

Title: “Tears to Burn Down Cities”: Revolutionary Emotions in Mayakovsky’s Poetry
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In *Literature and Revolution*, Lev Trotsky critiqued Vladimir Mayakovsky for creating a poetry in which the primary thrust was emotional, rather than political. “He has a very high degree of pathos in his works,” Trotsky complained, “a pathos that does not always have strength behind it. [...] The pathos is destroyed by shouting and hoarseness.” Maksim Gorky also admits his discomfort with Mayakovsky’s hyperemotional side in his memoirs. Recalling a private meeting when the poet read his “Cloud in Pants,” Gorky notes “Mayakovsky even broke into sobs, like a woman, and this alarmed and disturbed me.” For Gorky and Trotsky, emotional outpouring could not constitute a form of revolutionary art.

Yet Mayakovsky himself had theorized the political impact of emotion as early as 1914. In his essay “No White Flags,” he drew upon Leonid Andreev’s distinction between two types of tears: those that only “redden the face and dampen the handkerchief,” versus those that “burn down cities, and even scatter wild beasts in their wake.” Avant-garde poets, he suggests, shed tears of only the latter kind, while traditional poets continue to rely on “their ageing, blunted nerves.” Far from exuding sentimentalism, Mayakovsky’s early work brims with a strangely tangible anger. He often peculiarly equates his poems with emotion itself: calling his chapbook “not words, but clods of convulsions.” Yet the awkward question of whether Mayakovsky intentionally blunted his own nerves during the Soviet 1920s remains.

My paper traces the changing function of emotion in Mayakovsky’s poetry, from the avant-garde period to his official role as state poet in the 1920s. I argue that recent innovations in affect theory (Terada 2001; Flatley 2008) allow us to unlock the radical political potential of Mayakovsky’s early work, even in poems that are not normally read as ideological.