

Alexander Blok

Selected Poems

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Introduction

Alexander Blok (1880-1921) was born in Saint Petersburg. His father was a law professor in Warsaw, and his grandfather, Andrey Beketov, was a famous botanist and the rector of Saint Petersburg State University. Following his parents’ separation, Blok lived with aristocratic relatives at the manor of Shakhmatovo near Moscow, where he discovered the philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov, and the poetry of the then little-known 19th-century poets, Fyodor Tyutchev, and Afanasy Fet. In 1903 he married

the actress Lyubov Mendeleeva, daughter of the chemist Dmitri Mendeleev, and was later involved by her in a complex three-way relationship with his fellow Symbolist Andrei Bely. Blok's early lyrical and symbolist poetry was superseded by a cooler ironic style. While strongly influencing the younger generation particularly Akhmatova, his early espousal of the 1905-1907 Revolution, and later poems such as 'The Twelve', alienated him from his earlier literary audience, though he too became disillusioned with the direction of the 1917 Revolution. The poems selected here mainly represent his personal and intimate poetry from 1908 onwards, with the early lyricism and symbolism and the later more political verse largely absent. It therefore shows only one facet of his work, often revealing its closeness to the deeply-felt but ironic personal style of Heine.

The Stranger

At eve, above the restaurants,
The sultry air's a savage burden,
And the breath of Spring's corruption,
Holds the sound of drunken bedlam.

Far off, o'er the dusty street's
Tedious suburban houses,
The baker's gilt sign faintly glitters,
There's the noise of children, crying.

And every night, beyond the toll,
The polished wits, with their bowlers
Tipped at a rakish angle, stroll
In the hollows, with their lovers.

On the lake, the oars creak loudly,
As a woman shrieks somewhere;
While long-inured, quite mindlessly,
The moon's pale orb leers through the air,

And every night my only friend
Mirrored, in this glass of mine,
Mute like myself, is stunned, once more,
By the sour mysterious wine,

While, nearby, waiters half-asleep
Round the neighbouring tables pass;
And drunks, with their rabbit eyes,
Cry: 'In vino, veritas!'

Each night, at the appointed hour,
(Is it in dream I view that same?)
The form of a girl, clothed in silk,
Passes across the misted pane,

Moves, slowly, among the drunks,
And then, forever on her own,
Sits down, beside the window-glass
Scattering mist, and rich perfume.

Her hat, where a dark feather clings,
Her stiff brocaded draperies,
Her slender hand, decked out with rings,
Breathe the air of ancient stories.

Bewitched by mysterious nearness,
I gaze through a shadowy veil,
And see an enchanted shoreline,
Far-off, magical, dim and pale.

Hidden secrets are granted me,
Someone's sun is for me to hold,
Since the sour wine has entered
Int the labyrinth of my soul.

And those soft ostrich plumes
Nodding gently in my brain,
And fathomless blue eyes, flower
In some far-off domain.

A treasure's buried in my soul,
The sole key to it is mine!
You're right, you drunken fools!
I know: 'There's truth in wine.'

'I'm nailed to the bar-counter,'

I'm nailed to the bar-counter,
I'm drunk – couldn't care less.
Off in the silvery mist – a sleigh
Has flown, with my happiness...

Off with a sleigh, buried deep
In Time's snowy waste of years...
It merely sifts over my soul;
From hooves, a silvery mist appears.

In the deadening dark, sparks fly,
Sparks in the night, that fill the night,
The sleigh bells jingle on and on,
Speaking of happiness, its flight.

And only the gilded harness
Shines, in the night...rings in the night...
And you my soul...my deadened soul...
Drunk outright...ah, drunk outright.

Do You Recall?

Do you recall? In our drowsy bay
The green waves were sleeping,
When battleships, in line ahead,
Entered, soundlessly creeping.

Four – all grey. And for an hour
We were full of questions,
While sunburnt sailors strolled
The dock in all directions.

The world became more enticing,
Wider, deeper – then, set in motion.
We watched all four of them slide
Into the night, and the ocean.

And the sea was dull once more,
And the lighthouse blinked madly
As, from the semaphore,
The last signal shone sadly...

How little we children need
In this life – you and I.
The heart will gladly find joy
In the least thing that goes by.

You've only to find a speck of dust
On your knife from some alien land –
And the world appears miraculous,
Bright, mist-drenched, on every hand!

The Visitor

She came in out of the cold
All flushed,
And filled the room,
With fresh air, and perfume,
With bright chatter –
Dispelling every hope
Of useful labour.

Then she dropped a thick
Arts journal on the floor,
And, in my place, there seemed
Much less space than before.

All quite annoying,
And faintly absurd, agreed,
Nonetheless, she'd have me
Open '*Macbeth*' and read.

Scarcely had we two reached
'*The earth hath bubbles...*' those words

That I can scarcely speak without emotion,
When I saw she was equally disturbed,
Staring out the window, where in motion

A monstrous tabby cat, with subtle moves,
Down the edge of the roof, was creeping,
On the watch, there, for amorous doves.

Those doves annoyed me the most, as ever;
Since they, not us, were billing and cooing.
Long gone the days of Paolo and Francesca!

At Dawn

I recall the endless agony:
Beyond the window, the fading night;
She – wringing her hands quite wildly,
They – a gleam in the morning light.

Tormented, humiliated, scorched,
A whole life, troubled needlessly,
As, like a ghost growing larger,
White dawn lit the domes, quite slowly;

More frequent, beneath the window,
Swift steps of the passers-by;
And, raising circles in puddles,
Drops of rain, fell from the sky,

And the morning, on, and on, and on...
Its burden a pointless question;
Nothing to be resolved, then,
By Spring's fierce tears of emotion.

Once More

The way she had before, she longed
To breathe life into my heart-space,
Into my tortured body,
My chilly dwelling-place.

Like the sky she loomed above me,
Yet I failed to rise to meet her,
Could not move my wasted hand,
Or even say that I'd missed her...

I gazed at her with dull eyes,
How sad, to me, she seemed to be,
Nothing more between us now,
Resentment, joy, words, mystery.

The earth-bound heart was weary;
So many years, days, forever...
Earth-bound happiness came too late
In its wildly-driven troika!

In the end, fatally ill,
I breathe strangely, seeking newness,
Content, it seems, with the sunset,
Unafraid of eternal darkness...

My eyes have gazed on eternity;
It has filled my heart with light,
Quenching the flames of passion,
With the cool damp blue of night...

Virgin Snow

You're as white as the distant temple.
You're as bright as the virgin snow,
I'll not believe the nights endless,
Evenings filled with anguish, so,

Nor do I wish to believe in
The soul wearied for evermore!
Perhaps, a benighted traveller,
I'll come knocking at your door,

And you'll forgive the traitor,
For his deadly suffering,
Stretch your hands to the faithless,
And gift him the far-off Spring.

In The End

No! You'll not disenchant my heart,
No beautiful, flattering speeches; deem
Me a stranger and new to you;
All ghostly, unreal as in dream.

But you'll leave, and, as in a dream,
Press your lips to some shroud, its white,
Imagining you're mourning a corpse,
For three days, at its head, each night.

Intoxicated with beautiful fancies,
You'll reproach fate and the hour,
And the grave-mound, your fancy sees,
Deck with many a delicate flower.

And my shade will pass before you,
On the ninth, on the fortieth, day,
Unrecognised, beautiful, lifeless.
As you wish? – Yes, in just that way.

When time has extinguished your sadness,
You'll wish to live modestly, truly,
With another fairy-tale, not this...
And yearning simply for beauty.

He'll arrive, familiar, long-awaited,
Wake you from unearthly sleep,
And, at once, Spring will take you,
To a world both calm and deep.

And I'll die, unneeded, forgotten the while,
Once your new companion appears,
At the very moment when you smile,
Ending your troubles and fears.

You'll forget my grave, my very name...
But wake, empty, and robbed of light,
And at that hour, in a stranger's embrace,
Remembering, seek me, in the night!

How wildly you'll stretch out your hands,
Sad creature, deep in the darkness.
Alas! No sound of life reaches those
Clasped tight by Spring's emptiness.

Racked by impossibility,
You'll curse fate for the love it failed to give!
But my answer will sound in my poetry,
And its secret flame help you live.

Note: In the Greek Orthodox Church prayers for the dead are said on a number of occasions including the ninth and fortieth days after death.

On This Sad Earth

I forgot all these, on this sad earth –
Courage, Achievement, Fame,
While, before me, on the table,
Shone your face in a simple frame.

But the hour struck, you left the house,

I tore the beloved ring from its place.
You put your fate in another's hands,
I forgot your lovely face.

Days went by, circling, a cursed swarm...
Passion and drink, tormented strife...
I recalled you before the altar,
I spoke to you, as to youth, to life...

I called but you never looked back,
I wept, but you would not relent.
You wrapped yourself, sad, in a blue cloak,
From the house, to the damp night, you went.

O dear, gentle one, where who knows,
You found shelter for your pride...
I sleep, I dream of that blue cloak
In which you sought the damp night...

That's all over; my youth is past!
No more dreams – of tenderness, fame.
From the table, with my own hand,
I've removed – your face in its simple frame.

Night

Night, street, lamp, and pharmacy,
A dull, a meaningless light.
Live another quarter century –
The same. No exit in sight.

You'll die – once more, begin it all;
As before, all will repeat:
Night, cold ripples on the canal,
Pharmacy, lamp, and street.

Ravenna

All that's fragile, that's transient,
You've buried in the centuries.
Like a child you sleep, Ravenna,
In the drowsy arms of eternity.

Slaves no longer bear mosaics
Through the arches built by Rome.
On the walls of cool basilicas
The gold fire is dying down.

The rough sepulchral vault has softened
To the moisture's lingering kiss,
Where a green film coats the graves
Of monks and of empresses.

The burial vaults are silent,
Their doorways dark and cold,
Lest black-eyed Galla's holy gaze
Wakes, and burns through stone.

The bloodstained track of war and hurt
Erased, all memory gone,
Lest Placidia's voice, stirred to life,

Sings the passion of times long done.

The sea's receded, and the roses
Cling round the rampart's stone,
Lest Theodoric dreams life's storms
As he sleeps sound in his tomb.

And the vine-filled wastes, the houses,
And the people – all are tombs.
Only noble Latin, cut in bronze,
Sounds like music from the stones.

Only in the deep quiet gaze
Of Ravenna's girls, regret
For the sea that will not return
Still shyly flickers, as yet.

Only at night, bent over the valleys,
Taking stock of the ages to be,
Dante's spirit, with aquiline profile,
Still sings, of the New Life, to me.

To The Muse

In your most secret music,
Lie messages of damnation,
A curse on all that's holy,
Happiness's desecration,

And so seductive a power
That (I'm ready to repeat)
You draw angels from heaven,
Enticing them to your feet.

And when you scorn all faith,
Then the grey-blue halo,
That I saw once before,

Begins to glow above you.

Are you good, or are you evil? –
Inhuman, the tales told of you.
For some you are – Muse, miracle.
For me you are – Hell, anew.

In the dawn hour, I know not why,
Fading, at last, from exhaustion,
I saw your face, and failed to die,
And sought your consolation.

I wished us enemies: tell me why
You gave me a meadow's excess
Of flowers, and a starry sky –
All the curse of your loveliness?

Crueller than northern nights,
Sweeter than golden wine,
Brief as a gipsy girl's love,
Your fearful hand on mine...

Trampling dear and holy things,
Was such a fatal pleasure;
And the heart's wild delight,
Ever this passion, so bitter!

'Oh, how desperately I want to live:'

Oh, how desperately I want to live:
All reality – immortalise;
The faceless – personify;
To the non-existent – substance give!

Life's smothering dream may crush me,
I may suffocate, finally –
Yet some happy child, perhaps,

In the future, will say of me:

‘We forgive him his sadness – might
It not, have inspired him, inwardly?
He was simply – the child of good and light;
Simply – freedom’s victory!’

Hamlet

I – am Hamlet. My blood ran cold,
While treachery wove its net,
And, in my heart, that first love,
Alive – the only truth that I met.

The cold took life from you,
My Ophelia, mislaid,
While I, a prince, in my native land,
Die, stabbed by a poisoned blade.

‘How hard to walk among the crowd’

‘There a man was burned alive.’

Afanasy Fet

How hard to walk among the crowd;
With existence’s pretension,
And speak to posterity, aloud,
Of the tragic play of passion.

And peering into darkest night,
Find form in a chaos of feeling,
So that by art’s anaemic light
They may see life’s fatal gleaming!

I Remember

I remember your shoulders' tenderness,
Their diffident sensitivity,
Interrupted, by a swift caress,
Words ending light chatter swiftly.

And your hair, red, like red ore,
And your voice, your depths' creation,
And a lilac flower's *five*-pointed star,
In the darkness of separation.

And what is stranger, and greater,
Midst the whirl of sound, light, applause,
An endlessly welcoming gaze,
And a secret fidelity...yours.

Note: Lilac flowers have four petals, a five-pointed flower is a sign of good luck, akin to a four-leaved clover.

Forgive

You were the brighter, truer, more charming,
Don't curse me! Don't curse me now!
My train speeds by like a gypsy-song,
Like the days, unreturning, my vow...

Of what was loved – all is over, over,
Ahead – what the unknown track may give...
Blessed, irrevocably,
Irrevocably...forgive, forgive!

The Artist

In the heat of summer, in winter, darkly,
Amidst some funeral, festival, wedding,
I wait for a faint, inaudible ringing

To relieve my deadly ennui.

It's here – rises. Chill concentration,
Waits to know it, skewer it instantly.
And, as I wait, with tense emotion,
The finest of threads it spins for me.

A wind from the sea? Or miraculous birds
Singing in Heaven's leaves? Time still?
White blossom spilt, from the May-time
Apple trees? An angel, soaring at will?

An hour carries the weight of the earth.
Sound, light, motion expand as one.
The past sees itself in the future's glass.
There's no 'Now'. And pity? – None.

And at the dawn of a new soul's birth,
Of unknown powers, a curse yet fills
The soul, and strikes like lightning,
Conquers creative reason – and kills.

And I, enclosed in its chilly cage,
The ethereal, gentle bird (its goal
To take away death, and pain, and rage)
That flew down to save the soul,

Here is my cage – this solid steel,
Gleaming gold with the sunset's fire.
Here is the bird – born pure joy to feel,
On its perch now, close to the wire,

Wings clipped, its songs learnt by heart.
You stand under my window, dumb,
Pleased with my songs? Yet, tired of art,
I await the new – I feel the boredom.

On The Field of Kulikovo

1

The river spreads wide. Flows sluggish, sad,
Erodes the banks on either hand.
Above the yellow cliff's barren clay,
In the steppe, sad hayricks stand.

O, Russia! My wife! Our long road lies
Ahead, clear is the hour!
The road has pierced our breast like an arrow
Fired with bygone Tartar power.

Our road – lies through the steppe – and endless
Anguish, your anguish, Russia!
And now I no longer fear the dark of night
That lies beyond the border.

Let night fall. We'll gallop on, light with fire
The steppe stretching out wider.
In smoky light the holy banner; the Khan's
Steel-bladed sabre will glitter...

The endless fight! We can only dream, of peace
In blood and dust...
The mare of the steppe flies on and on,
Trampling the feather-grass.

Without end! The miles, the slopes, flash by...
Halt there!
Nearer, nearer, the fearful clouds,
Sunset bleeds in the air!

The sunset bleeds! Blood streams from the heart!
Weep, heart, weep...
No peace! The mare of the steppe
Gallops, the shadows deep!

2

Midnight, we stopped, in the steppe, You and I:
No returning, no looking back.
The swans, past the Nepryadva, cry,
And, again and again, they cry...

On our road – the white burning stone.
Past the river – the pagan horde.
Over our host the shining banner
Will flutter as brightly no more.

And, bending her head towards the ground,
My friend speaks: 'Sharpen your sword,
So, you'll not fight the Tartars in vain,
Spend your life for the holy cause!'

Not the first warrior, nor the last – am I.
Long, long, the Motherland's illness.
Pray for your loved one in the dawn,
O my wife, of beauty, of brightness!

That night, when Mamai went to ground
 On the steppe, by the bridges,
 We were in the dark plain together, You and I –
 Did you know this?

Before the Don, ominous, shadowed,
 My prophetic heart, grown wise,
 Heard your voice at night, in the plain,
 In the swans' eternal cries.

At midnight the prince's host rose,
 Like a cloud; they all rose up,
 While far, far, the mother wailed
 And beat hard at the stirrup.

And night birds were circling,
 Far, in the distance,
 While, o'er Russia, summer's silent lightning
 Guarded the prince.

The eagles' cries o'er the Tartar camp
 Foretold disaster,
 While the Nepryadva veiled herself,
 A princess in misted weather.

And in that fog that lay above
 The sleeping Nepryadva,
 You came to me, in a radiant garment,
 Not even startling my charger.

You flashed, like a ripple of silver,
 Along Your friend's sword of steel,
You lightened the dust-drenched armour
 On my shoulders, on that field,

And when, at dawn, the horde moved in
 Like a darkened cloud, revealed
Your image, unwrought by human hand,
 Was gleaming, bright, on my shield.

4

Again, with age-old anguish
The grass bends to the ground.
Again, past the misty river
You summon me; clear, the sound.

The herd of mares flee the steppe
Vanish and leave no trace;
Wild passions are unleashed
Beneath the moon's waning face.

And I, with age-old anguish
A wolf in the moonlight, ache,
Know nothing of what to do,
Or where to fly, in your wake!

I hear the roar of battle,
Trumpet calls, the Tartar ire,
And, raging over Russia,
A vast and silent fire.

Gripped by immense anguish
I roam on my horse, in its light...
I meet the wandering clouds
High in the mist-filled night.

In my wounded heart
Radiant thoughts my being claim,
And burning thoughts descend,
Consumed by a darkened flame...

‘Appear, my wondrous miracle!
Teach me how to be radiant!’ Proud,
The horse’s mane rises, and flows...
The swords on the wind cry loud ...

5

*Dawn was clouded with the darkness
Of ineluctable misfortune.*

Solovyov

On the field of Kulikovo,
Again, the mist rose and spread,
And veiled the dawn of day,
Like lowering cloud, overhead.

Behind the utter silence,
Behind the misted light,
No sound of the battle’s thunder,
No lightning piercing the fight.

But I know you, Dawn
Of exalted, turbulent days! Rising,
Over the enemy camp, again,
Swan-cries, and the wings beating.

The heart cannot rest in peace,
Clouds mass; not in vain this day.
Armour weighs heavy for the fight;
Now your hour is striking – Pray!

'I've a presentiment of You'

I've a presentiment of You. Years go by,
Yet, with the same presentiment, I sigh.

All the horizon on fire – impossibly bright,
Mutely I wait – in love, longing, this night.

All the horizon on fire – your shape draws near,
Yet You, you will alter your form, I fear.

Exciting a bold suspicion, hereafter,
I'll yet see your familiar outline alter.

Oh, how low I'll fall, bitterly, it seems,
To be overcome, at last, by my deadly dreams!

How bright the horizon! Radiance is near.
And yet You, you'll alter your form, I fear.

'Those born in uneventful days,'

Those born in uneventful days,
Fail to recall their passing.
We – born of Russia's fearful years –
Must recall each single thing.

This incinerating age of ashes!
With its news of hope, or madness?
The days of war, days of freedom;
On our faces a blood-stained redness.

There's muteness: the tocsin bell
Has forced us to seal our lips.
In our hearts, once full of fire,
There's a fatal emptiness.

On high, over our death-beds,
Let the croaking ravens soar –
May those who are worthier,
Behold your kingdom, Lord!

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