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Controlled Chaos: Poetic Rhythm in Blok’s *The Twelve*

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

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

От здания к зданию
Протянут канат.
На канате - плакат:
"Вся власть Учредительному Собранию!"
Старушка убивается - плачет,
Никак не поймёт, 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!

Black night.
White snow.
The wind, the wind!
One can't stay on his feet.
The wind, the wind –
Blowing across all God's world!
The wind swirls around
The clean white snow.
Under the snow – there's ice.
It's slick, it's hard,
Any pedestrian
Slips – oops, the poor thing!

From building to building
Stretches a cable.
On the cable's a placard:
"All Power to the Constituent Assembly!"
An old woman grieves and weeps,
She just can't understand what it means,
Why such a huge scrap of cloth
For such a placard?
It'd make so many food wraps for the boys,
And they're all without clothes or shoes…

The old woman, like a chicken,
Somehow managed to scramble over the snow bank,
"Oh, Holy Mother of God, Protectress!
Oh, those Bolsheviks will put me in my grave!"

--Aleksandr Blok, *The Twelve*

The rhythm of Aleksandr Blok's poem *The Twelve* comprises a striking mixture of different meters—trochaic, iambic, *dol'nik*, and sometimes even free verse. These meters change quickly and often, creating a feeling of chaos that mirrors the chaotic atmosphere of the Russian Revolution and subsequent Civil War. This poetic chaos corresponds to Iurii Lotman’s and Boris Gasparov’s characterization of the poem as a carnival: if characters in the poem are participating in a carnival, then it is entirely appropriate for them to use different rhythms to signify their different voices.¹ However, the rhythm of *The Twelve* is still poorly understood.

¹ Lotman.
In his 1928 book *Gamburgskii schet* (The Hamburg Score) the prominent formalist author and critic Viktor Shklovsky said about *The Twelve*: “[The poem] is written not even in the style of a chastushka; it is written in the ‘blatnoi’ style.”\(^2\) The *blatnoi* is a type of urban folk song that usually describes criminals and often uses trochaic meter, as in Maksim Gorky’s “Na dne” from 1901–1902: “Солнце всходи́т и выхо́дит, а в тюрьме моёй темно́” (The sun rises and sets, but in my prison it is dark.) A thorough, close analysis of the rhythms in *The Twelve*, however, reveals Shklovsky's assertion to be a simplification. Shklovsky’s argument explains one aspect of Blok’s *poema*—its use of trochaic meter—but it does not account for the function of the poem’s other rhythms, such as *dol’nik* or free verse. Another critic, Efim Etkind, categorically states that the beginning of *The Twelve* is an “amorphous, purposely arhythmical composition.”\(^3\) It will be argued here that the stanzas written in *dol’nik* or free verse are, in fact, neither “loose” nor “amorphous.” Rather, Blok consciously deviates from strict rhythmic structures in certain sentences to reflect their meaning, i.e. the rhythms imitate what the lines are about. Such temporary rhythms, which underline particular images, fall into the category of what Marina Tarlinskaja calls “rhythmic figures” in her article “What is ‘Metricality’?”\(^4\) In the former article, Tarlinskaja describes rhythmic figures as deviations from a set meter that “do not occur merely to incorporate an optimal amount of vocabulary” and serve as “part of the poetic convention and serve semantic purposes;” that is, they express meaning in and of

\(^2\) “Она написана даже не частушечным стилем, она сделана «блатным» стилем.” 175.

\(^3\) Etkind, “Demokratia, opoiasannaia burei.”

\(^4\) Tarlinskaja, “Rhythmic Figures,” 231.
themselves. Interestingly, Etkind himself believed in the semantic role of rhythms, but failed to acknowledge the connection between rhythm and the meaning of the lines in *The Twelve*.

The first rhythmical figure of *The Twelve* occurs at the very beginning of the poem, in the first stanza of Part One. In order to analyze the rhythms of these first lines, in the following table a large “X” denotes stressed syllables, while a small "x" denotes unstressed syllables. The total number of stresses and syllables in each line is also included.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lines</th>
<th>Rhythm</th>
<th>Number of Stresses</th>
<th>Number of Syllables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Чёрный вёчер.</td>
<td>Xx Xx</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Бёльй снег.</td>
<td>Xx X</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Вётер, вётер!</td>
<td>Xx Xx</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>На ногах не стоит человек.</td>
<td>xxX xxX xxX</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Вётер, вётер –</td>
<td>Xx Xx</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>На всём божьем свете!</td>
<td>xX Xx Xx</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At first it seems that the first stanza is in trochaic meter because lines 1 and 2 have the rhythm [Xx Xx / Xx X]. Line 3 continues with this trochaic meter [Xx Xx], but line 4 diverges into anapest with the rhythm [xxX xxX xxX]. Blok uses anapest to interrupt the trochaic rhythm of the stanza because a person slips when he “can’t stand on his feet” (на ногах не стоит). People slip, therefore the rhythm slips. This is the first rhythmical figure of the poem. Blok only uses anapest once in this stanza; line 5 immediately returns to trochaic meter with the rhythm [Xx

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5 Tarlinskaja, “What is ‘Metricality’?” 71.
Xx, while line 6 is practically free, since it does not match any of the rhythms of the preceding lines and has three stressed syllables instead of two.

In the first stanza of the poem there are more stressed syllables in lines containing a description of some physical movement, like the aforementioned “slip” in line 4 (на ногах не стоит человек) and the blowing of the wind “across all God’s world” (На всём божьем свете) in line 6. Blok continues to place more stresses in lines with physical movement in the second stanza of Part One. He writes this stanza in the rhythm of dol’nik until the line “Скользи́т – а́х, бедня́жка” (He slips – oops, the poor thing!)—that is, each line of the stanza except the final one contains the same number of stresses (two), but the interval of unstressed syllables between them varies between one and two:

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Завива́ет ве́тер</td>
<td>хxХx Хx</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Бе́лый снего́к.</td>
<td>Хx Хx</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Под снегко́м –ледо́к.</td>
<td>ХxХ хX</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Скользко, т́жкко,</td>
<td>Хx Хx</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Вся́кий ходо́к</td>
<td>Хx Хx</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Скольз́йт – а́х, бедня́жка!</td>
<td>xX Х xXx</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In line 1 of this stanza the interval of unstressed syllables is at first two, and then one and one; in line 2 the interval is two syllables, and so on, but in every line there are two stresses. This dol’nik rhythm becomes regular, but again, the image of a person who slips interrupts the rhythm in the last line, which has three stressed syllables: “Скользи́т – а́х, бедня́жка!” Again, the rhythm slips when a person slips. Here the unstressed interval becomes zero, which dol’nik verse avoids and
which did not occur in the preceding lines. There are also more stresses than in the previous lines. This is the second rhythmical figure in the poem.

After this brief slip, stanza 3 returns at first to two stresses per line, continuing in dol'nik:
When Blok describes a placard bearing the slogan of the Russian Constituent Assembly, however, he places both more stresses and more syllables in each line of this stanza.

<table>
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<tr>
<td>От здания к зданию</td>
<td>xXx XxX</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Протянут канат.</td>
<td>xxX xxX</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>На канате – плакат:</td>
<td>xxX xXx</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With four unstressed syllables in a row, this line is not a *dol'nik*. The poem’s historical context provides an explanation for this abrupt shift. As Maria Carlson explains in the preface to her translation of this poem, “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.”\(^7\) The establishment of such an assembly was a striking change in the lives of the Russian people, who had lived under a tsarist autocracy for centuries. The line that contains the slogan promoting the power of the Constituent Assembly has three stresses, separating it immediately from the preceding lines of the stanza, which have only two. After this long line, the subsequent stanzas of Part One have significantly more syllables and stresses than before. Consider the remainder of stanza 3, after the statement of the placard slogan, and the following two short stanzas:

\(^7\) Carlson.
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Старушка убивается — плакет,</td>
<td>xXx xxXx Xx</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Никак не поймет, что значит,</td>
<td>xX xxX xxXx</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>На что такой плакат,</td>
<td>xX xX xX</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Такой огромный лоскут?</td>
<td>xX xXx xX</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Сколььбы вышло портяники для ребят,</td>
<td>Xx xxX xXx xX</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>А всякий — раздёт, разут...</td>
<td>xXx xX xX</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Старушка, как курица,</td>
<td>xXx xXxx</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Кой-как перемотнулась через сугроб,</td>
<td>xX xxxXx xx xX</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Ох, Матушка-Заступница!</td>
<td>X Xx xXxx</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Ох, большевик загонят в гроб!</td>
<td>x xXxX xxX X</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The chart of stress patterns indicates that after the statement of the placard slogan, most lines have three stresses, which is more than most of the lines in the preceding stanzas. With longer words in each line, the total number of syllables in each line is also significantly larger than in the previous stanza. As a result, the intervals between stressed syllables grow to as many as three or four. The very short fourth and fifth stanzas, which describe the movements and thoughts of the old woman, exhibit this trend.
This rhythmical figure in many ways communicates not only how deeply the appearance of the Constituent Assembly's slogan affects the old woman, but also how significant the change in government was for many people. The rhythmic structure suggests that the Revolution and its consequences have changed the way people talk and have also given them more to talk about; they are saying more and using more complex language to describe the intricacies of the new political system that is forming. Their discourse has changed, and they are speaking out and arguing more as the clouds of the Civil War gather. The lengthening of the third stanza and the lines that follow the placard slogan reflects this evolution of discourse.

*The Twelve* is a work of significant length, and it contains many more rhythmical figures than the ones featured in the present analysis, which all occur in only the first few stanzas. Rather than dismissing the rhythmical figures as conjectural coincidences, it is worthwhile to seek them throughout the poem and investigate their symbolic meaning, particularly since Blok was an adherent of the Russian poetic school of Symbolism. Any element of a symbolist’s poetry, including variations in syllables and stresses, can potentially contain a complex network of symbols. Moreover, poets like Blok, who belonged to the second generation of symbolists, distinguished themselves through their fixation on the mystical and miraculous power of symbols and were often also mystics themselves.8 Mysterious elements embedded in Blok’s poetry would likely shed more light on the symbolists’ esoteric world as a whole. Although these symbols may not be immediately obvious, they nonetheless create a particular atmosphere and work subliminally on the reader or listener. This is evident in Blok’s use of slipping people and

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slipping rhythms in order to evoke the cold, foreboding atmosphere of a revolutionary winter night.

Works Cited


