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MELANCHOLIA BECOMES ELECTRIC: THE DEAD MOTHER AS PROPHETESS OF REVOLUTION IN BLOK'S "ШАГИ КОМАНДОРА"

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Abstract: Aleksandr Blok's 1912 poem "The Commander's Footsteps" is a response to personal trauma and loss that points towards a collective catharsis in history, namely, the end of the feudal social order, signaled by the approach of an automobile in the night. A unique modernist re-imagining of the Don Juan legend's occult finale (the confrontation between Don Juan and the statue of the Commander he killed), written at the nadir of Blok's personal happiness, the poem removes the elements of passion and desire to focus exclusively on the subject's anxiety and guilt. Yet though the title of the poem famously heralds the retribution to be visited on Don Juan, the work notably omits any resolution-- beyond a cryptic prophecy that Donna Anna, Don Juan's nemesis, victim and (within the poem's anagrammatic structure, analyzed by V. V. Ivanov in a seminal 1982 paper) twin, will rise from the dead. The silent, ambivalent, un-dead 'Dead Mother' later theorized by André Green thus replaces the Phallic Mother and pre-Oedipal mother of Blok's previous periods (preceding and immediately succeeding the failed 1905 Revolution) as the embodiment of hopes for a revolutionary cataclysm, likewise superseding the phallogocentric Law represented by the punishing patriarchal Commander.

Heute verstehe ich es ja – ach, Du hast michs verstehen gelehrt! – daß das Gesicht eines Mädchens, einer Frau etwas ungemein Wandelhaftes sein muß für einen Mann, weil es meist nur Spiegel ist, bald einer Leidenschaft, bald einer Kindlichkeit, bald eines Müdeseins, und so leicht verfließt wie ein Bildnis im Spiegel, daß also ein Mann leichter das Antlitz einer Frau verlieren kann...

-- Stefan Zweig, *Brief einer unbekanntenen*

Compared with those of Lacan or Winnicott, psychoanalyst André Green's theoretical insights have not yet been widely incorporated into literary or cultural studies scholarship, although Kristeva cites him as an important influence in *Tales of Love* (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 23), and his own writing on literature is incisive and astonishing. This paper will discuss a work of literature, Aleksandr Blok's 1912 "Шаги Командора" (The Commander's Footsteps), in relation to Green's concept of the Dead Mother, with the hope of illuminating some broader context in the process. In the poem, a retelling of the moments leading up to the climax of the Don Juan

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legend, in which the titular Commander is a kind of Dead Father in conflict with the protagonist, embodying the moral Law and the fear of castration, the Dead Mother, in the figure of Donna Anna, appears to neutralize that conflict by embodying a transcendent, cosmic nemesis, albeit with political reverberations: for Blok, post-1905, the only imaginable force of redemption and retribution is the coming Revolution.

The Dead Mother complex, the topic of a 1986 article by Green, emerges from his clinical practice; it describes an analysand's relationship, not with a mother who has physically died, but with "an imago which has been constituted in the child's mind, following maternal depression, brutally transforming a living object, which was a source of vitality for the child, into a distant figure, toneless, practically inanimate, deeply impregnating the cathexes of certain patients . . . psychically dead in the eyes of the young child" (Green, "The Dead Mother" 142). Green's article invokes two of Melanie Klein's concepts, the depressive position and the loss of an object, both of which represent necessary, inevitable stages in a child's development. The loss of the mother's breast when the infant finally understands the breast to be a separate entity, not part of the child's own body, is the loss of both an external and an internal object. (Klein 278, 300-304; Kristeva, *Melanie Klein* 119-132.) The Dead Mother complex differs from this necessary and inevitable object-loss in that it represents the experience of the presence of a depressed, bereaved mother: the mother is physically present but psychically absent or unavailable, and therefore can be understood as situated in between life and death, or in between presence and absence. As Samuel Gerson writes, describing the patient's condition, "There is 'no end to the dead mother's dying' because her absence has become his as he was compelled to forge a connection with her. The milk she fed her infant carried the toxic serum of the deadness festering in and about her, leaving the child saturated with the mother's undigested loss and her 'blankness'." (Gerson 90), In this indistinction, this indefinite, in-between status, it resembles melancholia as defined by Freud in "Mourning and Melancholia".

The Phallic Mother, the subject of a 1968 article by Green,¹ may be exemplified in culture by the iconography of the sorceress, pagan goddess or high priestess, images that feature prominently in Blok's poetry in the first decade of the 20th century, in the period preceding the failed 1905 revolution and in its aftermath, in which Blok frequently presents a male persona in worshipful and masochistic awe of a dominating female figure. By contrast, the closest readily available mythopoetic analogue to the Dead Mother might be an image from the work of another twentieth-century artist heavily influenced by German Romanticism, namely Alfred Hitchcock: not the possessive, dominating cruelty of Mrs. Bates in *Psycho*, however, but rather the inaccessibility and opacity of "Madeleine" in *Vertigo*, when she is staring into the portrait of Carlotta Valdes or otherwise lost in a reverie. In all of these tropes, however, we find what Jed Sekoff calls "relief from the anxieties of freedom through submission to a powerful other" (Sekoff 115).

¹ André Green, "Sur la mère phallique", in *Revue Française de Psychanalyse*, T. XXXII, n° 1, janvier – février 1968.

Avril Pyman summarizes “Шаги Командора” as “the crystallization of the theme of retribution” (Pyman II, 98); since the personal and the political are inextricably intertwined in Blok’s vision of history and in his poetry, this implies both historical retribution against the ruling social class of which Blok was a member (Don Juan represents the aristocracy, the class which the coming Revolution will eliminate) and in the private sphere of romantic love, as a consequence of betrayal of ideals (Mints 219-223), as well as what can only be called the metaphysical sphere (Tager 90). The poem belongs to a cycle of short poems entitled “Возмездие” (Retribution); as Pyman notes, the social dimension of retribution is emphasized more strongly in the unfinished epic poem Blok worked on intermittently from 1911 to 1921, also entitled *Возмездие*. The title “Шаги Командора” itself lives on in the vernacular as a phrase evoking inexorable, fateful consequences whether in the personal or the historical sphere.

Mints delineates four characteristics shared by the classic Russian literary type of the Superfluous Man, epitomized by the hero or antihero of the most celebrated Russian poem of all time, Pushkin’s *Евгений Онегин* (Eugene Onegin), with the lyrical personae of Blok’s mature poetry (the example that fits her argument best is “Как тяжело мертвецу среди людей” [How tough to be a dead man among the living], also written in 1912, dated three days after “Шаги Командора”) and Blok’s Don Juan (notably not the persona of the poem; at most a few lines may be argued to be in his ‘voice’); they can be summarized as follows:

He belongs to the aristocratic elite; he is a ‘gentleman’.

Though belonging to that world, he is alienated from it, and finds it lifeless and unnatural.

Despite his ambivalence, he remains in that world, and does nothing to change or fight it.

He transmutes his contempt for that social sphere into violation not only of social but of ethical norms. (Mints 219-20)

Characteristic #3, the only one of the four to be emphasized in the text of “Шаги Командора”, corresponds to the state of melancholia, or the roughly equivalent “empire of the dead mother” of which Green speaks. The only reference in Blok’s poem to Don Juan’s career as a seducer, the words “постылая свобода” (loathsome freedom), are a quotation from *Eugene Onegin* (Mints 221); to be precise, from Onegin’s final supplication to the woman he earlier rejected, Tatiana, in a symmetrical reversal of roles.

Though freedom may be loathsome, and death still fearsome, “submission to a powerful other” is not as simple as it might appear, given that

the fate of the human psyche is to have always two objects and never one alone, however far one goes back to try to understand the earliest psychical structure. . . The father is there, both in the mother and the child, from the beginning. More exactly, *between* the mother and child. . . On the side of the child, everything which introduces the anticipation of a third person, each time that the mother is not wholly present and her devotion to the child is neither total nor absolute (at least in the illusion he

maintains in this regard, before it is pertinent to speak of object-loss), will be, retrospectively, attributable to the father. (Green, “The Dead Mother” 146-7)

In an essay on symbolic exchange, Jean-Pierre Dupuy describes Molière's Don Juan as “fascinated by the autonomy that excludes him”, i.e., the autonomy of the couple, “the totality that excludes him, in its exclusion of him” (Dupuy 771); Dupuy finds it “highly significant” that Don Juan chooses a moving, speaking, living automaton as his guide in the quest for autonomy (Dupuy 773). In the suspended or thwarted primal scene that we find in Blok’s version, Don Juan is guided by not one but two automatons: the statue come to life and, in the final image of her rising from the dead, Donna Anna. It is she, in fact, who takes on the role of the ‘guide’.

Contemporaneous with Freud’s article “Negation” (1910) and Sabina Spielrein’s “Destruction as the Cause of Coming Into Being” (1912), which would strongly influence Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), “Шаги Командора” takes the Don Juan legend and removes the elements of sex and passion, leaving only anxiety, dreams, and an inconclusive confrontation with the symbol of paternal punishment (and presumably castration), the Commander—traditionally an automaton in the form of a statue come to life, here represented only by sounds—his footsteps and voice— like the Yahweh of the Old Testament. However, though the title signals that this towering, monstrous father is the central figure in the work, the poem is dominated by the ambivalent figure of Donna Anna, whose suspension between this world and the next resonates with Green’s description of maternal depression. The living death in which we find the poem’s Donna Anna, and Juan’s enthrallment to her in that state, represent what Freud in “Mourning and Melancholia” calls the transformation of object-loss into ego-loss, or “substitution of identification for object-love” (Freud 249); the death of Donna Anna transforms the conflict between Anna and Juan (an eternal conflict between archetypal symmetrical opposites in Hoffmann’s short story “Don Juan,” the chief literary precedent for Blok’s deployment of this tragic plot development) into an internal conflict within one subject or consciousness.

Who is Donna Anna? She is a woman in mourning, either the Commander’s widow (in the Pushkin and Molière versions) or his orphaned daughter (in Da Ponte, de Molina, etc.). She is not a mother, but Don Juan is the “Eternal Son” (Kristeva *Tales of Love*, 91). There is no representation of sexual activity, sexual tension, seduction or even flirtation in the poem, and yet Anna’s death has presumably been caused, directly or indirectly, by Don Juan’s libertine ways; at the same time, the anagrammatic symmetry detected by Vyacheslav Vsevolodovich Ivanov in his meticulous, monumental phonetic analysis, the insistent repetition of the sound combinations /on/ and /an/, the stressed syllables in both names, suggests a kind of twinship between Juan and Anna (Ivanov 637-9).² In Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, or at least in Hoffmann’s interpretation of it in his short story “Don Juan”, Anna is an equal and opposite force to Don Juan; in Hoffmann’s reading, anticipating in equal degrees

² It is possible to see, in this formal mirroring, a kind of identification between Don Juan and the dead Donna Anna, as in Pausanias’s critique of Ovid’s telling of the Narcissus legend. See H. Spotnitz and P. Reznikoff, “The Myths of Narcissus”, in *Psychoanalytical Review*, 1954, 41:174.

Spielrein's thesis of the identity of the death and procreation instincts Klein's insistence on the centrality of the mother to 'Don Juanism', Donna Anna is both Don Juan's nemesis and his only love.

Ivanov, in the course of his rigorous phonetic and metrical analysis of the poem, claims that in killing Donna Anna, Blok deviates from European canonical tradition (Ivanov 632); in fact, however, Hoffmann's "Don Juan" ends with the death of Donna Anna (technically, of the actress portraying her in a provincial theater). Pushkin's version, *Каменный гость* (The Stone Guest), on the other hand, ends with the protagonist, there called Don Guan, speaking her name as he dies.³ In all three cases, the effect is to divinize or sanctify her.

Ivanov draws attention to the preponderance of impersonal constructions in the poem, and the related absence of active subjects with verbs (Ivanov 641-2). Of the poem's 197 words, 16 are verbs, not counting six participle adjectives; of these, two refer to the movements of inanimate objects; eight refer to actions by the living dead, that is, Donna Anna (six) and the Commander (two); two are the Commander's discourse referring to himself and Don Juan; one is Don Juan's imperative to fate; one describes Don Juan's features in the mirror. Though the Commander may emerge from an automobile, it is Donna Anna, dreaming and, in the future, rising, who is the driving force of the poem.

As John E. Bowlt points out, Blok's poems, marked by a typically Symbolist "vacillation ... between concrete reality and spiritual essence" (Bowlt, "Aleksandr Blok" 349), often lack a concrete, descriptive sense of place. Yet while there is little description other than "cold" and emotional attributes, "Шаги Командора" undeniably brings to the fore the idea of home and hearth, read by David Sloane as the central theme of the totality of Blok's three-volume poetic oeuvre (Sloane 22).⁴ The poem presents an almost entirely static scene: the one event (other than utterances and sounds) is the commander's arrival and entrance in the house. Of the sounds described, two come from outside the house: the commander's vehicle (actually represented as sound and its absence, identified as "silent like an owl" at the same time as its one visual attribute is the black color that fails to differentiate it from the surrounding night) and the crowing of a rooster heard coming "from a blessed, unknown, faraway country". We are clearly not in seventeenth-century Spain, since the commander arrives in a motorcar; the repetition of the word "cold" and numerous synonyms suggests we may be in Russia. Blok's use of such repetition often has the effect of deconstructing the contrasts he sets up between two antithetical things: for example, in "Шаги Командора", the main element of place, driving the narrative tension, is the contrast between outside and inside, yet the contrast is neutralized by the fact that both the interior of the house and the exterior (when the Commander

³ In fact, the unexplained death of Donna Anna and the meeting of 'son' Don Juan and 'father' Commander over (or adjacent to) her corpse suggests a strange reworking of Freud's myth, laid out in *Totem and Taboo*, of the primal horde, at the same time as it feels reminiscent of the final scene in Dostoevsky's *Idiot*. See Elizabeth Dalton, "Myshkin and Rogozhin", in *Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis*, Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, ed. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1989.

⁴ Blok's ambivalence toward the concept of home also looms large in his essays, in particular "Безвременье" (Stagnation) from 1906. Blok V, 66-82.

enters from outside) are described as cold; similarly, the two antagonists in the drama or anti-drama, Don Juan and the Commander, are referred to as cruel, the first in his features, the second in the question he asks as he enters the house. In addition to this identity between antagonists, successive stanzas establish non-identity between Dona Anna and herself: at first she is presented as asleep, next she is revealed to be dead, next she is addressed as the Bride of Light; yet in all of these states she is in communication with herself, through dreams, and no-one else.

The sleeping, 'undead' state in which Blok presents Donna Anna in the poem is also reminiscent of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, who went to sleep and never died (Pirog 113), the subject of a 1909 poem in Blok's *Итальянские стихи* (Italian Poems), inspired by a painting by Fra Lippo Lippi seen by the poet in Spoleto on a journey with his wife (Pirog 112-3). Blok scholar Zinaida Mints finds a parallel with the trope of Sleeping Beauty, or more precisely, the Gnostic myth of Sophia, the World Soul, represented in the writings of Vladimir Solovyov as a captive princess (Mints 223), which figured throughout Blok's pre-1905 poetic debut, *Стихи о Прекрасной Даме* (Poems about the Beautiful Lady); this link is reinforced by the reference to Donna Anna as Bride of Light. The image of the sleeping princess also functioned broadly as political allegory in Russian culture of the early 1900s, for example in Rimsky-Korsakov's 1902 opera *Кащей Бессмертный* (Rutten 24, 53, 90). If we pursue the connection between the poem's Donna Anna and previous heroines of Blok's poetry, above all the heroine of the 1906 play *Незнакомка* (The Unknown Woman), she may also be read as embodying the dormant force of Revolution.

In Blok's 1908 essay "Народ и интеллигенция" (The People and the Intelligentsia), he repeatedly describes the millions of Russian peasants who constitute the "people" as "seemingly ruled by sleep and silence" (Blok V, 323)—but he cautions the intelligentsia that the masses' "sleep is ending" (Blok V, 327). The intelligentsia, who are preoccupied with "aesthetics, individualism and despair," feed increasingly on the will to death, he asserts, referencing Schopenhauer, while the people are the perennial bearers of the will to life. As Ellen Rutten documents in her book *Unattainable Bride Russia*, this opposition figures in gendered terms throughout Blok and much of canonical 19th century literature (Rutten 40): the Superfluous Man, culminating in Turgenev's *Asya*, being the embodiment of the intelligentsia's alienation from authentic Russianness, resulting lack of vitality, and failure to recognize and reckon with the plight of the peasantry.

Within his marriage to Lyubov Dmitrievna Mendeleeva, daughter of the great chemist and described by Blok's biographer Vladimir Orlov as diametrically opposite to her husband in her "Positivist" outlook (Orlov 584, 595), Blok would also invoke the trope of sleep, or rather sleepwalking, as prelude to catastrophe—in a letter of autumn 1912, he wrote to her when she was touring with a troupe of traveling players and got involved in a passionate love affair, "You are submerged in a deep sleep... what you are doing is the final part of your dream, which will lead to catastrophe" (Orlov 651). Orlov notes that Blok frequently chided his wife for being (metaphorically) asleep (Orlov 584). Unlike his spouse's infidelity or alleged spiritual torpor, the approaching cataclysm that will transform Russian society and the entire

world is viewed by Blok with both dread and longing, much like the approach of Fate or the Commander in “Шаги Командора”.

The pairing of dread and longing is typical of castration anxiety; Green, in *Le complexe de castration*, describes such anxiety as “doubly conflicted”, closely linked to both fear and desire (Green, *Le complexe* 75-6). In his book *Sodom & Psyche*, Aleksandr Etkind documents Blok’s fascination with literal castration, whether among the heretical religious sect of the Skoptsy or in the historical narrative of the Roman politician Catiline (Etkind, 60-78). Etkind also documents Blok’s attachment to his mother “to the point of fusion” (Etkind 69) from an early age, a fact which becomes evident from a glance at his letters. There is a theoretical connection, asserted by Ferenczi, between castration anxiety and separation anxiety; as Green notes, for Ferenczi, castration represented “the definitive impossibility of reunion with the mother” (Green, *Le complexe* 80). Blok’s feelings towards his mother and wife, like the motherland he repeatedly metaphorizes as mother/sister/wife (Rutten 53, 79) are, in any case, characterized by intense ambivalence. Abandoned by Blok’s father, an abusive husband, when the boy was a few months old, Blok’s mother, Aleksandra Andreyevna Kublitsky-Piottukh, suffered from bouts of severe depression throughout his childhood and later life (Etkind 69, 72). She and Blok’s wife were barely able to tolerate each other—the couple lived for years in the same house with both Aleksandra Andreyevna and her sister Maria, an accomplished translator.

The claustrophobic atmosphere of the family home, and the ambivalence toward home and hearth that pervades Blok’s work, are conveyed in the 1910 poem “Сон” (Dream). Dedicated to Aleksandra Andreyevna, the poem describes a dream in which the persona, his wife and his mother lie dead and buried next to each other; when the Last Judgment comes, the wife has no desire to rise from the dead, because “freedom is not dear to her”; the mother asks him to push the stone away in order to open the tomb, but the persona replies that he is out of breath and tells the two women to pray together for the angel to do it (Blok III, 134). Read with the insomniac “Шаги Командора”—initially conceived in the same year—the relatively short “Сон” may be seen as that work’s negative image, in which the withdrawn ‘object’ of the triangle is male, and (perhaps for that reason) provides no assurance of resurrection or even resolution. Unlike the unexpectedly dynamic Donna Anna, however, that male protagonist is equipped with the power of speech.

Ivanov’s analysis of “Шаги Командора” shows, crucially, that its narrative structure is composed of a series of sounds (Ivanov 645); five of the ten stanzas each represent a sound (the rooster crow, the car horn, the fateful footsteps, the Commander’s voice, and the chiming clock with which that voice has been identified) while the first, third, fourth, eighth, and ninth stanzas present the silence of Donna Anna’s bedroom (Ivanov counts the questions asked of Juan and Anna as sounds, and therefore counts only three stanzas of silence; I would assert that those questions resound on a different plane than the other sounds). Where the canonical theatrical representations of the Don Juan story tend to emphasize the visual strangeness and horror of the Commander, a statue come to life rising out of the ground, in the poem he is first heralded by a series of metonymic visual cues (the lights of his automobile, then the black vehicle itself, likened to an owl, as Ivanov notes, in terms of sound-- or rather, *lack of sound*) but his presence in the house is communicated purely through

auditory signals: his footsteps, followed by his question to Don Juan (Ivanov 645). The apparent primacy of sound over sight in the poem has precedents in the Jewish tradition (Jacoby 3, 119), of which Blok had some knowledge (Blok VI, 144-150). Yet that primacy is paradoxically undermined by the silent omnipotence of Donna Anna. At the same time, Donna Anna's divinized, Mariological aura surely aligns her with the rooster crow from a paradisiacal "unknown, faraway country"—in political terms, that land may also be read as the post-revolutionary future.

Most of Blok's poems are punctuated by precise dates of composition; "Шаги Командора" is atypical in being dated to a range: "September 1910 – 16 February 1912" (Blok III, 519). During the eighteen months of its development, Blok can best be described as shifting in between various states of mourning, and toward the end of the period, he wrote in his journal: "All my near ones are on the edge of insanity, somehow sick or cracked" (Orlov 583). He began work on the poem (if we trust his dating) nine months after the death of his father; worked on it during what has been called "the darkest period of his life" (Ljunggren 68) during which he finally accepted that Symbolism, the literary movement in which he was heavily invested, would not have the transformative effect on Russian life that he had hoped; and finished work on it while in the process of ending (among other affairs) an on-again off-again, possibly unconsummated love affair with a married actress, Valentina Shchegoleva (Pyman II, 98). A mutual acquaintance, Nadezhda Chulkova, described Shchegoleva as "quite ugly but very feminine and graceful, with a pleasant voice. When she became emotional, her speech was halting and almost incoherent." (Litvin and Greshichkin 851). Shchegoleva inspired some of Blok's most deliriously tender love poems (Litvin and Greshichkin 850), and also, if we are to concur with Pyman, one of his least erotic. In January 1911, midway through his work on the poem, Blok wrote the following short note to Schegoleva:

I know nothing. I have long thought of you. I have long hovered about your home. Now it is two o'clock in the morning. I cannot come to you. And I never can. Just now I wanted to go to you and tell you—today, all that remains of my youth is yours. And I am not going to. But you will hear, you will hear me now. (Blok VIII, 328)

In this relationship, as in the poem, sound clearly reigned supreme over sight; yet a sound also signaled its doom. According to Pyman, the frustration and jealousy of this affair, and the sound late one night of the arrival of Shchegoleva's husband in his car, led to Blok's "realization of his inability to form any further profound ties with a woman" (Pyman II, 98).

Besides the Donna Anna of the Don Juan legend, another Anna is likely being referenced here. Blok dates the completion of the poem as February 16, the feast day of Anna the Prophetess and Simeon the God-Receiver (in the Russian Orthodox Church considered to be the last prophets of the Old Testament), and the afterfeast of the Orthodox holiday commemorating the Presentation in the Temple, also generally understood to mark the onset of spring. On the one hand, the Holy Family is ironically mirrored in the accursed Don Juan Family of Juan, Anna and the Commander; on the other hand, the poem contains a kind of catharsis and the promise of renewal even at the cost of Don Juan's life and the elimination of the socioeconomic class which he

represents. It is notable that the Biblical story (verses 22-40 in the second chapter of Luke) and icons depicting the Presentation show Anna in an incantatory trance (Fig. 1), as does Giotto (Fig. 2). The biblical Anna is a widow; in contrast to the non-speaking Anna in the poem, however, “she spake of [Christ] to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem”, according to Luke 2:38. The Presentation is also an important Mariological feast, appropriately given that Anna the prophetess was a mentor to Mary (Pace 546); for Orthodox religion, the feast is closely linked to the Seven Sorrows of Mary and the icon of the Softening of Evil Hearts, depicting seven swords piercing her heart (Fig. 2). Though Blok was never conventionally religious, he frequently drew on Mariological and biblical symbols (Pyman I, 76, 159 and passim), and would doubtless have been aware of this connotation and Anna’s prophetic stature.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

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