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Title: The Metaphor of Speaking in Tongues

Abstract:

In 1921, the poet Osip Mandelstam used the metaphor of speaking in tongues to describe the verbal articulation of the intoxicating experience of observing total social-political transformation. More recently, this metaphor has been applied to *skaz*, the dominant narrative style of the mid-1920s, as an expression of the failure of the Soviet avant-garde to facilitate interclass communication through its experiments with language. This paper takes up the same metaphor in accounting for what was communicated in this revolutionary voice. *Skaz* allowed early Soviet writers to give verbal expression to the processes of mental and emotional development being undergone by the Soviet peasantry and working class. But *skaz* also served as medium through which intelligentsia writers strove to come to an understanding of themselves and the role they were to play in these transformations. This paper situates this vogue for revolutionary glossolalia in the conceptual history from which the metaphor emerged: that of enthusiasm. Enthusiasm's rich philosophical tradition dates back to the pre-Socratics but took on new significance in the realm of political philosophy, first, in the wake of the French Revolution, and later, in the early Soviet years, when enthusiasm was first prescribed by the state as a core component of civic virtue. What is expressed by this concept in each of its diverse applications (this paper addresses Plato, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Lenin) is the dialectical movement of the subject beyond itself — into the mind of a deity or the spirit of the revolutionary crowd — the negation of the self and attainment of new consciousness through the voice of the other. Re-reading key *skaz* practitioners and their theorists in light of the concept of revolutionary enthusiasm will offer new insight into the processes of political subjectification, which played themselves out in the experimental prose of the Soviet 1920s.