



Александр Блок
ДВЕНАДЦАТЬ¹
Поэма

1

Черный вечер.
 Белый снег.
 Ветер, ветер!
 На ногах не стоит человек.
 Ветер, ветер –
 На всем божьем свете!

Завивает ветер
 Белый снежок.
 Под снежком – ледок.
 Скользко, тяжело,
 Всякий ходок
 Скользит – ах, бедняжка!

От здания к зданию
 Протянут канат.
 На канате – плакат:
 “Вся власть Учредительному Собранию!”
 Старушка убивается – плачет,²
 Никак не поймет, что значит,
 На что такой плакат,
 Такой огромный лоскут?
 Сколько бы вышло портянок для ребят,
 А всякий – раздет, разут. . .

Старушка, как курица,
 Кой-как перемотнулась через сугроб.

– Ох, Матушка-Заступница!
 – Ох, большевики загонят в гроб!

Ветер хлесткий!

ALEKSANDR BLOK
TWELVE¹
 in a new translation by Maria Carlson

1

Black night.
 White snow.
 The wind, the wind!
 Impossible to stay on your feet.
 The wind, the wind!
 Blowing across God’s world!

The wind swirls round
 The clean, white snow.
 Under the snow – there’s ice.
 It’s slick, it’s hard,
 Pedestrians
 Slip – oops! too bad!

From building to building
 Stretches a cable.
 On the cable’s a placard:
 “All Power to the Constituent Assembly!”
 An old woman keens and weeps beneath it,²
 She just can’t understand what it means,
 Why such a huge scrap of cloth
 For such a placard?
 It would make so many footwraps for the boys,
 So many are without clothes or shoes . . .

The old woman, hen-like,
 Managed somehow to scramble over the snowbank.

“Oh, Holy Mother of God, our Protectress!
 “Oh, those Bolsheviks will put me in my grave!”

The wind is biting!

¹Typically, English translations refer to Blok’s poem as “The Twelve.” I have chosen to remove the article in order to preserve the original ambiguity of the title. “Twelve” is not only the number of Red Guards, but also the time of day -- here, the powerful, liminal time of midnight, the approximate time action occurs. Midnight has important symbolic implications as the temporal threshold when one day ends and the next begins, a “change of guard” and of times, as well. The reader may wish to associate to other symbolic twelves as well, of which there are more than a few.

² Blok depicts the *realia* of Petrograd in January 1918 with considerable precision in Canto 1 of *Twelve*. The passersby the reader meets are those one might typically run across late at night in the center of Petrograd: an old woman whose life has been turned upside down by war and revolution; writers or intellectuals returning from a salon; young ladies coming home together from an evening with friends, etc. Placards greeting the representatives of the Constituent Assembly were hung around the center of town, including on Nevsky Prospekt, the city’s main thoroughfare.

Не отстает и мороз!
И буржуй на перекрестке³
В воротник упрятал нос.

А это кто? – Длинные волосы
И говорит вполголоса:
– Предатели!
– Погибла Россия!
Должно быть, писатель –
Вития. . .

А вон и долгополый –
Сторонкой – за сугроб. . .
Что нынче невеселый,
Товарищ поп?

Помнишь, как бывало
Брюхом шел вперед,
И крестом сияло
Брюхо на народ? . .

Вон барыня в каракуле
К другой подвернулась:
– Ужь мы плакали, плакали. . .
Поскользнулась
И – бац – растянулась!

Ай, ай!
Тяни, подымай!

Ветер веселый
И зол и рад.
Крутит подолы,
Прохожих кóсит,
Рвет, мнет и носит
Большой плакат:

“Вся власть Учредительному Собранию”. . . ⁴

The frost tenacious!
The bourgeois standing at the
Crossroads³
Has tucked his nose into his collar.

And who’s this? with long hair
And muttering under his breath:
“Traitors!
“Russia has perished!”
It must be a writer –
An orator. . .

And there’s a figure in a cassock -
Sidling behind the snowbank. . .
So, not too happy these days,
Eh, comrade priest?

You remember how once
You walked, belly-first,
And your cross-bedecked belly
Shone on the common people? . .

There’s a young lady wrapped in karakul,
Walking with another:
“And we cried and cried . . . “
She slipped on the ice
and – oof! – down she went!

Oh, my!
Give me your hand, pull me up!

The wind is gleeful
And mad and glad.
It twists coat hems,
Mows down passers-by,
Tears at, mangles, and tosses
The large placard:

“All Power to the Constituent Assembly” . . . ⁴

³ The image of the crossroads is important. Metaphorically, the bourgeois gentleman stands at the crossroads of Russia’s fate, unsure of his own future direction or Russia’s. In keeping with the poem’s juxtaposition of popular and religious imagery, the image of the crossroads visually suggests the “cross” (+), an image negatively evoked and rejected (“Yeah, without the cross”) in the poem on a number of occasions. But it also suggests the liminal crossroads of folklore, where suicides are buried and unclean forces hold sway.

⁴ The Constituent Assembly was the democratically elected representative body that had formed under the Provisional Government for the purpose of drafting a constitution for Russia. It met only once, from 4:00 pm on 18 January 1918 to 5:00 am on 19 January (according to the Western calendar) in the Tauride Palace on Shpalernaia Street. After only thirteen hours it was dissolved by the Bolsheviks, since they could not control the vote. The action of *Twelve* occurs very soon after the Assembly’s forcible disbandment: note the line, “And we, too, held an assembly,” implying that the subsequent conversation takes place after the Constituent Assembly’s doomed meeting.

И слова доносит:

... И у нас было собрание.

... Вот в этом здании.

... Обсудили –

Постановили:

На время – десять, на ночь – двадцать пять. . .

... И меньше – ни с кого не брать. . .

... Пойдем спать. . .

Поздний вечер.

Пустеет улица.

Один бродяга

Сутулится,

Да свищет ветер. . .

Эй, бедняга!

Подходи –

Поцелуемся. . .

Хлеба!

Что впереди?⁵

Проходи!

Черное, черное небо.

Злоба, грустная злоба

Кипит в груди. . .

Черная злоба, святая злоба. . .

Товарищ! Гляди

В оба!

2

Гуляет ветер, порхает снег.

Идут двенадцать человек.⁶

The wind carries the words:

... And we, too, held an assembly . . .

... Here, in this building . . .

... We debated –

We resolved:

For an hour, ten rubles; for the whole night –
twenty-five . . .

... And don't take less from anyone . . .

... Let's go to bed . . .

The evening's late.

The street's deserted.

Only a vagrant

Stoops, round-shouldered,

And the wind whistles . . .

Hey, poor sweetie!

Come on over –

Give us a kiss . . .

Bread!

What's ahead?⁵

Move along!

Black, black sky.

Spite, grievous spite,

Boils in the breast . . .

Black spite, holy spite . . .

Comrade! Keep

Both eyes open!

2

The wind, it frolics, the snow flies high.

Twelve men with guns go marching by.⁶

⁵ Such phrases should be interpreted both literally (*in realia*) and metaphorically (*in realiora*). What, indeed, lies ahead? That is the question.

⁶ The number twelve, as observed in Note 1, is culturally marked: twelve Red Guards, twelve apostles, twelve signs of the zodiac, twelve months, twelve gates of Jerusalem, twelve knights of the Round Table, Arcanum XII of the Tarot (The Hanged Man; followed by XIII Death), as well as twelve stars in the crown of the Woman Clothed with the Sun (from the Biblical Book of Revelation, 12:1). In occultism, twelve is the number of the manifestation of the universe in time and space.

In the margin of Canto 10 in the original manuscript of *Twelve*, Blok adds another association: "And he was with the robber/thief. Once there lived twelve robbers" ("И был с разбойником. Жило двенадцать разбойников") [See, "Примечания," Алек. Блок, *Собр. соч.* 3 (М-Л: ХудЛит, 1960, с. 628)]. "Once There Lived Twelve Robbers" was a popular song often sung by the



Винтовок черные ремни,
Кругом – огни, огни, огни. . . ⁷

В зубах – цыгарка, примят картуз,
На спине б надо бубновый туз!⁸

Свобода, свобода,
Эх, эх, без креста!⁹

Тра-та-та!

Холодно, товарищ, холодно!

On their rifles dull black straps,
Around them fires, and fires, and fires . . . ⁷

A home-rolled cig, a flattened cap,
All that's missing is prison stripes!⁸

Freedom, freedom,
Yeah, yeah, without the cross!⁹

Rat-a-tat-tat!

It's cold, comrade, cold!

famous Russian operatic bass singer Fedor Chaliapin (1873-1938). The song consists of several verses from Nikolai Nekrasov's 1876 song "Of Two Great Sinners." ("О двух великих грешниках" из поэмы *Кому на Руси жить хорошо*).

Было двенадцать разбойников,
Был Кудеяр атаман.
Много разбойники пролили
Крови честных христиан!

Господу Богу помолимся, древнюю быль возвестим!
Так в Соловках нам рассказывал инок честной Питирим.

Once there lived robbers, in number twelve,
Led by Kudeiar *ataman*.
In their own time these twelve robbers shed
Many a good Christian's blood.

Let us now pray to the Lord our God, let us the ancient lay sing!
As then in Solovki we heard it first from the worthy monk Pitirim.

The song and verse tell the story of twelve robbers and their leader, Kudeiar. Kudeiar accepts the error of his ways and turns to God. In the full Nekrasov version, "Of Two Great Sinners," Kudeiar redeems his sins (which include theft, murder, and the abduction of women) in two ways: 1) by his new-found piety and his repentance for his evil deeds, and 2) by murdering a sinner as great or greater than himself. Kudeiar's service to God may not be "Christian" in the traditional sense, but it was apparently effective, as his redemption is achieved only when he murders the evil debaucher, Pan Glukhovskii. Perhaps the Red Guards are performing a similar service for God, removing evil viler than themselves?

Blok's marginalia implies a connection among Christ, who spent time with thieves and prostitutes and was crucified between two thieves, Kudeiar, who led twelve thieves, abducted women, but later turned to God, and Petrukha the Red Guard, who, having consorted with prostitute Kat'ka, tries to kill the vile Van'ka. Thus we have several important binaries (and the poem is full of binaries) -- Jesus Christ/Kudeiar/Petrukha, twelve apostles/twelve robbers/twelve Red Guards, -- and key themes of *Twelve*: sin and repentance, crime and forgiveness, earthly love and divine love, and the power of grace to save. In the poem's storm of cosmic upheaval of traditional values, why would these images not be mixed up together?

⁷ The Petrograd night was "black" because the utilities were out and the street lamps dark. To compensate, people lit fires in the street or in metal barrels, both to cast some light and to provide a place for passersby to warm themselves ("fires, fires, fires").

⁸ Convicts sent to hard labor in imperial Russia were marked by a red or yellow diamond on the back of their clothing to make them easily identifiable in case of escape. (Cf. nineteenth-century American convicts at hard labor who wore black and white striped outfits for the same reason.) The narrator's point is that the twelve Red Army men are convict-types.

⁹ This simple line has complex repercussions. Note that "Свобода" may be translated as either "freedom" or "liberty." "Without the cross" has several readings: visually, it invites the reader to compare the marching twelve to a church procession, but without the traditional cross in front of it (replaced by the red flag); individually, it would mean that the Red Guards have taken off their personal crosses, which Orthodox Christians rarely remove; ideologically, it signals a rejection of Christianity -- freedom "without the cross" implies both the suspension of traditional morality and Christian values and an end to the political and social influence of the Church: "all is permitted," the world now lies "beyond good and evil."

– А Ванька с Катькой - в кабаке. . .
– У ей керенки есть в чулке!

– Ванюшка сам теперь богат. . .
– Был Ванька наш, а стал солдат!

– Ну, Ванька, сукин сын, буржуй,
Мою, попробуй, поцелуй!

Свобода, свобода,
Эх, эх, без креста!
Катька с Ванькой занята –
Чем, чем занята? . .

Тра-та-та!

Кругом – огни, огни, огни. . .
Оплечь – ружейные ремни. . .

Революционный держите шаг!
Неугомонный не дремлет враг!

Товарищ, винтовку держи, не трусь!
Пальнем-ка пульей в Святую Русь –

В кондовую,
В избяную,
В толстозадую!

Эх, эх, без креста!

3

Как пошли наши ребята
В красной гвардии служить –
В красной гвардии служить –
Буйну голову сложить!¹⁰

Эх ты, горе-горькое,
Сладкое житье!
Рваное пальтишко,
Австрийское ружье!

“Van’ka and Kat’ka are in a dive . . .”
“Kerensky rubles tucked in her hose”!

“And Vaniushka’s pretty rich himself . . .”
“Once just our Van’ka, he’s now a soldier!”

“Well, Van’ka, bastard, bourgeois guy,
Why not give my kiss a try!”

Freedom, freedom,
Yeah, yeah, without the cross!
Kat’ka’s busy with Van’ka –
But what is she busy doing?

Rat-a-tat-tat!

Around them fires, and fires, and fires . . .
Rifle straps on shoulders hang . . .

Hold to the revolutionary pace!
The tireless enemy never sleeps!

Comrade, hold on to your gun, be brave!
Let’s put a bullet into Holy Russia –

Into ancient, sturdy,
wood-hutted,
Fat-assed Russia!

Yeah, yeah, without the cross!

3

Off our own dear boys have gone
In the Red Guard for to serve,
In the Red Guard for to serve,
To lay down their reckless heads.¹⁰

Oh, you bitter, bitter grief,
Oh, you sweet existence!
I’ve an overcoat that’s torn,
And an Austrian rifle!

¹⁰ “Сложить буйную голову” (“to lay down one’s reckless head”) is a constant epithet from East Slavic magic tales and historical epics. It is a folkloric kenning (or, figurative phrase) for “to die in battle.” Its appearance here injects a folksy note into the genre of the *chastushka*, the popular four-line rhyme of the three verses in Canto 3.

Мы на горе всем буржуям
Мировой пожар раздуем,
Мировой пожар в крови –
Господи, благослови!¹¹

4

Снег крутит, лихач кричит,
Ванька с Катькою летит –
Елекстрический фонарик
На оглобелях. . .
Ах, ах, пади! . .

Он в шинелишке солдатской
С физиономией дурацкой
Крутит, крутит черный ус,
Да покручивает,
Да пошучивает. . .

Вот так Ванька – он плечист!
Вот так Ванька – он речист!
Катьку-дуру обнимает,
Заговаривает. . .

Запрокинулась лицом,
Зубки блещут жемчугом. . .
Ах ты, Катя, моя Катя,
Толстоморденькая. . .

5

У тебя на шее, Катя,
Шрам не зажил от ножа.
У тебя под грудью, Катя,
Та царапина свежа!

Эх, эх, попляши!
Больно ножки хороши!

To the grief of all bourgeois
We'll fan a worldwide conflagration,
A conflagration drenched in blood –
Give us Your blessing, O Lord!¹¹

4

Snow swirls round, the driver yells,
Van'ka flies along with Kat'ka –
Small electric lanterns glow
On the sled shafts as they go . . .
Oh, oh, away we go! . .

He's wearing a soldier's overcoat,
His physiog is foolish,
He twirls, he twirls his black moustache,
Twisting, twisting,
Joking, joking . . .

Oh, yes, Van'ka – he's broad-shouldered!
Oh, yes, Van'ka – he's sweet-talking!
He embraces silly Kat'ka,
Talks her head off . . .

And she's looking up at him,
Her pearly teeth are shining,
Oh, you Katya, my sweet Katya,
Fat-faced Katya . . .

5

Katya, on your neck's a scar
From a knife-wound scarcely healed.
Katya, there beneath your breast,
There the scratch is still quite fresh!

Oh, yeah, dance and prance!
What great legs that girl has!

¹¹ Here a proletarian *chastushka* (popular ditty) echoes Bolshevik revolutionary rhetoric and apocalyptic imagery, but ends with a phrase commonly found in prayers. The “universal conflagration” appears in socialist writings from the mid-nineteenth century on. Pavel Miliukov (1859-1943), the prominent leader of Russia’s Constitutional Democratic Party (or, “Kadets”) used the phrase contemptuously in his speech of 18/31 October 1917, referring to “some apostles of the Universal Conflagration” who were returned to Russia by the European socialists. The image of conflagration also evokes the apocalypticism of the Symbolists and the God-seekers. Throughout the poem, ecclesiastical, literary, vulgar, folk, and other lexical levels swirl through the universal chaos of Revolution, fragmented and separated from their natural environments, which now no longer exist.

В кружевном белье ходила –
Походи-ка, походи!
С офицерами блудила –
Поблуди-ка, поблуди!

Эх, эх, поблуди!
Сердце ёкнуло в груди!

Помнишь, Катя, офицера –
Не ушел он от ножа. . .
Аль не вспомнила, холера?
Али память не свежа?

Эх, эх, освежи,
Спать с собою положи!

Гетры серые носила,
Шоколад Миньон жрала,
С юнкерьем гулять ходила –
С солдатьем теперь пошла?¹²

Эх, эх, согреши!
Будет легче для души!

6

. . . Опять навстречу несется вскачь,
Летит, вопит, орет лихач. . .
Стой, стой! Андрюха, помогай!
Петруха, сзади забегай! . .

Трах-тарарах-тах-тах-тах-тах!

She wore lacy underwear,
Wear it now, yes, wear it now!
With officers she fornicated –
Fornicate, now, fornicate!

Oh, yeah, fornicate!
Feel the heart just skip a beat!

Remember, Katya, that officer –
He did not escape the knife . . .
Left your memory already?
Is your memory stale, you broad?

Well, then, freshen it,
Take it off to bed with you!

Kat'ka always wore gray gaiters,
Devoured *chocolat* "Mignon,"
Used to date the young cadets,
But now with soldiers off she's gone?¹²

Oh, yeah, let's sin!
Sin is easy on the soul!

6

. . . Again they ride on at full gallop,
The driver flies and howls and roars . . .
"Halt! Halt! Andriukha, help me here!
Petrukha, run around the rear!" . .

Rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, tat-tat-tat!

¹² There are several points worth noting in regard to this stanza. Kat'ka probably wore "gaiter boots," a style of fitted footwear with leather toe and heel and cloth body (either decorative or utilitarian) that extended up over the ankle. The gaiter boot made the foot look smaller and more delicate. A very popular form of women's footwear, versions of the gaiter boot were worn from the early nineteenth century into the 1930s. Gray felt gaiter boots would have been sexy winter wear.

"Mignon" might refer to the Khar'kov chocolatier Hovsep Ter-Poghossian, who established the Mignon sweets firm in Khar'kov in 1910, or to the Finnish Fazer firm's "Mignon Chocolate Egg," a famous Easter confection. The Swiss chocolatier Karl Fazer moved to Finland in 1891 and covered the Scandinavian and northern Russian markets; his firm provided chocolates to the household of the Russian Tsar. But since "mignon" simply means "sweet" and "dainty," it could also have been a local Russian brand; the French name would give it a touch of *je ne sais quoi*.

"Cadets" were young officers in training, the teen-aged sons of the nobility. Soldiers were men of the ranks, usually of peasant or lower class background. Note the use of the collective nouns "юнкерье" and "солдатье," a word-choice that is both vulgar and insolent. The comment has implications for Kat'ka's "narrative": once the girlfriend of a peasant lad, she became a prostitute, first working the wealthy young men of the cadet academy (a "soft" job), then moved to working the ranks of common soldiers -- a clear professional demotion. [NB: There is no relation between the "cadets" referred to here and the "Kadets" mentioned above in the preceding note.]

Вскрутился к небу снежный прах! . .

Лихач – и с Ванькой – наутек . . .
Еще разок! Взводи курок! . .

Трах-тарарах! Ты будешь знать,
.
Как с девочкой чужой гулять! . .

Утек, подлец! Ужо, постой,
Расправлюсь завтра я с тобой!

А Катька где? – Мертва, мертва!
Простреленная голова!

Что́, Катька, рада? – Ни гу-гу. . .
Лежи ты, падаль, на снегу! . .¹³

Революционный держите шаг!
Неугомонный не дремлет враг!

7

И опять идут двенадцать,
За плечами – ружьеца.

Snowy dust swirled toward the sky! . .

The driver and Van'ka make a break . . .
“One more time! Now cock your gun!” . .

Rat-a-tat-tat! “You’ll now find out,
.
What it means to take another’s girl.”

“He got away, the scum! Just wait,
Tomorrow I’ll take care of you!”

But where is Kat'ka? “She’s dead, she’s dead!
She’s been shot right through the head!”

Glad now, Kat'ka? “What, not a peep . . .
Then lie there, carrion, on the snow!” . .¹³

Hold to the revolutionary pace!
The tireless enemy never sleeps!

7

Again the twelve are on the march,
Their rifles on their shoulders hang.

¹³ The shooting of the prostitute Kat'ka by her former lover and now Red Guard, Petrukha, the escape of Katya's new lover, the Tsarist army soldier Van'ka, and Petrukha's remorse for Kat'ka's murder, lie at the center of the work's "plot." The names are suggestive: Peter tries to murder Ivan, but ends by unintentionally killing Ekaterina, whom he loved. If we succumb to allegory and turn this into a comment on Russian history, then Peter the Great, in his attempt to eradicate the Old Holy Russia of Ivan IV, ends by inadvertently "killing" Catherine II and her legacy (which was really his legacy continued), thereby sending Russia backward into medieval chaos.

The names of the characters are also telling. The name "Kat'ka" is the diminutive form of "Ekaterina," which, in this literal case, ironically means "eternally pure." The Imperial Empresses Catherine I and Catherine II, like Kat'ka, enjoyed masculine company very much. But there is more at work here. "Eternally pure" Ekaterina reflects Blok's obsession with the Eternal Feminine, which he portrayed in his most famous poetry as a symbol, as both the mystical Soul of the World, or Sophia, the Wisdom of God, and as a fallen prostitute, the Stranger in black plumes and silk. The apostle "Peter" is the "Rock" on which Christ builds his new "Church"; this fits the Bolshevik vision, but now "without the cross." "Ivan" is the "grace of God" -- certainly ironically used.

Were this *commedia dell'arte*, we would readily recognize the love triangle of Harlequin (the amoral lover, Van'ka), Columbine (the contested love interest, Kat'ka), and the naive clown Pierrot (Petrukha, who pines for Columbine/Kat'ka after she goes off with the dashing Harlequin/Van'ka). This echoes the Slavic *balagan* (puppet-booth) tradition, which derives from the *commedia dell'arte*. Blok alluded to this tradition in his 1906 play *Balaganchik* (Балаганчик). Interestingly enough, the puppet "Petrushka" is sometimes named "Van'ka" (in northern Ukraine; this implies a certain "kinship" between Kat'ka's two lovers). In neither the Italian nor the Slavic pantomime or puppet show, however, is the woman killed, as Kat'ka is in *Twelve*.

In 1911 Igor Stravinsky transformed this popular standard into the ballet "Petrouchka," which actually takes place in St. Petersburg on Admiralty Square during *Maslenitsa* (the period of pre-Lenten carnival). The ballet introduces new themes that are relevant to Blok's *Twelve*: Petrouchka (Petrukha) is a "puppet" brought to life by the Charlatan [puppetmaster], but the puppet has human feelings; Petrouchka tries to break up the Blackamoor's seduction of the Ballerina. In the ballet, however, Petrouchka is killed and returns as a ghost to take vengeance. The *commedia dell'arte*, puppet-booth, and carnival theme were popular among the Symbolists in both Europe and Russia. The love triangle of *Twelve* actually holds up well to a large number of interpretive possibilities, of which these are a sample.

Лишь у бедного убийцы
Не видать совсем лица. . .

Всё быстрее и быстрее
Уторапливает шаг.
Замотал платок на шее –
Не оправиться никак. . .

– Что, товарищ, ты не весел?
– Что, дружок, оторопел?
– Что, Петруха, нос повесил,
Или Катьку пожалел?

– Ох, товарищи, родные,
Эту девку я любил. . .
Ночки черные, хмельные
С этой девкой проводил. . .

– Из-за удали бедовой
В огневых ее очах,
Из-за родинки пунцовой
Возле правого плеча,
Загубил я, бестолковый,
Загубил я сгоряча. . . ах!

– Ишь, стервец, завел шарманку,
Что ты, Петька, баба, что ль?
– Верно, душу наизнанку
Вздумал вывернуть? Изволь!
– Поддержи свою осанку!
– Над собой держи контроль!

– Не такое нынче время,
Чтобы нянчиться с тобой!
Потяжеле будет бремя
Нам, товарищ дорогой!

И Петруха замедляет
Торопливые шаги. . .

Он головку вскидывает,
Он опять повеселел. . .

Эх, эх!
Позабавиться не грех!

Only the hapless murderer's face
Is completely hidden away . . .

Faster, faster, and still faster
He hurries up the marching pace.
A scarf he's wound around his neck –
He can't get over what he did . . .

“Hey there, comrade, why not merry?”
“Hey, old friend, cat got your tongue?”
“Hey, Petrukha, feeling low now?
Sorry for that Kat'ka, eh?”

“Well, I'll tell you, my dear comrades,
That I really loved that girl . . .
Many a dark and drunken evening
I spent making out with her . . .

“All because of the lively boldness
Of her fiery, hot eyes,
All because of the crimson birthmark
On her right shoulder, what a sight,
Stupidly I've wrecked her life now,
I destroyed her rashly . . . oh!”

“Good grief, you bastard, stop your whining,
Are you a girl then, Pet'ka, eh?”
“What a moment you have picked
To search your soul. Oh, spare us, please!”
“Shoulders back, come on, Petrukha!”
“Get a grip upon yourself!”

“This is really not the best time
For us to nursemaid you along!
We'll soon have a heavier burden
On our shoulders, comrade pal!”

And Petrukha soon relaxes,
Slows his pace, unhurried now . . .

Tosses back his head, then cheers up,
His good humor's back again . . .

Hey, hey!
It's no sin to to have some fun!

Запирайте этажи,
Нынче будут грабежи!¹⁴

Отмыкайте погреба – ¹⁵
Гуляет нынче голытьба!

8

Ох ты, горе-горькое!¹⁶
Скука скучная,
Смертная!

Ужь я времячко
Проведу, проведу. . .

Ужь я темячко
Почешу, почешу. . .

Ужь я семячки
Полуцу, полуцу. . .

Ужь я ножичком
Полосну, полосну! . .

Ты лети, буржуй, воробышком!
Выпью кровушку
За зазнобушку,
Чернобровушку. . .

Упокой, господи, душу рабы твоя. . .¹⁷

Скучно!

9

Не слышно шуму городского,

Lock up the apartments all,
Looting there will be today!¹⁴

Open up the cellars all – ¹⁵
Today the rabble will have fun!

8

Oh, you bitter-bitter grief!¹⁶
Boredom most boring,
Deadly!

And a little time
I will pass, I will pass . . .

And your little head
I will scratch, I will scratch . . .

And some little seeds
I will shuck, I will shuck . . .

With my little knife
I will slash, I will slash! . .

Fly away, bourgeois, like a sparrow small!
I will drink your blood
For my sweetest love,
My black-browed beauty . . .

Grant rest, O Lord, to the soul of
Thy handmaiden . . .¹⁷
What a bore!

9

One cannot hear the city's din,

¹⁴ Looting, pogroms, violence, public drunkenness, and other crimes were a serious problem during the period of the Bolsheviks' consolidation of power. Tsarist institutions were in a state of dissolution, while new Bolshevik institutions had yet to be put into place. The new regime was not yet in control. Note the comments of Petrukha's friends juxtaposed with the looters' calls.

¹⁵ "Погреб" is a multi-faceted word, meaning a basement, a root cellar for storage, a powder magazine, or a wine cellar; all definitions pertain. The immediate post-revolutionary period was notorious for its looting of wine cellars, leading the Bolsheviks to destroy the alcohol stores of the city, an act culminating in the destruction of over \$5 million-worth of wine in the cellars of the Winter Palace alone.

¹⁶ The doubling of lexical units (горе горькое, скука скучная) is characteristic of folk speech and oral tradition.

¹⁷ This is a line from the Orthodox prayer for the dead. We may speculate that it refers to Kat'ka, but it might also refer to Russia (which is a feminine noun in Russian). The preceding material in Canto 8 is a threat by the uneducated, folk-connected Petrukha against Van'ka.

Над невской башней тишина,¹⁸
И больше нет городского –
Гуляй, ребята, без вина!¹⁹

Стоит буржуй на перекрестке
И в воротник упрятал нос.
А рядом жметя шерстью жёсткой
Поджавший хвост паршивый пес.

Стоит буржуй, как пес голодный,
Стоит безмолвный, как вопрос.
И старый мир, как пес безродный,
Стоит за ним, поджавши хвост.

10

Разыгралась чтой-то вьюга,
Ой, вьюга́, ой, вьюга́!
Не видать совсем друг друга
За четыре за шага!

Снег воронкой завился,
Снег столбушкой поднялся. . .²⁰

– Ох, пурга какая, спасе!
– Петька! Эй, не завирайся!
От чего тебя упас
Золотой иконостас?²¹

Silence reigns o'er Nevsky's tower,¹⁸
There are no more policemen now,
So frolic, friends, though there's no wine!¹⁹

The bourgeois stands here at the crossroads
With nose tucked into his coat collar.
A coarse-haired, mangy dog beside him
Cringes, its tail between its legs.

The bourgeois stands, like a hungry dog,
Wordless he stands, like a question mark.
And the old world stands, like a mongrel dog,
Right behind him, its tail between its legs.

10

The blizzard has increased its fury,
Such a blizzard, such a blizzard!
Impossible to see each other
Even four short steps away!

The snow has swirled into a funnel,
The snow has risen in a column . . .²⁰

“What a snowstorm, Savior help us!”
“Pet'ka! Hey, cut out that babbling!
Did the golden icon screen
Ever save you from a thing?”²¹

¹⁸ This stanza ironically references an 1826 poem by Fedor Glinka, which became a popular romance. “Песнь узника” (“The Prisoner’s Song”) begins with the stanza:

Не слышно шуму городского,
В заневских башнях тишина!
И на штыке у часового
Горит полночная луна!

One cannot hear the city's din,
Silence reigns o'er Nevsky's tower!
The radiant midnight moon is caught
On the tip of the sentry's bayonet.

Glinka's poem tells the story of a young prisoner who takes leave of his family, his home, his bride; he hopes for mercy from the tsar. We are not told why he is imprisoned, but the date of the poem is telling: The young Decembrists who led an abortive uprising in December 1825 against the newly crowned Tsar Nicholas I (r. 1825-1855) were tried and sentenced to death or exile in 1826 for their role in the failed revolt. The failed Decembrist coup was widely portrayed as a dress rehearsal for the Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, establishing the continuity of Russian attempts at revolt.

¹⁹ In December 1917 the Soviets renewed the ban on the sale of alcohol in Petrograd. Soldiers high on alcohol and narcotics were making control of the city difficult; alcohol also led to looting and pogroms among the residents, a feature also reflected in the last four lines of Canto 7.

²⁰ A column of swirling dust (“dust devil”) or snow is a well-known attribute of the devil in Russian folklore--the devil hides and travels around in such columns.

²¹ The icon screen, or ikonostasis, is a wall of icons that separates the sanctuary from the nave in Orthodox churches. Petrukha had just made a reference to the Savior, and his comrades want to disabuse him of religion's value. Their question about being saved by the icon screen raises doubt about the efficacy of religion; the Red Guards are atheists.

Бессознательный ты, право,
Рассуди, подумай здраво –
Али руки не в крови
Из-за Катькиной любви?
– Шаг держи революционный!
Близок враг неугомонный!

Вперед, вперед, вперед,
Рабочий народ!²²

11

. . . И идут без имени святого
Все двенадцать – вдаль.
Ко всему готовы,
Ничего не жаль. . .

Их винтовочки стальные
На незримого врага. . .
В переулочки глухие,
Где одна пылит пурга. . .
Да в сугробы пуховы –
Не утянешь сапога. . .

В очи бьется
Красный флаг.

Раздается
Мерный шаг.

Вот – проснется
Лютый враг. . .

Completely unaware you are,
Think about it, work it out –
Both your hands are bloody, aren't they,
On account of Kat'ka's love?"
"Hold to the revolutionary pace!
The tireless enemy is near!"

Forward, forward, forward,
Working people!²²

11

. . . Without the holy name's protection
The twelve go marching on.
Ready for anything,
Regretting nothing . . .

Their steel rifles now are aimed
At the foe invisible . . .
In the dead-end alleys where
Only the snowstorm swirls its dust . . .
And the feather-soft snowbanks
Grab your boot and won't let go . . .

Their red flag strikes
The watchful eye.

One can hear
Their measured pace.

Soon will wake
The mortal foe . . .

²² This is a variant of a line from the popular revolutionary song, the "Varshavianka." The opening verses strongly echo the context of Blok's poem (whirlwind, dark forces, fateful struggle, [red] banner, bloody, holy, righteous struggle, freedom):

Вихри враждебные веют над нами,
Темные силы нас злобно гнетут.
В бой роковой мы вступили с врагами,
Нас еще судьбы безвестные ждут.
Но мы подыдем гордо и смело
Знамя борьбы за рабочее дело,
Знамя великой борьбы всех народов
За лучший мир, за святую свободу.

Припев:
На бой кровавый,
Святой и правый
Марш, марш вперед,
Рабочий народ.

Belligerent storm clouds have gathered above us,
Forces of darkness oppress us with spite,
We have engaged in a dark, fateful struggle
With enemy forces; unknown fates are ours.
But we will lift up proudly and boldly
The banner of struggle for all workers' rights,
The banner of struggle, the goal of all nations,
For a better world and for our sacred freedom.

Refrain:
To bloody battle,
Sacred and righteous,
March, march ahead,
All working people.

И вьюга пылит им в очи
Дни и ночи
Напролет. . .

Вперед, вперед,
Рабочий народ!

12

. . . Вдаль идут державным шагом. . .
– Кто еще там? Выходи!
Это – ветер с красным флагом
Разыгрался впереди. . .

Впереди – сугроб холодный,
– Кто в сугробе – выходи! . .
Только нищий пес голодный
Ковыляет позади. . .

– Отвяжись ты, шелудивый,
Я штыком пощечочу!
Старый мир, как пес паршивый,
Провались – поколочу!

. . . Скалит зубы – волк голодный –
Хвост поджал – не отстает –
Пес холодный – пес безродный. . .
– Эй, откликнись, кто идет?

– Кто там машет красным флагом?
– Приглядишься-ка, эка тьма!
– Кто там ходит беглым шагом,
Хоронясь за все дома?

– Все равно, тебя добуду,
Лучше сдайся мне живьем!
– Эй, товарищ, будет худо,
Выходи, стрелять начнем!

Трах-тах-тах! – И только эхо
Откликается в домах. . .
Только вьюга долгим смехом
Заливается в снегах. . .

Трах-тах-тах!
Трах-тах-тах. . .

And the blizzard dusts their eyes
Days and nights
Without reprieve . . .

Forward, forward,
Working people!

12

. . . Off they go with martial pace . . .
“Who is it there? You come on out!”
But it’s just the wind that’s playing
With the red flag up ahead . . .

Up ahead there’s a frozen snowbank,
“You, in the snowbank – come on out! . . .”
Only the dog, beggared and hungry,
Hobbles along behind them still.

“Beat it, you mangy cur, or else
My bayonet will tickle you!
Vanish, old world – or else I’ll stick you
Like that mangy, lousy dog.”

. . . It shows its fangs – a hungry wolf –
Tail tucked in, it sticks close by –
The dog is cold – the dog’s a mongrel . . .
“Hey, give answer, who goes there?”

“Who now waves the bright red flag?”
“Oh just look, how dark it is!”
“Who is walking with quickened pace,
Hiding behind the buildings there?”

“All the same, I’m going to get you,
Come on now – give yourself up!”
“Listen, comrade, this won’t end well,
Come on out, before we shoot!”

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 . . .

. . . Так идут державным шагом,
Позади – голодный пес,
Впереди – с кровавым флагом,
И за вьюгой невидим,
И от пули неведим,
Нежной поступью надвьюжной,
Снежной россыпью жемчужной,
В белом венчике из роз²³ –
Впереди – Иисус Христос.²⁴

(Январь 1918)

. . . And so they keep a martial pace,
Behind them follows the hungry dog,
Ahead of them – with bloody banner,
Unseen within the blizzard's swirl,
Safe from any bullet's harm,
With gentle step, above the storm,
In the scattered, pearl-like snow,
Crowned with a wreath of roses white,²³
Ahead of them – goes Jesus Christ.²⁴

(January 1918)

²³ This is a particularly rich image and a striking way to end the visual sequences of the poem. A wreath for the head is called *венеч*, a wreath for other purposes is called *веноч*. The use of the term *венчик* is thus marked. The *венчик* is a cloth or paper strip used in the Orthodox funeral service. Laid on the forehead of the deceased, it most commonly has images of Christ, the Mother of God, and John the Baptist, and may also have the words “Святой Боже, Святой Крепкий, Святой Безсмертный, помилуй нас” [“Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us”]. Here the *венчик* is of white roses, which carry their own symbolism, depending on context. While white roses traditionally mean innocence and serve as symbols of pure love and innocence (as in the bridal bouquet, or in association with Mary, the mystical Rose of Heaven), they may also symbolize honor and reverence: white roses serve as a sign of farewell at funerals. The white rose is not associated with Christ in Orthodox symbology. One might speculate here that the Christ at the head of the Red Guards has “died” to Russian reality: the Revolution is His funeral and the Red Guards are unwittingly His mourning *cortège*. Christ is insubstantial, invisible, and for all intents, symbolically “deceased.” But such is the beauty and the living power of this work: the reader is still able to speculate and wonder as to its meaning, and to absorb several meanings, even contradictory ones, simultaneously.

²⁴ Some critics have made much of Blok’s use of “Иисус Христос” instead of the correct form, “Иисус Христос;” “Иисус” happens to be the sectarian spelling and so, these critics claim, this is a sectarian [хлыст] Christ. That is why he is in white (the color these sectarians wore for their “радения;” this was mind-altering, mystical dancing, like Dervish whirling.) The metaphorical implications are clear: the revolution is a mad, heretical, sectarian ecstasy. This is a plausible interpretation, given that many of Blok’s friends belonged to the Godseeking intelligentsia and were taken with the sectarians. It is true that Blok had spent time with some sectarians to whom he had been introduced back in 1904 or 1905; and yes, the image may have remained with him, buried in the sub-conscious.

But Blok was first and foremost a poet. Note that the entire last stanza consists of perfect trochaic tetrameter, with judiciously-placed pyrrhic feet to vary the rhythm. There is no room anywhere in this meter for an extra syllable. The semantic content is “martial pace,” and the poem’s meter may not break out of it. The poet in Blok could not force “Иисус” when the meter demanded it be “Иисус.” This is an excellent example of how poetics give us important information. There is only one perfect line in that stanza (i.e., where stress of each foot is completely realized), and that is the first line, “Так идут державным шагом” (/ - / - / -) -- the line that references the pace. All other lines contain pyrrhic feet, either in the first or third foot, or both. The rhythm of the final line is (- - / - / -), and only one other line has it. These two lines are: “Позади - голодный пес” and “Впереди - Иисус Христос.” Both lines are masculine (end with stressed syllable); both are directional (backward and forward, past and future). It is just beautiful. Blok was a genius. But it is unlikely that he meant Christ to be a sectarian [хлыст]. The reader may choose to interpret Christ that way, and that interpretation has some justification, but I do not think Blok purposefully encoded that reading. There was simply no metrical way to make “Jesus Christ” the last word of the poem. Blok did try to find another way: in the manuscript he wrote and rejected the final line, “Иисус идёт Христос.” But that is too clumsy and not compelling. Since he first tried to make “Иисус” work, the issue was the meter, not the spelling; the “sound” of the revolution forced this change.