preconditioned by his class-related psycho-ideology'; V. V. Golubkov and M. A. Rybnikova, *Izuchenie literatury v shkole II stupeni. Metodika chteniia* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1929), p. 36.

28 *Programmy srednei obshcheobrazovatel'noi shkoly. Literatura 4–10 klassy* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1983), p. 54.

however, he lacked the necessary political consciousness to embrace the principles of socialist art.

It is true that Blok's poetry was by nature less esoteric, simpler, and, perhaps, less abstract than that of some other Silver Age authors. Over the years he evinced an extraordinary ability to evoke life as it is in both its happy moments ('O, vesna bez kontsa i bez kraiu' ('Oh, spring without an end and without a limit', 1907), 'I vnov' — poryvy iunykh let' ('And again — the impulses of youth', 1912)) and its most depressive manifestations, represented in such poems as 'Pliaski smerti' ('Dances of Death', 1914), 'Golos iz khora' ('A Voice from the Chorus', 1914) or 'Miry letiat. Goda letiat' ('Worlds fly past. Years fly past', 1912), which, thanks to their doomed and negative perspective, were often seen as an expression of the ruthless realism of the poet's nib. Like many Russian intellectuals of the time, Blok was aware of the real gap separating the intelligentsia and the Russian people, as he put it in his famous speech *Narod i intelligentsia* (*The People and the Intelligentsia*, November 1908):

There is a line between two camps — the people and the intelligentsia [...] these two camps still do not see each other and do not want to know each other; and those who are looking for peace and concurrence are still treated as traitors and deserters by both the majority of people and the majority of the intelligentsia.<sup>29</sup>

Blok challenged the intelligentsia's assumption of their shared identity with, and their leading position towards, the Russian people, and appealed to them to surrender their high culture to the popular *stikhiinost'* (element). He himself also tried to break out of the artificially created world of aestheticism towards the uncomplicated, down-to-earth life of simple people. 'I still live very quietly, on my own', he wrote to Belyi, 'I work a lot and everything is profoundly simple'.<sup>30</sup> Russia became a major focus of his writing at the time — a theme in which he found his vocation, his civic responsibility as a creator:

I face my theme — the theme of Russia [...]. To this theme I consciously and irrevocably dedicate my life. This is the most significant question,

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29 First published as 'Rossiia i intelligentsia', *Zolotoe runo*, 1 (1909); *Sobranie sochinenii*, V, 321–27 (p. 324).

30 Blok, letter to Andrei Belyi, 5 April 1908, in *A. A. Blok-Andrei Belyi: Perepiska* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1969), p. 229.

the most vital, the most real. I have been approaching this question for a long time from the beginning of my conscious life, and I know that my road in its basic aspiration is as straight and as purposeful as an arrow.<sup>31</sup>

Although he pursued this vocation with almost suicidal sincerity, fervour and dedication (for his world had always been the world of absolutes), his yearning for a simple life was constantly undercut by profound depression and despair, his feeling of spiritual emptiness and isolation, as well as his disgust in the face of the society he lived in. This is not to say that the element of social concern in his writings was entirely contrived, but it was clearly generated by both his repulsion with the world and a horror at his own condition. To a certain extent he always remained the poet of intoxication: whether in surrendering himself to the flow of the popular *stikhiinost'*, or drowning in the ecstasy of oblivion in poems such as 'V chas, kogda p'ianeit nartsissy' ('In the Hour when Narcissi are Intoxicated', 1904) and 'Ia prigvozhden k traktirnoi stoike' ('I am nailed to the bar in the tavern', 1908).

As regards the Revolution, during the last period of his creative work, Blok did put forward some political comments, pondering on the messianic destiny of the country, in *Vozmezdie* (*Retribution*, 1910–1921) and 'Skify' ('The Scythians', 1918). Influenced by Solov'ev's doctrines, he had vague apocalyptic apprehensions and often vacillated between hope and despair: 'Behind the storm, there opened a ferocious void of the day, menacing, however, with a new storm and concealing within itself a promise of it. These were the inter-revolutionary years that have exhausted and worn out body and soul. Now there is another storm', he wrote in his diary during the summer of 1917.<sup>32</sup> Quite unexpectedly (at least for his close circle) he accepted the October Revolution as the final resolution to these apocalyptic yearnings. The official Soviet stance on Blok, however, was configured in a somewhat different way. Blok was presented as a severe critic of bourgeois society, who displayed a suffocating picture of Tsarist Russia and revealed its social injustice with a strong emphasis on the motif of retribution — hence the title of his major cycle of seventeen poems (1908–1913), as well as his verse epic *Vozmezdie*. The Revolution was seen as a cathartic power, which ignited

31 Blok, letter to Konstantin Stanislavskii, 9 December 1908, *Sobranie sochinenii*, VIII, 265.

32 Blok, diary entry, 15 August 1917, *Sobranie sochinenii*, VII, 300–01.

Blok's poetic inspiration, manifesting itself in his two best-known poems 'Skify' and *Dvenadtsat'* (*The Twelve*, 1918).

In *Dvenadtsat'*, Blok included some eloquent poetic speculation on the meaning of the Revolution in the relentless spiral of human history. It depicts a group of twelve Red Army soldiers (a clear allusion to the twelve apostles) marching through revolutionary Petrograd, led by the mysterious figure of Jesus Christ ascendant at the end (an image whose symbolism defied a straightforward interpretation and which was therefore commonly disparaged by the critics who held sway after the Revolution).<sup>33</sup> Ambivalence pervades the poem, and contrast is its structural principle, analysed in great detail in Sergei Hackel's monograph *The Poet and the Revolution*.<sup>34</sup> The opening line 'Black night. / White snow' sets out the polarising framework for the poem's discourse, which alternates revolutionary marching songs with the orthodox liturgy for the dead, colloquial slang, and popular folk songs; clear and chopped rhythms and repetitive array of symbols all help to capture the mood of the time, as well as the poet's own uncertain view of the events.<sup>35</sup> In the words of Maiakovskii, who was one of the most faithful admirers of Blok's talent: 'two contrasting apprehensions of the Revolution linked fantastically in his poem *Dvenadtsat'*. Some read in this poem a satire on the Revolution, others a celebration'.<sup>36</sup>

Despite all its controversy (Kamenev and Trotskii, for instance, always denied the revolutionary content of Blok's writings: 'To be sure, Blok is not one of ours', wrote Trotskii in 1924, 'but he reached towards us. And in doing so, he broke down'), the poem became popular straight after its first publication on 3 March 1918: it was widely recited and publicly performed.<sup>37</sup>

33 For a modern interpretation of the finale of *Dvenadtsat'*, see Sergei Averintsev *et al.*, 'Final "Dvenadtsati" — vzgliad iz 2000 goda', *Znamia*, 11 (2000), 190–206.

34 Sergei Hackel, *The Poet and the Revolution: Aleksandr Blok's 'The Twelve'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

35 Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, III, 347–59. In her bilingual edition of *Dvenadtsat'* (Durham, UK: University of Durham Press, 1989), Avril Pyman lists seventeen translations of the poem available to date; for the purposes of this chapter a more literal translation of the text by Hackel (pp. 205–29) is preferred.

36 Vladimir Maiakovskii, 'Umer Aleksandr Blok', in *Sobranie sochinenii*, 13 vols., edited by E. I. Naumov (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1955–1961), III (1957), 474.

37 Leo Trotskii, *Literature and Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), p. 111; V. N. Orlov, *Zhizn' Bloka* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2001), p. 544.

A veil was drawn over the inconvenient fact that it was first published not by the Bolsheviks, but in the oppositional Socialist Revolutionary newspaper *Znamia truda*.<sup>38</sup> The text was configured along the lines of the Soviet state's current ideological aims and at times censored to the extent of turning into self-parody. The best example of this would be the version which, according to Evgenii Evtushenko, was read in the Red propaganda units, and in which the unwanted figure of Jesus was substituted with that of a proletarian sailor, who nevertheless still kept the garland of white roses: 'V belom venchike iz roz — / Vpered i det matros' ('With a garland of white roses spliced — / Up in front is a sailor'). Having realized how ridiculous this image, verging on caricature, was, the post-war Stalin-era censors made an executive decision and simply cut out the baffling episode altogether.<sup>39</sup>

*Dvenadtsat'* entered the school curriculum as 'the first poem of the October Revolution in Soviet literature'.<sup>40</sup> For years it became a trademark of the poet; and for many it remained the only piece of Blok's writing that they actually knew. It was largely due to *Dvenadtsat'* that Blok has never been effaced from the palette of recommended canonical reading and escaped the condescending remarks directed towards his fellow symbolist authors: 'Our contemporary literature is also full of outstanding literary influences', wrote the author of a teachers' handbook of 1928:

There are organic trends coming from the past (Pushkin, Gogol', Tolstoi, Dostoevskii); there are examples of influences of contemporary poets on each other (Maiakovskii-Bezymenskii-Zharov; Blok-Esenin-Aleksandrovskii), and there are some instances of temporary accidental literary imitations such as the 'bal'montism' of Gerasimov.<sup>41</sup>

In this context, the name of Maria Rybnikova deserves special consideration. As a leading methodologist in the field of Soviet secondary education and the author of numerous school anthologies and teachers'

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38 Blok, 'Dvenadtsat', *Znamia truda*, 3 March 1918, p. 2. From spring 1918 the newspaper was in active opposition to the Bolsheviks and Lenin's politics, and was closed down after the Socialist-Revolutionary uprising in July 1918.

39 *Strofy veka. Antologiiia russkoi poezii*, edited by Evgenii Evtushenko (Minsk-Moscow: Polifakt, 1995), p. 82.

40 *Programmy srednei obshcheobrazovatel'noi shkoly. Literatura*, p. 54.

41 M. A. Rybnikova, *Russkaia literatura. Voprosnik po russkoi literature dlia zaniatii 7, 8 i 9 grupp shkol 2-i stupeni i dlia pedtekhnikov* (Moscow: Mir, 1928), p. 120.

handbooks (republished in the 1980s), she expended significant effort in securing Blok's place in the canon through education. Rybnikova was a long-term admirer of the Russian symbolist poets, and her particular sphere of interest was focused on Blok. She wrote a number of scholarly articles on his poems, the most prominent of which was the essay *A. Blok—Hamlet*, published as early as 1923.<sup>42</sup>

Within the canon shaped by the framework of scholarship and so-called Blok studies, Blok's poetic output has always enjoyed a vast amount of attention, despite the fact that the poet himself expressed his utmost dismay at the prospect of becoming a subject of scholarly concern. In his poem 'Druz'iam' ('To My Friends', 24 July 1908) he writes:

Печальная доля — так сложно,  
Так трудно и празднично жить,  
И стать достоянием доцента,  
И критиков новых плодить...

Зарыться бы в свежем бурьяне,  
Забиться бы сном навсегда!  
Молчите, проклятые книги!  
Я вас не писал никогда!<sup>43</sup>

Depressing fate: to live a life,  
So complex, hard and festive,  
Only to end as young dons' prey,  
And serve to breed new critics...

Let me delve deeper into weeds,  
And sleep oblivious forever!  
Be silent cursed books!  
I never wrote you, never!

In terms of his impact on the art of poetic composition, Blok was undoubtedly one of the most influential authors of the symbolist movement, and as regards this branch of literary research, it is worth

42 M. A. Rybnikova, *A. Blok — Gamlet* (Moscow: Svetlana, 1923).

43 Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, III, 125–26; translated in Hackel, p. vii.

mentioning the works of Viktor Zhirmunskii and Vladimir Orlov, Pavel Gromov and Dmitrii Maksimov, and the detailed analysis of his prosody and poetics by Mikhail Gasparov, as well as the works of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic school, namely those of Iurii Lotman, Aleksei Losev, and Zara Mints. It is important to bear in mind, however, that for many years Soviet scholarship was predominantly centred on the textual analysis of Blok's writings (conducted within the framework of literary theory, semiotics, poetics, and topical research), while the metaphysical basis of his oeuvre remained, broadly speaking, a marginal and largely unexplored field (the only systematic study of the philosophical aspects of Russian symbolism in the Soviet period was carried out by Valentin Asmus).<sup>44</sup> Two main factors account for this restricted approach. Firstly, up until the late 1950s, there was a sheer lack of material and information. Blok's letters, notebooks and diaries were published in a more or less complete and systematic form only in the 1960–1963, eight-volume edition of the poet's *Collected Works*. Prior to this date these materials were released only sporadically and with considerable omissions. As highlighted by Orlov in his major review article on the legacy of the poet, the two volumes of Blok's *Diaries* published in 1928 were largely incomplete and contained the following explanation for editorial interventions:

Our ambition was, of course, to publish the diaries in their authentic and comprehensive form. However, due to the fact that many of the records refer to the living members of our society, we were obliged to make certain textual omissions, which, nonetheless, are of very little significance [...]. Moreover, we had to encode a number of proper names; and in order to avoid any unnecessary guessing, they were substituted by asterisks rather than initials.<sup>45</sup>

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44 V. F. Asmus, 'Filosofia i estetika russkogo simvolizma', *Izbrannye filosofskie trudy*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Moscow University, 1969), I, 187–237; Iu. N. Davydov, *Begstvo ot svobody. Filosofskoe mifotoorchestvo i literaturnyi avangard* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1978) also contributed to the area.

45 V. N. Orlov, 'Literaturnoe nasledstvo Aleksandra Bloka', *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* (Moscow: Zhurnal'no-gazetnoe ob'edinenie, 1937), XXVII–XXVIII, 505–74 (p. 559). The first volume of Blok's diaries contained the diaries of 1911–1913 and the second those of 1917–1921: *Dnevnik Al. Bloka*, edited by P. N. Medvedev (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo leningradskikh pisatelei, 1928); the diaries of 1901–1902 were published by Orlov later in 1937: 'Iz literaturnogo nasledii Aleksandra Bloka. Iunosheskii dnevnik', edited by V. N. Orlov, in *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* (Moscow: Zhurnal'no-gazetnoe ob'edinenie, 1937), XXVII–XXVIII, 299–370.



In practice, these omissions went far beyond the designated frame and, according to Orlov's scholarly analysis, resulted in a significant distortion of the author's text. Blok's notebooks, printed by *Priboi* (*The Surf*) in 1930, were subjected to even more severe excisions, so that, in the words of the editor, 'certain notebooks had to be omitted in their entirety, and the material of the others was drastically reduced'.<sup>46</sup> The same practice applied equally to Blok's letters and continued all way through the Khrushchev Thaw.<sup>47</sup> Although in the mid-1960s Orlov pointed out that it was time to release a new, comprehensive academic edition of Blok's works and correspondence, and in 1973 Zil'bershtein reiterated the matter, no such edition was issued until 1997.<sup>48</sup>

The second reason was directly related to the dominance of state censorship in the Soviet cultural field, which meant that scholarly works that focused primarily on textual analysis and literary techniques enjoyed a somewhat higher degree of freedom of expression, remote from ideological and political concerns. This partly explains the prominence of semiotic and structuralist analysis in Blok studies. Apart from the enormous power and grace of his writing, where formality merged with freedom, elevated language with vulgarity, public discourse with personal reflections and with song, his greater innovation was the emancipation of Russian metrics. The regular syllabic-accentuated scheme elaborated in the eighteenth century, and used almost without exception thereafter, was in many of his poems shifted to a purely stress metric — a development, of course, with close parallels in the history of modernist Western prosodies. Such major scholars as Lotman, Mints, Losev and Gasparov presented an in-depth examination of Blok's style

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46 Orlov, 'Literaturnoe nasledstvo Aleksandra Bloka', p. 560.

47 Prior to the 1960s edition of Blok's collected works (8 vols.), his letters were released sporadically and in various editions: *Pis'ma Aleksandra Bloka*, edited by S. M. Solov'ev, G. I. Chulkov, A. D. Skaldin and V. N. Kniazhnin (Leningrad: Kolos, 1925), with four introductory articles by the editors, who were also the addressees of the letters; *Pis'ma Aleksandra Bloka k rodnym*, 2 vols., edited by M. A. Beketova (Moscow-Leningrad: Akademiia, 1927–1932); *Pis'ma Al Bloka k E. P. Ivanovu*, edited by T. S. Vol'pe (Moscow-Leningrad: AN SSSR, 1936).

48 V. N. Orlov, *Blokovskii sbornik, Trudy nauchnoi konferentsii, posviashchennoi izucheniiu zhizni i tvorchestva A. A. Bloka, mai 1962*, edited by Iu. M. Lotman et al. (Tartu: Tartusskii gosudarstvennyi univesitet, 1964); I. S. Zil'bershtein, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 4 April 1973, p. 8, quoted in Hackel, p. 237; *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v 20 tomakh*, edited by A. N. Grishunin (Moscow: Nauka, 1997–1999).

and poetics, drawing attention to his daring rhymes and innovative versification, to the intricate language of his symbols, and to the vast connotative spectrum of his verse.<sup>49</sup> Having added an extra layer of complexity to the subject of their studies, these works (together with some other factors) conjured a complementary image of the poet, opening up new avenues in the reception of his oeuvre, accessible to those who were prepared to extend their reading beyond the limits of prescriptive curriculum lists.

As regards Blok's position and function within this kind of alternative, and essentially dissenting canon, these can be best understood by looking closely into the processes of its configuration and the contingencies of its subsequent transmission and preservation. One of the factors to be taken into account is the history of publishing in the Soviet Union. Curiously enough, the cultural activities of the elite were less directly touched by state-led initiatives than those of the masses (specifically in education). As Anthony Kemp-Welch describes it, 'NEP permitted considerable freedom to Russia's brilliant elites [...] cultural experiments were [...] exuberant — constructivism, suprematism, utopian architecture and innovative theatre — offering an artistic counterpart to the political revolution'.<sup>50</sup> The Bolsheviks understood that what influenced the political outlook of the masses was far more significant than writings aimed at the refined taste of the elite. Although in the first decade of Bolshevik control private publishing houses printed only a small and ever-diminishing share of the total output of the literary material, they nonetheless made a contribution to the variety of texts available to the Soviet reader, bringing out a significant proportion of editions on philosophy, the works of fiction and translations. For instance, authors whose pro-Bolshevik credentials were not remotely flawless, such as Merezhkovskii, Nikolai Berdiaev, Semen Frank and Nikolai Losskii, were still published (by private publishers) in the mid-1920s; the same

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49 Zara Mints, *Poetika Aleksandra Bloka* (St Petersburg: Iskusstvo, 1999); Iurii Lotman, 'A. A. Blok. Anne Akhmatovoi'; 'Blok i narodnaia kul'tura goroda'; "'Chelovek prirody" v russkoi literature XIX veka i "tsynganskaia tema" u Bloka', in Iurii Lotman, *O poetakh i poezii* (St Petersburg: Iskusstvo, 1996), pp. 211–20, pp. 653–69, pp. 670–75.

50 Anthony Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia, 1928–1939* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 34.

can be said about the symbolist poems of Blok that were produced in Petrograd by the Alkonost publishing house.

Another relevant factor is that up until the 1960s, quite a few people who knew Blok personally were still active on the Soviet literary scene. Through their social conversations and published records (for instance, those of Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Iurii Annenkov and many others), they moulded and passed on their own image of the poet — that of a refined aesthete, a herald of divine beauty — an *echt* embodiment of poetic inspiration itself. The reminiscences of Chukovskii, and more specifically his description of Blok reading *Neznakomka* at one of the gatherings in Ivanov's 'tower', are particularly exemplary in this respect:

And Blok, sluggish, looking calm, young and sunburnt (he always got his tan already in early spring), climbed up some huge iron armature, connecting telephone wires, and in response to our unceasing begging, for the third, and even for the fourth time in a row read this everlasting ballad with his measured, muffled, monotonous, docile and tragic voice. And, while absorbing its ingenious phono-scripture, we have been suffering in anticipation that this enchantment would come to an end, whereas we all wanted it to last for hours.<sup>51</sup>

The fact that Blok was one of the most influential poets of his time is difficult to overlook. The richness of his images, which he conjured out of the most banal surroundings and trivial events (e.g. 'V restorane' ('In the Restaurant') or 'Na zheleznoi doroge' ('On the Railway')) inspired generations of younger poets: Sergei Esenin, Akhmatova, and Boris Pasternak. Compare, for instance, Blok's poem 'Rus'' ('Russia', 1906) with the poem of the same title written by Esenin (1914), which effectively invokes the same metaphor of an impenetrable and ghostly land:

Русь, опоясана реками  
И дебрями окружена,  
С болотами и журавлями,  
И с мутным взором колдуна.<sup>52</sup>

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51 Kornei Chukovskii, *Sovremenniki. Portrety i etiudy* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1967), p. 250.

52 Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, II, 99.

Rus' is embraced by rivers  
 And surrounded by thick forests,  
 With marshes and cranes,  
 And with a hazy look of a sorcerer

И стоят за дубровными сетками,  
 Словно нечисть лесная, пеньки.  
 Запугала нас сила нечистая,  
 Что ни прорубь — везде колдуны.<sup>53</sup>

And behind the array of oaks, there  
 Stand tree-trunks, like wood demons.  
 We were all scared by these evil spirits,  
 A sorcerer looks out of every ice-break.

Likewise, one can find numerous echoes of Blok's patterns in Akhmatova's poems. Zhirmunskii — one of the first major scholars of Russian symbolism — once pointed out that this was not a case of imitation in its most traditional sense, but rather a kind of 'contamination' of her writing with Blok's means of expression, imagery and certain metrico-syntactic structures.<sup>54</sup>

И такая влекущая сила,  
 Что готов я твердить за молвой,  
 Будто ангелов ты низводила,  
 Соблазняя своей красотой.<sup>55</sup>

And it is such an appealing power, that  
 I am happy to follow the rumour, acting  
 As if you brought angels down from heaven,  
 seducing them by your beauty.

53 Sergei Esenin, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 7 vols., edited by Iu. L. Prokushev (Moscow: Nauka-Golos, 1995–2002), II (1997), 17.

54 V. M. Zhirmunskii, 'Anna Akhmatova i Aleksandr Blok', in *Izbrannye trudy. Teoriia literatury. Poetika. Stilistika* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1977), pp. 323–52 (p. 339).

55 Blok, 'K muze' (1912), *Sobranie sochinenii*, III, 7.

И такая могучая сила  
 Зачарованный голос влечет,  
 Будто там впереди не могила,  
 А таинственной лестницы взлет.<sup>56</sup>

And such a compelling power  
 Draws the bewitched voice on,  
 As if ahead there were no grave,  
 But a flight of mysterious stairs.

Maiakovskii, whose own style and convictions were hardly comparable to Blok's vision of aesthetics, was absolutely enthralled by the mastery of the poet's writing; and, according to the memoirs of David Burluiuk, could easily recite from memory the vast majority of Blok's poetic collections.<sup>57</sup> These examples are manifold and stretch far beyond the literary domain. In music, Blok inspired Arthur Lourie's choral cantata *Dans le temple du rêve d'or* (*In the Sanctuary of Golden Dreams*, 1919), Shostakovich's lyric song cycle for soprano and piano trio, *Seven Romances of Aleksandr Blok* (1967), and Sergei Slonimskii's cantata *A Voice from the Chorus* (1963–1976); in art one might immediately think of the series of eye-catching illustrations to Blok's poems created in the early 1980s by the then oppositional artist Il'ia Glazunov.<sup>58</sup> All these primary, and in the case of art and music, secondary references to Blok's writings are, of course, of major cultural importance: they affirm the canonical status of the original, and constitute an effective mechanism of attaching value to the poet's oeuvre.<sup>59</sup> This aspect, however, has an extra political dimension in the Russian context. Curiously enough, the majority for whom Blok provided an inspiration were, in one way or another, at

56 Anna Akhmatova, *Sochineniia*, 2 vols., edited by M. M. Kralin (Moscow: Tsitadel', 1997), I, 284; translated by Judith Hemschemeyer, *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, edited by Roberta Reeder, 2 vols. (Somerville: Zephyr Press, 1990), II, 685.

57 Burluiuk, quoted by E. I. Naumov in his commentary to Maiakovskii's obituary 'Umer Aleksander Blok', in Maiakovskii, *Sobranie sochinenii*, III, 653.

58 *Aleksandr Blok v illiustratsiakh I. Glazunova* (a set of 16 postcards) (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1982).

59 The representation of Blok in Soviet cinema as an affirmation of the canon delivered to the mass viewer is a matter of separate investigation: Olga Sobolev, *Appropriated by the Revolution: Blok and the Socialist Realist Cinema*, presented at the AAASS Conference, Boston, November 2013.

odds with the Soviet system (the aforementioned authors are exemplary in this respect), which in itself, and not without a reason, had some bearing on the ideological reputation of their source.

In other words, the representation of Blok in Soviet culture can be characterized by a so-called double exposure. The first layer, configured by the school curriculum, firmly wedded the poet to the Revolution. It highlighted the patriotism of his lyrics; the revolutionary echoes in *Dvenadtsat'*; and associated his legacy with the notion of socially engaged writing. One can say that as an object of cultural capital, Blok's oeuvre was clearly appropriated by the dominant class. The second layer was available only to 'the happy few' — those who (through superior judgement or benefit of learning) were prepared to go beyond this artificially created frame. For all its greatness, *Dvenadtsat'* could not be made to stand for all of Blok; and for many he essentially remained a lyric poet in the Romantic tradition — one of the last heirs of the nineteenth-century Russian intellectual elite. By the mid-1950s Blok had become a canonical emblem of this elite — an epitome of poetic refinement, of sublime aestheticism, and spiritual elevation, but always with the double connotation of an angel fallen from grace. Gradually (from the early seventies and throughout Brezhnev's years), these particular undertones acquired a distinctly political dimension, which, in a way, reflected the overall status of the intelligentsia in the Soviet state. Leonid Trauberg, an eminent Russian film director, testified that he and his fellow artists secretly preferred Blok to Maiakovskii: 'he was much closer to our hearts', he reckoned, 'but we were deeply ashamed to voice these thoughts'.<sup>60</sup> At that time the Russian intelligentsia saw itself as a hostage of the system, and such qualities of Blok's writings as their charming sadness and vulnerability, the sense of spiritual isolation and sacrificial suffering were profoundly internalized (the circumstances of his death were widely known among cultural circles).<sup>61</sup> He became an

60 V. Shcherbina, 'O grupe estestvuiushchikh kosmopolitov v kino', *Iskusstvo kino*, 1 (1949), 14–16 (pp. 14–15).

61 A vivid reflection of this atmosphere can be found in Stanislav Rostotskii's 1972 film *A zori zdes' tikhie* (*And the Dawns Here Are Quiet*). The film is set in 1942: five young girls from the division of the anti-aircraft gunners are sent on a doomed mission to stop a detachment of German paratroopers. During her night-watch duty, Sonia, the only heroine with a university background, characteristically recites Blok's poem 'Rozhdennye v goda glukhie' ('Those Born in the Years of Stagnation'), which is charmingly mistaken for a prayer by her village-man commander Vas'kov.

echo of the hopeless cry of a trapped generation, bidding farewell to the end of the liberal Thaw. As Pasternak claimed in his 1956 poem:

Но Блок, слава Богу, иная,  
Иная, по счастью, статья.  
Он к нам не спускался с Синая,  
Нас не принимал в сыновья.

Прославленный не по программе  
И вечный вне школ и систем,  
Он не изготовлен руками  
И нам не навязан никем.<sup>62</sup>

But Blok is, thank Heaven, another,  
A different matter for once,  
He did not descend from Sinai  
And not accept us as sons.

Eternal and not manufactured,  
Renown not according to plan,  
Outside schools and systems, he has not  
Been foisted upon us by man.

The fact that Blok was canonised by the Russian intelligentsia as an expression of its self-image is in no way coincidental. The poet had always identified himself with and had a troubled attitude towards the intelligentsia, which effectively made him a typical representative of this social group. In his diary entries for January 1918, he repudiates 'the intelligentsia', referring to its negative view of the revolution, its instinctive 'hatred of parliaments, institutional gatherings and so on', and bitterly remarks that 'the smart alecks of the intelligentsia do not want to get their hands dirty with work'. In the same entries, however, he identifies with that very intelligentsia, calling it 'dear' and 'native' scum.<sup>63</sup> He claims that the removal of the gap between the intelligentsia and the people requires the former to love Russia as 'a mother,

62 Pasternak, 'Veter' (see note 1 above; the reference to 'his adopted sons' in the fourth line is an allusion to Stalin, who was regarded as the father of the Soviet people).

63 Blok, diary entry, 5 January 1918, *Sobranie sochinenii*, VII, 315; diary entry, 18 January 1918, *Sobranie sochinenii*, VII, 321.

sister and wife', and places himself in the role of that wife's lover by repeatedly stressing his status as 'a member of the intelligentsia'.<sup>64</sup> According to Mints, the same type of identification is reflected in his poetic compositions, namely in the cycle *Rodina* and his verse drama *Pesnia sud'by* (*Song of Fate*, 1908); in these writings the poet-protagonist is repeatedly presented as Russia's suitor or her promised husband, which, Mints maintains, irrevocably leads the reader to interpret him as a synecdoche for the intelligentsia.<sup>65</sup> At the same time, in a series of articles and speeches at the end of 1908, Blok argued that the intelligentsia was simply obsolete as a driving social force.<sup>66</sup> He accused it of pursuing a fatally individualistic course, expending its energies in literary novelties, nebulous philosophical speculations, and mechanical political activities, which had no connection with the needs and desires of the Russian people. Intellectuals, he wrote, loving 'individualism, demonism, aesthetics, and despair', were imbued with the 'will to die', thus becoming fundamentally opposed to the people, sustaining 'from time immemorial — the will to live'.<sup>67</sup> This, for Blok, was the cornerstone of the problem, making the intelligentsia incapable of national advocacy and moral leadership.

The feelings of self-doubt, ethical questioning, and reflection are, evidently, a constant factor in intellectual life, not least in that of the Russian intelligentsia. During the decades of Soviet power their old task of moral criticism and articulating national ideals acquired a new vitality in opposition to the regime. Moreover, throughout the apathy of the Brezhnev era, this was enhanced by the profound sense of disillusionment of many who had by and large been prepared to carry out the role allotted to them — a metaphysical rejection of the present and a psychological denigration of the possibility of change became the mode.<sup>68</sup> Effectively, each element of this quintessential array — spiritual

64 Blok, 'Rossiia i intelligentsia', *Sobranie sochinenii*, V, 321; 319; 327.

65 Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, III, 251–54; IV, 148–49; Mints, *Poetika Bloka*, p. 351.

66 His critical essays on the topic include: 'Russia and the Intelligentsia' (1908) and 'Nature and Culture' (1908); for a more detailed analysis of Blok's views on the Russian intelligentsia see Jane Burbank, *Intelligentsia and Revolution: Russian Views of Bolshevism, 1917–1922* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 9–11.

67 Blok, 'Rossiia i intelligentsia', *Sobranie sochinenii*, V, 327.

68 For a more detailed account of the changes in the intelligentsia's views in the Soviet period see Catriona Kelly, 'New Boundaries for the Common Good', in *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution 1881–1940*, edited by Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 238–55.



abandonment, introspective reflection, despair and self-loathing — had a distinct parallel in Blok's own social and cultural position, turning him *ipso facto* into a canonical icon of the intelligentsia's views. His legacy (as well as his own image) began to function as a symbol of an alternative culture, and in this sense offered a perfect example of social conceptualisation brought about entirely by the grassroots activities of a particular group.

The first years of the post-Soviet period were characterised by a distinct reconfiguration of the country's cultural agenda. The abolition of state censorship and, consequently, of the *official* canon, the changes in the educational system and a tremendous increase in the number of privately printed books gave a new impetus to the debates on the function and value of literature, as well as on the formation of a canon of important works. When looking at the position of Blok (and the cohort of symbolist authors) in this newly developed context, two main issues should be considered. Firstly, the beginning of the 1990s was characterized by an unparalleled growth of interest in the legacy of the Silver Age. This can be demonstrated by the publication of such rare volumes as the collected poems of KR (the Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich Romanov), edited by Askol'd Muratov, as well as a series of critical articles concerning his artistic output; the selected poems of Konstantin Sluchevskii, Solov'ev, Semen Nadson, Konstantin Fofanov, and Gippius; and, for the first time since 1914, an edition of poems by Merezhkovskii.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, the emphasis had now shifted considerably: it was transferred onto the philosophical platform of the symbolist authors, with a distinct attempt to establish an interdisciplinary approach to the field.<sup>70</sup> An increasing number of

69 D. S. Merezhkovskii, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 4 vols., edited by O. Mikhailov (Moscow: Pravda, 1990).

70 S. N. Broitman, *Russkaia lirika XIX — nachala XX veka v svete istoricheskoi poetiki* (Moscow: RGGU, 1997); *Vladimir Solov'ev i kul'tura Serebriannogo veka*, edited by E. A. Takho-Godi (Moscow: Nauka, 2005); S. P. Bel'chevichen, *Problema vzaimosviazi kul'tury i religii v filosofii D. S. Merezhkovskogo* (Tver': Izdatel'stvo Tverskogo universiteta, 1999); E. Andrushchenko, *Vlastelin 'chuzhogo': tekstologiya i problema poetiki D. S. Merezhkovskogo* (Moscow: Vodolei, 2012); S. Sapozhkov, 'Russkaia poeziiia 1880–1890-kh godov: "konstruktivnost" khaosa ili "esteticheskii immoralizm"?'', *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 75 (2005), 338–47; G. Obatin, *Ivanov-mistik: Okkul'tnye motivy v poezii i proze Viacheslava Ivanova* (Moscow: NLO, 2000); E. A. Takho-Godi, 'Vladimir Solov'ev i Konstantin Sluchevskii. K istorii vzaimootnoshenii', in *Kontekst: 1993. Literaturno-istoricheskie issledovaniia* (Moscow: Nasledie, 1996), 323–40.

works were released by a variety of specialists in literature, philosophy and cultural studies, and in this respect the studies of Efim Etkind and Aleksandr Etkind are particularly notable.<sup>71</sup> Symbolism started to be treated as a complex and far-reaching movement, which set out the framework for exploring the interaction between philosophy and art. The analysis of such interactions contributed to the appreciation of the philosophic theories of such major thinkers as Solov'ev, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer, and their impact on the creative output of the symbolist writings of Merezhkovskii and Ivanov, Belyi, Feodor Sologub and Blok.

The second issue is related to the tendency to denigrate virtually the entire artistic output promoted in Soviet Russia before Gorbachev's years of *perestroika* and *glasnost'*. It became fashionable for iconoclastic critics to attack 'liberal' or 'dissident' writers of the socialist realist tradition from various different angles: either because of the conventional style of their work and the conservative nationalist viewpoint espoused by some, or because of the political and cultural compromises the artists were obliged to make with the system. In the 1990s vociferous adherents of alternative literature belittled virtually any cultural product of the post-Stalin era which displayed the moral or political concerns of its creator.<sup>72</sup>

One would think that the interaction of both trends would undermine Blok's position in the newly configured canon. The so-called *accessible* canon became broader, the competition in the field became stronger, and attention should have been drawn to the newly emerging, previously unknown names rather than to established figures. The mechanisms of the *selective* canon also should not have worked (at least in theory) in favour of a formerly classic writer, recommended and promoted by a now denigrated regime. This rather ill-fated combination, however, did not seem to weaken the poet's viability within the post-Soviet canon: his name still has the same weight in secondary education and features in literary anthologies with a considerably wider spectrum of verse. As far as indirect references to Blok's oeuvre are concerned, in the 1990s

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71 E. G. Etkind, *Tam vnutri: O russkoi poezii XX veka* (St Petersburg: Maksima, 1997); A. M. Etkind, *Sodom i psikhia. Ocherki intellektual'noi istorii Serebriannogo veka* (Moscow: Its-Garant, 1996), A. M. Etkind, *Eros nevozmozhnogo: Istoriia psikhoanaliza v Rossii* (St Petersburg: Meduza, 1994); A. M. Etkind, *Khlyst: Sekty, literatura i revoliutsiia* (Moscow: NLO, 1998).

72 See, for instance, V. Erofeev, 'Soviet Literature: In Memoriam', *Glas*, 1 (1991), 225–34; M. Kharitonov, 'Apologiya literatury', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 19 June 1991, 11.

his writings reached an even wider audience through popular culture, when his poem 'Devushka pela v tserkovnom khore' ('A Girl Sang in a Church Choir', 1905) was used by Slavianskii Bank in a series of its commercials *Poeziia v reklame* (*Poetry in Advertising*), shown in the cinema and on the major Russian TV channels.<sup>73</sup> Initially the series was based on four authors, Blok, Mandel'shtam, Pushkin and Pasternak — all with a distinctly non-conformist attitude towards the system; the advertisements using poems by Esenin and Daniil Kharms, added later, made these undertones even more pronounced. At first glance Blok's legacy appears simply inexhaustible, but on closer consideration one cannot fail to notice that its reproduction and representation remain largely defined by the poet's perceived social connotations. In the school curriculum, followed universally throughout Russia as a major mechanism of engraving cultural views, Blok is indeed no longer classified as a revolutionary poet,<sup>74</sup> but it is nonetheless the motif of Mother Russia and the elements of his socially engaged writing which still dominate the questions offered in the exams (bearing witness to the prevailing priorities).<sup>75</sup> This, of course, ties in well with the nationalistic drift in Putin's current policies; and curricular intervention in this context simply reaffirms the concept of desirable cultural assets, embodied in or associated with canonical works.<sup>76</sup>

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73 The text in the clip using Blok's poem (shot by Timur Bekmambetov) is read by Vladimir Mashkov, a cult figure in Russian cinema, which added to the public appeal of the venture. The initiative of using poetry in advertising has now been picked up by another major company Mobile Tele-Systems (MTS), which in 2005 created its own clips based on poems by Blok ('Night, street and streetlamp, drugstore' (1912)) and Igor' Severianin.

74 This absurd attempt to turn Blok into a revolutionary poet (prevalent in the Soviet era) was parodied in Viktor Pelevin's widely read novel *Chapaev i Pustota* (1996): to heighten his pro-Bolshevik credentials the poet himself amends the finale of *The Twelve*, using the infamous image of a 'sailor' (see note 39): 'With a garland of white roses spliced — / Up in front is a sailor' (Viktor Pelevin, *Chapaev i Pustota* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1999), p. 36).

75 The list of Blok's poems specified in the programme of the Unified State Examination in literature (EGE) speaks for itself. It includes: 'The Twelve', 'The Unknown Woman', 'Russia', 'Night, Street and Streetlamp, Drugstore', 'In the Restaurant', 'On the Field of Kulikovo', 'On the Railway', 'Factory', 'Russia' ('Rus'), 'On Courage, Heroic Deeds and Glory': *Kodifikator elementov sodержaniia i trebovanii k urovniu podgotovki vypusnikov obshcheobrazovatel'nykh uchrezhdenii dlia edinogo gosudarstvennogo ekzamina 2010 goda po literature* (Moscow: Federal'nyi institut pedagogicheskikh izmerenii, 2010), p. 7.

76 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 310.

As regards scholarly studies of Blok, this domain represents, perhaps, the most interesting terrain in terms of reconfiguration of the canon, and provides some noteworthy material on the interaction of the socio-political and cultural currents in the absence of any direct steer from the state. Russian literary scholarship continues to be overwhelmingly based on the conviction that the value and quality of any major work are in inverse proportion to the level of political interference in the conditions of its production. Furthermore, despite the removal of the *official* Soviet-era canon, and the achievement of freedom of intellectual expression, one can, nonetheless, demonstrate that the emphasis in the scholarly response to Blok studies is still related, though less conspicuously, to the overall drift in the social agenda, and that the course of its re-orientation is largely directed by the changing political priorities.

The general socio-political atmosphere of the early 1990s, with its prevailing nihilism, its critical attitude towards the dying system and its destructive tendencies towards communist art, facilitated a series of works that highlighted the apocryphal motifs in Blok's writings, centred on the notion of theodicy, and on the subversive spirit of his poems, intended to desecrate everything concerning the accepted order. In this context, it is worth mentioning the works of Al'bert Avramenko and Irina Prikhod'ko, who argued the importance of Manichean philosophy in Blok's oeuvre; the monographs of Sergei Slobodniuk and Gennadii Glinin, who looked at Blok's poetry from the gnostic perspective; and the writings of Oleg Smola and Valentin Nepomniashchii, who highlighted the elements of Satanism and demonism in his verse.<sup>77</sup> One of the most prominent characteristics of these studies is a completely different interpretation of *Dvenadtsat'*, which (in order to outline the researchers' platform) can be best illustrated by a comparative reading of the following extract from the poem: 'Freedom, freedom, / Yeah,

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77 A. Avramenko, *A. Blok i russkie poety XIX veka* (Moscow: MGU, 1990); G. G. Glinin, *Avtorskaia pozitsiia v poeme A. Bloka 'Dvenadtsat''* (Astrakhan': Izdatel'stvo Astrakhanskogo pedagogicheskogo instituta, 1993); V. Nepomniashchii, 'Pushkin cherez dvesti let', *Novyi mir*, 6 (1993), 230–38; S. L. Slobodniuk, *Idushchie putiami zla* (St Petersburg: Aleteia, 1998); I. S. Prikhod'ko, *Mifopoetika A. Bloka* (Vladimir: Vladimirskaia pedagogicheskii universitet, 1994); O. Smola, *Chernyi vecher. Belyi sneg...*. *Tvorcheskaia istoriia i sud'ba poemy Aleksandra Bloka 'Dvenadtsat''* (Moscow: Nasledie, 1993).

yeah, without a cross! / Rat-a-tat-tat!' ('Svoboda, svoboda, / Ekh, ekh, bez kresta! / Tra-ta-ta!').<sup>78</sup>

In Soviet literary scholarship the reading of this passage was traditionally centred on the second line; the alienation from the holy cross ('Yeah, yeah, without a cross!') was seen as a manifestation of the poet's atheism and anti-religious views. Orlov argued that: 'everything that was established as a Christian dogma was alien to him', and Leonid Dolgoplov maintained that Jesus, leading the Red soldiers, as it appears in the ending of the poem, represented 'the ultimate objective of the Revolution' ('sverkh zadacha revoliutsii').<sup>79</sup>

By contrast, the scholars of the 1990s saw *Dvenadtsat'* in the light of a demonic canto — a text which positioned the Revolution within the framework of a black mass.<sup>80</sup> The title was read as an allusion to the 'twelfth hour' — the time of Satanic *shabash*, which, according to the Russian folk tradition, takes place between midnight and four o'clock in the morning (as, for instance, in Gogol's short story *Vii*). The setting of the opening also contributed to the point: the bewildering combination of the night, the wind and the snow storm created the atmosphere of a nightmarish orgy, with a clear intertextual reference to Pushkin's poem 'Besy' ('Demons').<sup>81</sup>

Черный вечер.  
 Белый снег.  
 Ветер, ветер!  
 На ногах не стоит человек.  
 Ветер, ветер —  
 На всем божьем свете!<sup>82</sup>

78 Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, III, 349.

79 V. N. Orlov, *Gamaiun: Zhizn' Aleksandra Bloka* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1980), p. 190; L. K. Dolgoplov, *Poema Bloka 'Dvenadtsat''* (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1979), p. 79.

80 Prikhod'ko, *Mifopoetika A. Bloka*, p. 106, p. 118; Nepomniashchii, 'Pushkin cherez dvesti let', p. 230; M. Petrovskii, "'Dvenadtsat'" Bloka i Leonid Andreev', in *Aleksandr Blok: Literaturnoe nasledstvo* (Moscow: IMLI, 1987), IV, 226.

81 Petrovskii, "'Dvenadtsat'" Bloka i Leonid Andreev', p. 226; Smola, 'Chernyi vecher. Belyi sneg...', p. 77; Nepomniashchii, 'Pushkin cherez dvesti let', p. 238.

82 Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, III, 347.

Black night,  
 White snow.  
 Wind, wind!  
 Knock you flat before you know,  
 Wind, wind!  
 Filling God's wide world!

Мчатся тучи, вьются тучи;  
 Невидимкою луна  
 Освещает снег летучий;  
 Мутно небо, ночь мутна.<sup>83</sup>

Clouds are whirling, clouds are swirling;  
 Though invisible, the moon  
 Lights the flying snow while blurring  
 Turbid sky and night in one.

Finally, the actions of the protagonists also tied in well with the proposed reading. The disposing of the cross in the passage quoted above ('Yeah, yeah, without the cross! / Rat-a-tat-tat!'), was seen by some scholars as an essential attribute of the satanic service, complemented by the blasphemous sayings and actions of the characters, such as 'Pal'nem-ka pulei v Sviatuiu Rus'' ('Let's put a bullet into Holy Russia').<sup>84</sup> Slobodniuk, for instance, pointed out that the shooting sounds reverberating in the air may well refer to characteristic rituals widespread among demonic sects and known as 'shooting the Invisible [Christ]' (also involving gunning down a crucifix, as a symbol of the demise of the Holy Spirit).<sup>85</sup>

83 A. S. Pushkin, 'Besy', *Sobranie sochinenii*, 10 vols. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1977), III, 167. Translated as 'Demons', in Aleksandr Pushkin, *Complete Works*, 15 vols. (Downham Market: Milner & Co. Ltd, 1999–2003), III (2000), 160.

84 Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, III, 349.

85 Slobodniuk, *Idushchie putiami zla*, p. 297.

Трах-тах-тах! — И только эхо  
 Откликается в домах...  
 Только вьюга долгим смехом  
 Заливается в снегах...  
 Трах-тах-тах!  
 Трах-тах-тах...<sup>86</sup>

Rat-a-tat-tat! Only the echo  
 Bounces round the buildings there...  
 Only the blizzard, laughing, laughing,  
 Roaring with laughter in the snows...  
 Rat-a-tat-tat!  
 Rat-a-tat-tat...

According to Slobodniuk and others, all of the above highlighted the destructive spirit of the Bolsheviks' venture, and related them to a group of the Devil's disciples.

The beginning of the twenty-first century witnessed yet another change in the canon. With the proliferation of authoritarian trends and consolidation of power in Putin's Russia, and with the instrumentalisation of religion as an additional mechanism of state manipulation, Blok's writings now tend to be configured towards the idea of an all-embracing unity. Following the new political direction, the accent is placed on Blok's theosophical reflections, on the symbolist concept of the omnipresent divinity of Sophia, as well as on his syncretic metaphysical doctrine.<sup>87</sup>

Very much along these lines, the new trend in Blok studies consists of apprehending his creative output in its entirety: for instance, the three volumes of his poems are seen as an overarching epic work equivalent to a novel (following Blok's own comment in the preface to the first edition of his *Collected Verse*: 'every poem is necessary to

<sup>86</sup> Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, III, 359.

<sup>87</sup> T. V. Igosheva, *Ranniaia lirika A. A. Bloka (1898–1904): poetika religioznogo simvolizma* (Moscow: Global Kom, 2013); S. L. Slobodniuk, *Solov'inyi ad. Trilogiia vohelovecheniia Aleksandra Bloka* (St Petersburg: Alataia, 2002); I. V. Grechanik, 'Osobennosti liriki Bloka: filosofskie osnovy, stil', *Religiozno-filosofskie motivy russkoi liriki rubezha XIX–XX vekov* (Moscow: Sputnik, 2003), pp. 59–111.

form a chapter; several chapters make up a book; every book is part of a trilogy; and this trilogy can be called a “novel in verse”).<sup>88</sup> These studies argue that the entire set of Blok’s poems can be characterized by a polyphonic structure of voices in its Bakhtinian, novelistic sense.<sup>89</sup> The focal point is the analysis of the first person narrative in its formal grammatical terms (the so-called lyrical self) and its conceptual dependence on, and correspondence to, the variety of different subjects of poetic consciousness, which even in the setting of the first volume of the *Stikhi o Prekrasnoi dame* can be interpreted as a whole spectrum of literary characters. As a result, the three volumes of Blok’s poems are regarded as a novelistic trilogy in verse, unified through a number of specific elements of his poetics. Among these elements one can name the overarching *fabula*, which differs from the notion of the lyrical plot in the traditional cycle of poems, as well as a set of well-defined poetic-personae with a clear line of character-building throughout the cycle.

Another interesting line of inquiry, which has recently come under the spotlight, concerns the unity of the Apollonian and Dionysian in Blok’s writings — the interaction of philosophy and the arts, of the rational and irrational in the process of creativity.<sup>90</sup> This dichotomy was one of the fundamental concerns of the Russian symbolist movement, and is now regarded as a useful lens for reflection on contemporary cultural thought.

Summarizing all of the above, it is worth pointing out that Blok’s poetry, his works for the theatre, his literary criticism, and his prose, have always been a subject of extensive literary investigations; and the very fact that their appeal does not seem to be on the wane brings to mind the idea of ‘exclusive completeness’<sup>91</sup> often seen as quintessential

88 Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I, 559; the same idea is mentioned in his letter to Belyi of 6 June 1911 (*Blok-Belyi: Perepiska*, p. 261).

89 A. I. Il’enkov, ‘O skrytoi kompozitsii liricheskoi trilogii Aleksandra Bloka’, in *Arkhetipicheskie struktury khudozhestvennogo soznaniia*, edited by E. K. Sozina (Ekaterinburg: Izdatel’stvo Ural’skogo Universiteta, 2002), pp. 124–38; G. G. Glinin, *Avtor i geroi v poemakh Bloka* (Astrakhan’: Izdatel’stvo Astrakhanskogo universiteta, 2006); A. F. Burukina, ‘Formy avtorskogo prisutstviia v proze A. Bloka’, *Gummanitarnye issledovaniia*, 4 (2007), 56–62.

90 A. V. Korniuikhina, ‘Misticheskii anarkhizm kak stadia formirovaniia russkogo simvolizma’, *Vestnik Moskovskogo Gosudarstvennogo oblastnogo universiteta. Seriia Filosofskie nauki*, 2 (2006), 176–81.

91 Fowler, ‘Genre and the Literary Canon’, p. 98.



in the definition of a canonical work. When thinking of the reasons for such a persistent interest in the development of this domain, three main factors have to be brought into the discussion. Firstly, there is a vast amount of material that has only recently been released from the archives and that has been processed and examined in detail. There is, therefore, an expectation of a radical step forward, a long awaited breakthrough, which would bring the accumulated quantitative investigation onto a completely new qualitative level of research. Secondly, there is still a strong urge to revise the cultural legacy of the Soviet era, liberating this area, including Blok studies, from the tarnish of ideologically imposed compromise. Whether this can be achieved is highly debatable, because, as has been demonstrated, the newly shaped tendencies in the literary canon remain closely related to the overarching currents of the social and political agenda. It seems that the very idea of institutionalised critical thinking entails an obvious internal contradiction, but the current drift in itself is certainly welcome, for it is the desire for reification of a pluralistic critique that (in a liberal society) stands behind any form of canon revision.

Finally, when looking at this phenomenon from a more general perspective, one has to consider that, not unlike the post-*perestroika* years, the Silver Age represents a liminal stage in the history of Russian culture — a time which can be largely characterized as a deep existential crisis, and a time when poetry and art made a significant contribution to the development of the conceptual social doctrine.<sup>92</sup> Overcoming fragmentation, and moving towards the construction of a new sociocultural reality by virtue of their artistic creativity — these were the major concerns of the turn-of-the-century symbolist thinkers, which have their parallels and repercussions in the actuality of the present day. Having overcome the existential crisis of the 1990s, Russia is nowadays also making an attempt to construct a new national and cultural identity. Discussions on the value of literature, the new canon, its orientation and its function have become an integral part of the intellectual and literary

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92 This crisis developed as a result of a series of failures in the socio-political structures of the time and encompassed a philosophical crisis (the disillusionment with positivism and with the cult of intellectual enlightenment); a religious crisis (Christianity was increasingly losing its standing as a dominant social authority); and a crisis in aesthetics (the shortcomings of realist art were becoming obvious) as well as politics (related to the failure of the Populists).

landscape; and any analysis of the reflective algorithms, elaborated within a similar context by the eminent generation of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century cultural elite, would have a meaningful impact on this process. As regards the position of Blok in this newly emerging canon, as Avril Pyman has put it in one of her latest articles on the poet:

Blok has never lacked readers, but he has lacked objective critics. He has repeatedly been claimed or rejected for political or cultural-historical reasons which have little to do with his practice as a poet: innovative to the end, yet always mindful of tradition. Now that time is rolling him away, now that he stands roughly equidistant between us and Goethe, Byron, Derzhavin and Pushkin, it is enough to know his poetry has outlived the events to which it bore witness, just as the *Iliad* outlived Troy and the *Psalms* David.<sup>93</sup>

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93 Avril Pyman, 'The Last Romantic', *Russian Life* (Nov.–Dec.2000), 34–43 (p. 43).