

Writing Without Words: Blok's Contextual Poetics

Timothy Williams

The greatest terror of Danny's life was DIVORCE, a word that always appeared in his mind as a sign painted in red letters which were covered with hissing, poisonous snakes. ... The most terrifying thing about DIVORCE was that he had sensed the word—or concept, or whatever it was that came to him in his understandings—floating around in his own parents' heads, sometimes diffuse and relatively distant, sometimes as thick and obscuring and frightening as thunderheads.

– Stephen King, *The Shining*

Lidiia Ginzburg is probably best known outside of Russia for her book *On Psychological Prose*, “an important stimulant,” according to Boris Gasparov, “to the development of the semiotics of behavior.”¹ But Ginzburg was also the author of perhaps the most important monograph on Russian lyric poetry of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, *О лирике* (*On Lyric Poetry*, 1964), the fifth chapter of which, “Наследие и открытия” (*Inheritance and Discoveries*), is devoted to Aleksandr Blok's corpus of poetry, his “Trilogy of Becoming Human”. In that chapter, Ginzburg heralded a Renaissance in Blok scholarship that would include important works by Zara Mints and Dmitry Maksimov, and planted the seeds that would bloom in David Sloane's magisterial *Aleksandr Blok and the Dynamics of the Lyric Cycle* (Columbus 1987); Ginzburg's influence is still felt even in such more recent works as Sergei Slobodniuk's *Соловьиный Ад* (*The Nightingale Hell*, 2010), ostensibly completely independent of the tradition of Soviet Blok scholarship, yet nonetheless indebted to that tradition. While remaining faithful to the official Soviet narrative about Blok's biography and artistic development, i.e., that he was a Decadent who finally found religion in the Revolution, Ginzburg discovered and demonstrated a surprising degree of complexity within the body of texts itself, as well as its fundamental unity. Ginzburg's key insight was her perception of the way Blok used the novelistic context of the Trilogy to generate a kind of lexical feedback loop in which a limited number of words acquire continually richer shades of meaning through repetition in a series of different but related contexts.

¹ B. Gasparov, “Introduction,” in *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, ed. Alexander D. Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 19.

Ginzburg has an eloquent if cryptic aside, with some bearing on our understanding of her future work, in a section of her posthumously published notebooks from 1925–926, when she was a young student, fairly recently arrived in Leningrad from Odessa, studying at the State Institute of the History of the Arts with two acknowledged titans of formalism, Tynianov and Eikhenbaum. In the passage in question, Ginzburg has been disparaging the great nineteenth-century Russian lyric poet Afanasy Fet for his many lapses in taste and style, and punctuates her reflections with the remark that “Only Blok knew how to write without words in such a way that no words were needed. But only he!”²

What does it mean to write without words? With reference to Fet, it means his overuse of certain “pretty” words, like “diamonds” (бриллианты) and “spring” (весна) to the point where they lose all meaning – “If everything is spring, there is no spring.”³ Ginzburg (who, to the extent that she allows such wordless writing is possible, may also have had in mind *Romances sans paroles* by Verlaine, an undoubted influence on Blok) provides further context in the previous paragraph, where she declares that “I don’t understand poems without rhyme and poetry without words (that’s [due to] our mother’s milk of Acmeism)”: the Acmeists, led by the slightly younger poet Nikolai Gumilyov, represented, at least in theory, a challenge to Symbolist and Decadent vagueness and abstraction, in some ways equivalent to the Imagist revolt in Anglo-American letters, the rejection, by Pound, Eliot, H.D., and others, of the prolix, at best oneiric, at worst abstruse current in English-language poetry represented by the Victorians, chiefly Tennyson and Swinburne. Indeed, Eliot’s ambivalent acknowledgement of Swinburne’s achievement reads like a mirror image (with opposite symmetry, that is) of Ginzburg’s characterization of Blok:

The bad poet dwells partly in a world of objects and partly in a world of words, and he never can get them to fit. Only a man of genius could dwell so exclusively and consistently among words as Swinburne. [...] For what he gives is not images and ideas and music, it is one thing with a curious mixture of suggestions of all three. [...]

Language in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object that the two are identified. They are identified in the verse of Swinburne solely because the object has ceased to exist, because the meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning, because language, uprooted, has adapted itself to an independent life of atmospheric nourishment.⁴

The phenomenon in Blok’s work which the young Ginzburg called “writing without words,” which the older Ginzburg calls a Blokian “discovery,” and which Sloane calls “migratory words,” is analogous to this “independent life of atmospheric nourishment.” As Sloane writes,

[...] it is acquisition of contextual meaning that allows amalgamation of Blok’s lyrics into something resembling “a novel in verse” and gives his poetry the quality of myth. Each of the recurrent symbol-motifs (e.g. door, window, sword, stairs) traces a path through [Blok’s] poetic oeuvre. These environments are assimilated by every new text in which the image appears and are essential to

² L. Ginzburg, *Записные книжки. Воспоминания. Эссе*, SPb: Iskusstvo-SPb, 2011, p. 378.

³ Ginzburg, *Записные книжки*, p. 377. She is admittedly paraphrasing Tynianov, who declared in a review of a novel, she thinks by Lidin, that “If everything is glass, there is no glass” (also p. 377).

⁴ T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921, p. 136.

its decoding. Understanding Blok's poetry, therefore, requires constant backtracking through the previous work—a recurring odyssey to the source and initial symbolification of its imagery.⁵

Ginzburg provides a case study in “Inheritance and Discoveries” with her reading of the poem “Не уходи. Побудь со мною” (Don't go away. Stay here with me), which she describes as an “encapsulation” of the trilogy in its initial form, Blok's first four published collections:

The layers of Blokian symbolism are presented in sequence here: twilight, the red light of dawn, the red circle, the fog [in the first stanza] represent the symbolism of [Blok's first book] *Poems about the Beautiful Lady*. The second stanza recalls the grim landscapes and swamp symbolism of [his second collection] *Inadvertent Joy*. In the third stanza arises the theme of the “terrible world,” so important for his last period.⁶

Ginzburg then draws our attention to how, in the canonical edition of the trilogy's third volume, “Не уходи. Побудь со мною” follows the poem “Осенний день” (Autumn Day), to which it is linked by the recurring word “дым” (smoke):

The semantics of the word are complex here. It is, of course, the smoke of the fatherland, the sweet smoke of the familial hearth, and it is the bitter smoke of the “low, poor villages” of “Autumn Day” (the theme of Mother Russia). And at the same time it is the smoke of the gypsy bonfire—a circle of associations amplified by the epigraph from a gypsy romance—the theme of Mother Russia here intersects with Roma culture, which for Blok represented not only elemental sensation but a basic element of the Russian cultural inheritance.⁷

This is one example of what another scholar, Dina Potsepnyia, calls the “inner contradictoriness” of Blok's semantics.⁸ Another example might be the way Blok's use of the adjective “непонятный” (incomprehensible, unintelligible) developed over time, and in this case the evolution of the word's use clearly charts Blok's evolution and growth as a poet; in his early poetry, the adjective functions in a conventional Romantic (or Fetian) way, connoting mystery and suspense:

Жутко выйти на дорогу:
Непонятная тревога
Под луной царит.
(It's weird going out into the road: an incomprehensible anxiety rules under the moon.)
 (“Полный месяц встал над лугом” [A full moon has risen over the field], 1898)

Кто поймет, измерит оком,
Что́ за этой синей далью?
Лишь мечтанье о далеком
С непонятною печалью...

⁵ David Sloane, *Aleksandr Blok and the Dynamics of the Lyric Cycle*. Columbus: Slavica, 1987, p. 128.

⁶ L. Ginzburg, *О лирике*, Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1964, p. 310.

⁷ Ginzburg, *О лирике*, p. 311.

⁸ D. M. Potsepnyia, *Проза А. Блока: Стилистические проблемы*, Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo LGU, 1976, p. 134; quoted in Sloane, p. 158.

(Who will grasp or measure with their eye what lies beyond that dark blue distance? Only dreaming of what is far away, with incomprehensible sorrow...)

“Ярким солнцем, синей далью” [On the bright sun, on the dark-blue distance], 1900)

Blok's use of the short-form adjective “непонятен / непонятна” in this early period is rare, and the one instance we find is flatly negative in its emotional coloration:

Мне странен холод здешних стен

И непонятна жизни бедность.

(I find the cold of these walls strange / And the poverty of this life is incomprehensible to me)

“Брожу в стенах монастыря” [I walk within the monastery walls], 1902)

This quasi-pejorative use of the adjective, whether in its short or long form, occurs in later poems as well, notably in “Песнь Ада” (The Song of Hell, 1909); but even there, conveying as it does hesitation and ambivalence (“И я смотрю с волнением непонятым” [And I look with incomprehensible excitement], “не кляни повествований [...] / О том, как длился непонятный сон” (don't curse my stories / about how the incomprehensible dream went)), the “flat” meaning coexists or mingles with another shade, that of the new positive valuation Blok's persona assigns incomprehensibility in its association with memory, childhood romance (“first love”), his vast and primitive motherland, life itself, or the woman or women who embody those tropes, in other words, a tantalizing and forcibly compelling opacity:

Но верю — не пройдет бесследно

Всё, что так страстно я любил,

Весь трепет этой жизни бедной,

Весь этот непонятный пыл!

(But I believe—some trace will remain of everything that I loved so passionately, all the rustle of this poor life, all of this incomprehensible dust!)

“Всё это было, было, было” [All of this has been, has been, has been], 1909)

Этот голос — он твой, и его непонятному звуку

Жизнь и горе отдам,

(The voice is yours, and to its incomprehensible sound

I will give my life and sadness)

“Приближается звук. И, покорна щемящему звуку” [The sound approaches. And, obeying the piercing sound], 1912)

Только ль страшный простор пред очами,

Непонятная ширь без конца?

(Is there only this terrible expanse before my eyes, unlimited incomprehensible vastness?)

“Новая Америка” [New America], 1913)

Как день, светла, но непонятна,

Вся — явь, но — как обрывок сна,

(Like the day, luminous, but incomprehensible,

All—waking, but—like a fragment of a dream)
 (“Как день, светла, но непонятна,” 1914)

A remarkable pattern emerges, with the word denoting incomprehensibility, used in the less mature poet’s work to suggest a certain generalized “atmosphere,” acquiring the capacity, through continued (even if not frequent) use and accumulated context, to actually convey a discernible atmosphere of meaning. A similar process of reevaluation occurs with the adjective “пустой / пустая” (empty), moving from a conventional sense of emptiness connoting lack to a more dynamic ambiguity:

Видишь, прорезал эфир бестелесный
 Свет ее бледный, бездушный, пустой?
 (Do you see how the incorporeal ether has cut through its [the moon’s] pale, soulless, empty light?)
 (“Моей матери” [To my mother], 1898)

Всегда бесплодная равнина,
 Пустая, как мечта моя!
 (Always infertile plain, empty, like my dream!)
 (“Какая дивная картина” [What a wonderful picture], 1909)

То над степью пустой загорелась
 Мне Америки новой звезда!
 (Over the empty steppe, the star of a New America has lit up for me!)
 (“Новая Америка” [New America], 1913)

Страстная, безбожная, пустая,
 Незабвенная, прости меня!
 (Passionate, godless, empty one, unforgettable one, forgive me!)
 (“Перед судом” [Before the judgment], 1915)

Zara Mints, whether inspired by Ginzburg or by the same zeitgeist that inspired Ginzburg’s work, went on to study in detail how Blok uses words such as “огонь” (fire) in strikingly varied ways in her four-volume study *Лирика Александра Блока* (1965–75). Indeed, with regard to the “inner contradictoriness” mentioned above, it could be useful to study Blok’s work through the prism of Freud’s essay on primal words. On the other hand, there is certainly a tendency in Blok’s early poetry that resists analysis or even communication: as Sloane observes, in the first volume, “Blok’s Muse, the Beautiful Lady, is a purely musical presence that speaks to the poet in a non-verbal (or perhaps pre-verbal) medium [...]”⁹

Ginzburg’s contribution to Blok scholarship has another dimension as well: one that intersects with her work on nineteenth-century Russian prose. I have in mind her work on the Blokian persona in “Наследие и открытия.” Having shown in earlier

⁹ Sloane, *Aleksandr Blok...*, p. 159.

chapters how nineteenth-century Russian poets of the Romantic period introduced a sense of biographical narrative into their work, she then clarifies how some of Blok's later work exists in a "dynamic interrelationship of the classical inheritance and the tradition-transfiguring signs of Blok's world."¹⁰ Somewhat paradoxically, however, she also argues that the overarching triadic narrative, connecting all of the poems in one "novel in verse," of the lyrical persona's progression from heavenly thesis through hellish antithesis to earthly synthesis, makes it possible for Blok to eventually write poems that recapitulate that progression using a vocabulary consisting entirely of "worn" (стертые), cliché images from the previous poetic heritage, which succeed as new, modern poems through the force of his already-familiar persona:

An element of Russian Romantic lyric poetry remains in Blok's poetry to the end, but increasingly profound layers of its semantic residue yield to transfiguration [...]. The poet's fate, his face, or rather faces, now multiplying, now merging into one, have so sharply made themselves felt that the inherited lyrical material immediately becomes the medium of Blokian meanings [...].¹¹

Ginzburg claims that in the celebrated poem "О доблестях, о подвигах, о славе" (Of virtues, of heroic feats, of glory, 1909), and likewise in "Как свершилось, как случилось?" (How did it materialize, how did it happen?, 1912), Blok creates a microcosm of the entire trilogy within a single poem.¹² This is only possible, of course, through his direct and indirect referencing of Dante, Petrarch, and the courtly love tradition (transposed into a recognizably Russian medieval past) throughout each phase of the Trilogy. Where Dante's choice to name his poem a "Comedy" was, as Agamben has shown, undergirded by a strong philosophical foundation, given the restoration of natural innocence (with a correlative of personal guilt) through the Incarnation, Blok's Trilogy is inescapably tragic, portraying both guilt and innocence as personal and natural. Nonetheless, like "the voyage of the Comedy," the Trilogy of Becoming Human documents, as Ginzburg insisted, the trajectory, not merely of Blok's "empirical fate,"¹³ but of the fate of his epoch, caught in between feudalism and modernity.

¹⁰ Ginzburg, *О лирике*, p. 311.

¹¹ Ginzburg, *О лирике*, p. 313.

¹² See Ginzburg, *О лирике*, pp. 278, 313.

¹³ Ginzburg, *О лирике*, p. 271.

KEYWORDS

s y m b o l i s m

POETRY

poetyka kontekstów

Algernon Swinburne

ABSTRACT:

This article presents a brief sketch of Lidiia Ginzburg's particular contribution to the extensive Russian and Western scholarship on the poetry of Aleksandr Blok, perhaps the most famous Russian poet of the twentieth century. The author, noting that Ginzburg is better known for her groundbreaking study of nineteenth-century prose, summarizes her equally groundbreaking insight into the mechanism of Blok's poetry, in which the repetition of key words in a gradually changing context creates a potentially infinite chain of interconnected meanings. Consideration is also given to possible parallels in the Anglo-American tradition, opening new paths for further comparative study.

migratory words

modernism

ALEKSANDR BŁOK

Lidia Ginzburg

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Timothy Dwight Williams, born in 1973, received his PhD in Russian literature from Columbia University in 2015. A non-teaching adjunct at the CUNY Dominican Studies Institute, he is also a freelance translator whose translations from Russian and Polish have appeared in the journals *Czas Kultury*, *Stasis*, and *Crisis and Critique*; he regularly translates texts for the St. Petersburg *Chto Delat?* collective and internationally renowned artist Natalia “Gluklya” Pershina-Yakimanskaya. He is currently translating Prof. Piotr Śniedziwski’s *Melancholijne spojrzenie* (The Melancholy Gaze) while continuing to research the poetry of Aleksandr Blok. |