

ALEXANDER BLOK

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Alexander Blok, 1880–1921

WE ARE CONSCIOUS of a certain diffidence in republishing a translation¹ of *The Collapse of Humanism* by Alexander Alexandrovich Blok. As a poet he ought to need no introduction from anyone now. You will not find genius to equal his in the history of Russian poetry until you come to Pushkin, and he, of course, remains, and always will remain, alone and unchallenged in his supremacy. Blok's prose, however, has, on the whole, been neglected, and, as we think, unduly; for even considered simply as

¹ [sc. publishing a new translation, made by IB.]

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prose it is extraordinarily fascinating. A Frenchman has said of Pushkin's verse that it is 'beau comme la prose';² Blok's prose has the swift movement of poetry, it intoxicates like poetry; this may partly be due to the fact that he was purely and wholly a poet and did everything as a poet, and partly to the exceptional malleableness and sensitiveness of the Russian language, which naturally tends to free itself from all pedestrian elements, and to rise, without at all losing in concreteness, to imaginative heights whether of poetry or of rhetoric.

But this very absence of anything earthbound makes the quality of Blok's prose unconveyable into another language; the sense can obviously always be expressed fairly accurately, and neither the nature of the language nor the abstruseness of the author's thought can free the translator from any responsibility whatever in this respect. But the necessity of translating terms, rendered unique through the personal imaginative content which is packed into them, by more or less inadequate equivalents is bound to make the noblest passages seem like vague and extravagant [74] rhetoric. We have tried to avoid such travesty wherever we could, but often with very indifferent success.

The essay appears to possess a twofold interest: it is interesting in so far as it expresses Blok's own conception of the significance of the events through which he lived, and it is interesting in so far as the spirit which animates him is still, it would seem, working in that section of Russian intelligentsia which tries to find inspiration in the revolution, but is neither politically nor economically minded.

The purely historical or sociological value of his essay appears to us to be small: it is far too vague to be of any use to the historian in search of stubborn and definite facts; hence we have ventured to omit entirely the third section of the essay, which is filled with extensive quotations from one [Johann Jakob] Honegger, a German *Kulturhistoriker* of the nineteenth century, a copious, dull, platitudinous writer, who attracted Blok by appearing to offer objective evidence for the thesis which Blok urges in that section, namely that the masses never have been and never will be civilised, and that even if it were possible to educate them, it would not be desirable to do so. After quoting Honegger to the effect that the nineteenth century is an age of disintegrated,

² Untraced to its origins.

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competitive, critical, individualist activity, he denounces the *Polizeistaat* in terms which any intelligent Russian of the twentieth century would naturally have employed; and ends his argument with these words:

Even supposing the time will come when it will be possible for civilisation to penetrate the masses, the question which must be asked is, whether such a state of things is desirable. The answer to that question, which to me is plain, is provided by the aspect of European civilisation in our own times. It is not only impossible to civilise the mob, it is not even desirable; [75] and if we are going to talk about assimilation of mankind to a certain culture, it is not by any means an open question who is going to be assimilated, and by whom, nor yet who has the greater right to do so; whether the civilised are entitled to assimilate the barbarians to their culture, or vice versa; for the civilised community has lost its strength and vitality and integrity of culture; on such occasions, what culture there is, is found to have been preserved, albeit unconsciously, in the barbarian mob with its greater freshness and vigour.

The excision of this chapter appeared to us not to constitute mutilation – it is the least original and the least organic part of the argument.

The general mood which runs through this essay, through the Shelleyan imagery of torrents and whirlwinds with which it teems, is that of someone expecting, eagerly expecting, a vast cataclysm which will overwhelm and sweep away a detestable order of things. This cataclysm, which inspires a certain awe, is often spoken of as brought about by ‘the spirit of music’, which stands for a primal, single, violent force which manifests itself as the unifying energy in every work of genius and every revolution. Coupled with this awe, however, there is a certain exultation, even a certain *Schadenfreude*, at the thought that what will be broken is that very European civilisation which has so long openly despised and mocked at Russia as a land of barbarians or madmen, and that it is these mad barbarians who are destined to inherit the earth. This feeling is most acutely displayed in Blok’s *Scythians*, a poem of passionate and savage beauty which exults over the approaching destruction of Europe.

What we wish to maintain is firstly that this feeling of revolt against the tyranny of Western Europe, this hatred of all its ways of thought and action, is now at [76] work in Russia, and inspires

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those artists, whether writers or makers of films, who have long ago seen through the political or social ideals of Communist theory, and now use them as a screen rather than as an instrument for their attack on civilisation; secondly that this is what makes their work a very effective weapon against that intellectual and moral organisation, that 'tune of the good, the true and the beautiful' on which our lives are based; and finally that more serious attention must be paid to it than has hitherto been paid, because if we *are* going to defend our Western forms of life, we might as well be clear as to what precisely it is that we are going to defend them against, and what we are to expect if we should lose (as Blok affirms that we have already lost) the fight for the civilisation which we call our own and which determines all our present values.

CORRESPONDENCE

Oxford Outlook 11 no. 56 (November 1931), 224–5

Dear Sir,

I was interested in your remarks on Blok's 'The Collapse of Humanism' in the summer number of the *Oxford Outlook*. I quite understand your diffidence in publishing that essay. It is in a way interesting as the reaction of a remarkable poet to the greatest of revolutions, and from this point of view it deserved being translated into English. But I am afraid that your editorial comment has been rather misleading. You seem to think that 'The Collapse of Humanism' reflects an attitude that is still extant. But this is not so. Blok's masochistic 'National-Bolshevism', directed against 'Europe', was an attitude prevalent towards 1918–19 among certain intellectuals brought up on the mystical currents of after 1905, but has long since become a thing of the past. So far from having 'seen through' Communism, Blok and the writers of his type simply never understood what Communism was about. The 'writers and makers of film' to whom you ascribe the same sharp-sightedness are quite as definitely *diesseits des Kommunismus*.³ Those who have followed closely the development of Soviet civilisation know how helpless and futile have been all attempts to circumvent Communism and all efforts to put Bolshevism at the

³ Literally 'this side of Communism', i.e. lacking critical distance from it.

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service of other ideals. Communism is the only cultural and ideological force in Soviet Russia, and everything that is not Communism is in rapid and unavertable decay. The enemy of Communism is not 'Western Europe', but capitalism, no matter whether it be European, American, Japanese, Russian or Indian – Gandhi quite as much as Sir Henri Deterding or the late Lord Melchett. As to what you call 'our Western forms of life', they resolve themselves for the Communist into three components. The first is capitalism, that is to say [225] private property over the means of production; this is the enemy. In the second component cultural individualism, or 'humanism', is the direct product of capitalism, and will automatically go with capitalism (its present form, the cult of 'cultural values' and of 'exquisite states of mind', is merely an extremely decadent form due to the advanced state of decomposition of capitalist civilisation; it would have been as repulsive to a younger and healthier generation of capitalist society as it is to the Communist). The third component of 'Western forms of life', the most characteristic of the West qua West, and the only one deserving (and destined) to survive, is scientific technique, the organisation of man's power over the forces of nature. Far from being an enemy of this 'Western form of life', Communism is coming to rescue it from the clutches of a moribund social system which has stultified it and made a curse of what, under a more human and intelligent system, will be the greatest of blessings. But the chief thing that should never be forgotten in any discussion of the relations between the USSR and the West is that the working class, which in point of numbers *is* the West, is not only an ally, but simply part and parcel, of the new world for which Communism is fighting.

Believe me, Yours, etc.

D. S. Mirsky

[The substance of Prince Mirsky's remarks is so totally unlike his own previous beliefs, and the style so like that which formerly he attacked on aesthetic grounds, that we prefer to say nothing at all, and regard this as a curious temporary flirtation with the new and exciting on the part of an unusually sane and honest thinker, for whom we still continue to entertain profound respect. I.B.]

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