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Divine Physiology: The Hellenism of Mandelstam’s Dormition Cathedral

“The Russian Language is a Hellenic language,” Osip Mandelstam emphatically states in his seminal essay, “On the Nature of the Word,” published in 1922. Mandelstam begins the essay by asking, rhetorically, whether “contemporary Russian literature [is] really the same as the literature of Nekrasov, Pushkin, Derzhavin, or Simeon Polotsky” and by concluding that the unity of Russian literature lies in its Hellenic principle of “free incarnation.” That same year, Mandelstam also published Tristia, a collection of poems thematically linking Russia to classical antiquity. For Mandelstam, whose 1913 manifesto “Morning of Acmeism” articulates the tenets of his poetics through the metaphor of architecture, Russia’s Hellenism lies within its monumental structures. The cathedral, in particular, with its “divine physiology” shaped by the human form, functions as the living vessel of culture. Thus, just as “Notre Dame” and “Hagia Sophia” could be considered the cornerstones of Mandelstam’s aptly titled first collection, Stone, so his poetic construction of the Dormition Cathedral in Moscow becomes the crux of Tristia, linking Russia to the legacy of Hellenic antiquity through the history of its building.

Central to Mandelstam’s understanding of the cathedral as a divine physiological vessel is the notion that monuments embody both celestial greatness and earthly humility. Mandelstam states: “We do not fly, we ascend only such towers as we ourselves are able to build,” and thus the history of the cathedral becomes inseparable from the human figures which occupy its walls. Mandelstam’s poetic rendering of the Dormition likewise intertwines his meta-

1 Mandelstam and Monas, 510.
2 Ibid, 510.
3 Mandelshtam and Brown, 50.
philological concept of Russian literature and his actual visit to the cathedral in the winter of 1916. The physiological link between the church and the human form emerges in the poem’s very first stanza as he anthropomorphizes the churches as a girls’ choir:

В разноголосице девического хора
Все церкви нежные поют на голос свой,
И в дугах каменных Успенского собора
Мне брови чудятся, высокие, дугой.

[In the polyphony of a girls choir
All gentle churches sing in their own voice,
And the stone arches of the Dormition Cathedral
Seem to me like high, arched brows.]

In this image of “all gentle churches” (Vse tserkvi nezhnye) singing together, the metaphor of the girls’ choir is instructive in that it emphasizes both individuality—each church sings in “its own voice” (na golos svoi)—and unity, as the choir connotes a unified group assembled in a particular location of a church. Indeed, a choir is a perfect example of how church architecture may be defined by its living inhabitants, as the “choir” (khor) is both the ensemble of singers and the architectural term for the section where the singers reside. Thus, the metaphor of the churches as a choir suggests the idea of unity in that “all churches” are united within the body of a single meta-church.

In the second two verses, the poem shifts from the general perspective of “all churches” to one church in particular—the Dormition Cathedral, located in the Moscow Kremlin. Unlike “Notre Dame” and “Hagia Sophia,” the two sister poems from Stone, this poem is not titled “Dormition Cathedral,” even though this structure is named in the first stanza. By beginning the poem with the metaphor of a “polyphony” of churches, Mandelstam suggests that the churches of Moscow (and of Russia in general) are a kind of amalgam of different architectural structures

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and styles without a central nexus, such as in Paris or Constantinople. Mandelstam hesitates to identify the Dormition Cathedral as a unifying force for Russian culture, placing it instead within the context of a larger “polyphony” of churches. Furthermore, rather than depicting the structure as a totality, he focuses on one singular aspect—its “stone arches” (v dugakh kamennykh), the blind arcades wrapping around the exterior, which “seem [to me] like high, arched brows” (Mne brovi chudiatsia, wysokie, dugoi). This metaphor of stone arches likened to a feature of the human face suggests a direct correlation between structural components of the church and human anatomy. Significantly, however, Mandelstam uses the word chudiatsia to make this link. The verb chudit’sia means “to seem” or “to appear,” and it shares a root with chudo (miracle). The similarity is not mere appearance, but rather evidence of a divine connection between architecture and human form illuminated by the word itself. For Mandelstam, the “divine physiology” of the cathedral is not just a metaphor for the principles of his Acmeism. Rather, the materiality of the Russian language manifests the physiology of both the human body and the cathedral. It is precisely this “capacity for achieving concrete modalities of existence,” which he terms “Russian nominalism,” that Mandelstam identifies as the Hellenic spirit of the Russian language. The word chudit’sia itself—its sound, graphics, meaning and connotations—emerges as a philological incarnation of Russian history and culture.

Mandelstam’s treatment of architectural structures in the second stanza follows the same formula used in the first, beginning with a panoramic view of a city that narrows to one specific monument:

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5 Mandelstam and Monas, 510–511.
И с укрепленного архангелами вала
Я город озирал на чудной высоте.
В стенах Акрополя печаль меня снедала
По русском имени и русской красоте.

[From a rampart fortified by archangels
I gazed upon the city from a miraculous height.
In the Acropolis walls I was consumed by grief
For a Russian name and Russian beauty.]

In the first two verses Mandelstam again posits a divine connection between architectural structures and the human spectator. The rampart—the defensive wall of a fortress—is fortified by the divine strength of “archangels.” The coupling of chudnoi (miraculous) and vysote (height) echoes the juxtaposition of chudiatsia (seems) and vysokie (high) from the first stanza and further reinforces this notion of tall constructions as a literal manifestation of human aspiration towards celestial greatness.

In the second half of the stanza, Mandelstam enters a particular space, the “Acropolis walls” (V stenakh Akropolia), establishing a parallel between the Dormition Cathedral and the Acropolis that embodies the philological link articulated in “On the Nature of the Word.” In the essay Mandelstam first states, “The Russian language, like Russian nationality itself, was formed out of endless mixtures, crossings, graftings and foreign influences,” thus harkening back to the image of Russian churches as a “polyphony” of distinct voices. He then elaborates, “[t]he Russian language is a Hellenic language. Due to a complex of historical conditions, the vital forces of Hellenic culture, which had abandoned the West to Latin influences, and which found scant nourishment . . . in childless Byzantium, rushed to the bosom of Russian speech.” The poem emerges as the logical conclusion of Mandelstam’s invented philological progression of

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6 Mandelstam and Monas, 510.
7 Ibid.
Hellenic antiquity—Notre Dame in the Latin West, Hagia Sophia in Byzantium, and lastly the Dormition Cathedral in Moscow.

Later in the essay, Mandelstam refers to the Acropolis itself as a nexus of Hellenic culture for which there is no Russian counterpart: “[w]e have no Acropolis. Our culture has been wandering until now and has not found its walls. But to make up for it, every word of Dal’s dictionary is a kernel of Acropolis, a small castle, a winged fortress of nominalism, equipped with the Hellenic spirit.”8 In the poem, Mandelstam’s location “in the walls of the Acropolis” is something of an inaccuracy. The Acropolis is not a specific architectural structure but, rather, the whole fortified complex of the Athenian citadel, wherein the Parthenon is the main temple ruin. In much the same way that kremlin (kreml’) is the generic Russian word for “fortress,” which has come to refer specifically to the Moscow kremlin, so acropolis is the generic Greek for “citadel,” which has come to refer specifically to the Athenian acropolis. Yet Mandelstam maintains that Russia has no Acropolis, and this may be due to the fact that the synecdochic relationship between the Acropolis and the Parthenon (whereby the walls of the temple become the walls of the whole complex) does not exist in Moscow for the Kremlin and the Dormition Cathedral.

The relationships between space and architecture in these two historic complexes reflect the structures of their respective cultures. For instance, the Parthenon is clearly the largest, central structure of a small, unified citadel, such that Mandelstam regards it as a kind of centripetal vessel of Hellenic culture. The Kremlin, by contrast, is a much vaster space, with meandering paths and many different buildings of varying sizes and functions. In much the same way, Russia’s vast geographic expanse is such that the Moscow Kremlin is more a centrifugal cultural force, with its “polyphony” of churches disseminating outwards rather than inwards.

8 Ibid, 516.
This centrifugality or diffuseness of Russian culture can be found in Mandelstam’s assessment of the language itself as possessed of an “awesome and boundless element,” such that each word in Vladimir Dal’s dictionary—a magnum opus of Russian lexicography—is a “kernel of Acropolis” unto itself, or a “winged fortress of nominalism,” echoing the poem’s image of a rampart guarded by winged creatures.9 Mandelstam identifies this nominalism, the incarnation of the word, as the feature of the Russian language which “links it with Hellenic philological culture.”10 In this way, Mandelstam’s grief “for a Russian name and Russian beauty” (Po russkom imeni i russkoi krasote) within the Acropolis walls becomes a longing for the Russian language itself and the beauty of its living, incarnate words, whose origins lie in Hellenic antiquity.

However, considering the biographical context of the poem’s origins, these two verses assume additional meaning. The poem is postscripted “February 1916, Moscow,” and can therefore be dated to Mandelstam’s first visit to Moscow in late January and early February of 1916.11 Mandelstam, a St. Petersburg resident who had traveled at length throughout Western Europe, came to Moscow to visit Marina Tsvetaeva. The two had connected briefly at a literary salon in St. Petersburg the previous month, and Mandelstam traveled frequently to Moscow for several months following their first meeting. The poets allegedly had a brief affair. Tsvetaeva acted as Mandelstam’s guide, touring him around the city and insisting that he, a Jewish cosmopolitan, could lay claim to Russian history and culture as his own.12 Thus the poem can be read as a response to Tsvetaeva’s belief in the distinct ‘Russianness’ of Moscow, embedding Russian language and culture within a Hellenic tradition.

9 Ibid, 510, 516.
10 Ibid, 511.
11 Mikhailov and Nerler.
12 Karlinsky, 56–58.
The phrase “consumed by grief” (pechal' menia snedala) in the stanza’s third verse alludes to the first line of Pushkin’s famous translation of an elegy by André Marie de Chénier.[1] The poem is addressed to a young woman who has fallen in love. By alluding to a love poem translated by Pushkin (named among the Russian poets whose unity he questions in “About the Nature of the Word”), Mandelstam suggests that such seemingly disparate cultural entities as an 18th century French elegy and an ancient Greek citadel can in fact be linked by Russian philology. Given the biographical context and the romantic nature of the allusion, Mandelstam—who became much enamored of Tsvetaeva—is also referring to the poet herself. His grief for “a Russian name and Russian beauty” may in fact be a desire for the woman, whose Russian surname, Tsvetaeva, he later links with the cathedral, reinforcing the Hellenic spirit of the language’s intrinsic connection between the corporal and the philological.

In the third stanza, Mandelstam expounds on the notion of Russian culture as a polyphony of different “foreign influences,” linking Russia with two cultures that may be regarded as emissaries of the Hellenic legacy: Byzantium and Renaissance Italy. He writes:

Не диво ль дивное, что вертоград нам снится,
Где реют голуби в горячей синеве,
Что православные крюки поет черница:
Успенье нежное—Флоренция в Москве.

[Isn’t it a marvelous marvel, that we dream of a garden,
Where doves soar in the burning blue,
The nun is singing Orthodox hymns:
Gentle Dormition—Florence in Moscow.]  

Mandelstam continues his description of the sublime with the tautological formula “Ne divo l' divnoe.” Here he uses both noun and adjective, “marvel” and “marvelous,” whose meaning comes close to the word chudo, which appears in earlier stanzas. However, whereas previous stanzas link the sublime with the vision and perception of architectural spaces or city views, here
it assumes a more specifically Christian signification. Mandelstam's choice of *vertograd*, an archaic word that means “garden,” “vineyard,” or “orchard” and is used to signify both heaven and the Garden of Eden, has a more sublime connotation than *sad* [garden].

Furthermore, it recalls a large volume of poetry entitled *Vertograd Mnogotsvenyi* (The Multi-Colored Garden), which was composed in the late seventeenth century by the Baroque poet Simeon Polotsky; this same Polotsky is named in the list of poets from the opening lines of “About the Nature of the Word.” *Vertograd Mnogotsvenyi* is a massive compendium of poems translated into Russian syllabic verse from various Latin sources. The work is considered a *florilegium*, a literary compilation of excerpts from other works. Polotsky’s title, “The Multi-Colored Garden,” is another reference to the genre—*florilegium* translates from Latin as “gathering of flowers.” The title also highlights the shared etymology of the Russian words for “color” and “flower” in the root *tsvet*. Followed by the image of soaring doves—a common representation of the Holy Spirit in Christian iconography—Mandelstam’s *vertograd* connotes both the celestial concept of heaven and the earthly image of a flowery paradise, underscoring yet again the way the Russian language emphasizes concrete modalities even in its esoteric or ecclesiastical etymologies.

As the poem shifts to a more esoteric, celestial realm, Mandelstam’s imagery remains resolutely sensory and material. He describes the sky, for instance, not as a distant, cold vault of space but as a “burning blue” (*v goriachei cineve*). The word *goriachei*, meaning “hot” or “burning,” is a surprising epithet for the sky; in religious contexts heat and burning evoke images of hell rather than heaven. Rather than calling the sky *nebo* (sky) or *nebesa* (heavens), Mandelstam makes reference to it through metonymy: the noun *cineva* means “blue” or “blueness.” The images of the garden and the hot, blue sky, which evoke a southern landscape

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13 Skatov, 238.
14 Sazonova, 301.
more than a Russian one, together with the reference to Florence in the stanza’s final line imply an Italian locale.

This emphasis on concrete, physical description continues in the image of the nun singing hymns. Mandelstam again appeals to archaic language, using the word *kriuki*, a Russian term for an old Byzantine style of musical notation. Mandelstam identifies these hymns as “Orthodox” (*pravoslavnye*), since they derive from the eastern Byzantine rite rather than the Latin West.\(^{15}\) The word *kriuki* is a Russian diminutive for “hooks,” referring to the hooked shapes of the notations themselves. Similarly, he refers to the nun with the archaic word *chernitsa*, from the root of the Russian word for “black” (*chernyi*), and thereby alludes to the black religious habits traditionally worn by nuns. *Chernitsa* is yet another example of how color can function metonymically; in this instance, it represents the whole occupational identity of an individual. In the case of both *kriuki* and *chernitsa*, Mandelstam’s archaic diction places a strong emphasis on the concrete and the visual.

In the final verse, the stanza’s visual imagery and archaic diction culminate in a synthesis of Russian and Italian culture, embodied in the form of the Dormition Cathedral. The colon at the end of the third verse suggests that the “Gentle Dormition” (*Uspen’e nezhnoe*) found at the beginning of the fourth line may in fact be the lyrics or the theme of the nun’s song. Yet the repetition of the epithet “gentle” (*nezhoe*)—used to describe the singing churches in the first stanza (where the Dormition Cathedral appeared)—and the precise location “in Moscow” (*v Moskve*) suggest that Mandelstam is also referring to the cathedral itself. “Florence in Moscow” (*Florentsia v Moskve*) thus becomes a reference to the church’s construction. Built in 1475-79 under the auspices of Grand Duke Ivan III, the cathedral was designed by the Italian architect

\(^{15}\) Mikhailov and Nerler.
Aristotele Fiorovanti. Prior to the commission, Fiorovanti had worked primarily in Florence for Cosimo de Medici, the great patron of the Italian Renaissance.\textsuperscript{16} Fiorovanti’s model was not an Italian church but the eponymous cathedral in Vladimir, built in the late 12\textsuperscript{th} century.

Like most medieval Russian churches, the Dormition Cathedral of Vladimir was not conceived in an “indigenous” Russian style; rather, it was modeled on a Byzantine antecedent, the Holy Apostles church in Constantinople—a five-domed, cruciform building consecrated in the mid-6\textsuperscript{th} century, a few decades after the Hagia Sophia. The confluence of Byzantium and Renaissance Italy is even further integrated into the construction of the Dormition Cathedral in Moscow. Ivan III’s second wife, Sofia Palaeologa, was responsible for Fiorovanti’s commission. Sofia, a niece of the last Byzantine Emperor, has been credited with introducing a number of Byzantine customs into the Russian court. Raised in Rome after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Sofia arrived at Moscow in 1472 with a number of craftsmen in her retinue. At her insistence, several more missions were made to Italy in order to invite artisans, architects and painters to the court in Moscow.\textsuperscript{17} The history of the cathedral’s construction mirrors Mandelstam’s account of the origins of the Russian language, whose Hellenic spirit, like the tsar’s wife, abandoned the Latin West and Byzantium and found a home in Russia. The third stanza’s archaic words of medieval Russian origin (which further recall Byzantine antecedents) combine with its visual evocation of an Italianate landscape to suggest that the Dormition Cathedral, designed by an Italian in a Byzantine style, manifests the “polyphonic” and distinctly Hellenic nature of Russian culture.

As in his evocation of “a Russian name and Russian beauty,” Mandelstam’s conception of “Florence in Moscow” operates on a historical, philological and personal level. Aside from the

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Fennell, 319.
Florentine origins of the architect, “Florence in Moscow” is a reference to Tsvetaeva and her Russian surname. One account of the origins of the name Fiorenza, the antiquated Italian for ‘Florence,’ comes from the many flowers blooming throughout the city, a connection evident in the Italian word for flower, fiore. The family name Tsvetaeva, whose root tsvet has already been noted in relation to Polotsky’s florilegium, is a perfect etymological correspondence to the Latin-derived Florentia, as the city is called in Russian. It is an even more perfect linguistic coincidence that the architect’s name, Fiorovanti, is also derived from the Italian root for flower. The verse “Gentle Dormition—Florence in Moscow” is a historical reference to the cathedral’s origins as well as a philological reference to the shared origins and meaning of the names Tsvetaeva, Fioravanti, Florence, and Polotsky’s Vertograd Mnogotsvetniy.

In the final stanza, Mandelstam expands on the idea of the cathedral as a Russo-Byzantine-Italianate synthesis. Just as in the first stanza, his perspective broadens to a plurality of churches:

И пятиглавые московские соборы
С их итальянскою и русскою душой
Напоминают мне явление Авроры,
Но с русским именем и в шубке меховой.

[And the five-domed Moscow cathedrals
With their Italian and Russian souls
Remind me of the appearance of Aurora,
But with a Russian name and a fur coat.]

Anthropomorphizing the churches yet again, Mandelstam endows them with souls. The physiological link between the Russian church and the human form becomes apparent when one considers the etymology of the words piatiglavye (five-domed) and sobory (cathedrals). Piatiglavye is the architectural term for a five-domed church, which, following the prominent

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18 Villari, 60.
19 Mikhailov and Nerler.
Vladimir and Moscow prototypes, spread throughout Russia. The word is a compound of piat’ (five) and glav (head). This suggests, like Mandelstam’s formulation of the brow-arches, a literal parallel between the architectural form of the dome at the pinnacle of the church and the head as the pinnacle of human physiology. The word sobor is most commonly translated as “cathedral” to signify its particular importance as a church. Sobor derives from the verb sobrat’, meaning to collect, gather or assemble. Indeed, what the Catholic Church would call an ecumenical council is, in Russian, sobor. The term also means “congregation,” and so, like the choir metaphor from the first stanza, it signifies the shared divine physiology of the architectural structure and its living occupants.

One key difference between a cathedral and a sobor is that there can be only one cathedral in a city since it serves as the seat of a bishopry. By contrast, there can be multiple sobory in a city; indeed, the Dormition is just one of several sobory located within the Moscow Kremlin. Whereas the organization of cathedrals in the Catholic West emphasizes a centralized seat of power held by one bishop, sobory are dispersed throughout a city. This is why Mandelstam can speak of many piatiglavye sobory in Moscow. Derived from the Dormition prototype, they can possess both Russian and Italian souls.

Mandelstam invokes yet another anthropomorphic image while describing the visual appearance of the churches. The poet likens the cathedrals, whose five domes are often gilded, to the “appearance of Aurora” (iavlenie Avrory), the goddess of the dawn in Roman mythology. Rather than comparing the image of gilded domes to the dawn, Mandelstam invokes the dawn’s personified form with another reference to classical antiquity. Furthermore, the Russian iavlenie, here translated as “appearance,” may also signify a phenomenon. The word carries connotations of the sublime or miraculous – hence the reference to a divine, mythological figure.
The parallel between the dawn and the gilded domes exhibits Mandelstam’s understanding of the Russian church as a diffused, centrifugal vessel. In “Morning of Acmeism” Mandelstam states: “The fine arrow of the Gothic bell tower is angry, because the whole sense of it is to stab heaven, to reproach it with its emptiness.”\(^{20}\) Conversely, in “Hagia Sophia” Mandelstam writes of the church’s dome: “Truly your cupola, in the words of a witness,/ seems to hang by a chain from heaven.”\(^{21}\) In the case of the spires of Notre Dame—which emanate from the church and point upwards—and the dome of Hagia Sophia, which appears to be suspended from above, the structures’ pinnacles stand in relief against the sky and originate from either heaven or earth. The five-domed pinnacles of the Muscovite cathedrals, by contrast, mimic the phenomenon of Aurora; they resemble and become a part of the sky, diffused and spread in all directions, like Russian culture itself. Mirroring the divine phenomenon of heaven while retaining their distinctly anthropomorphic shape, the domes embody Mandelstam’s understanding of the cathedral as both celestial and earthly.

The classical goddess of the dawn is an intermediary between the divine and the human. Gods and goddesses of the Greco-Roman pantheon possess human physical forms, yet are endowed with divine powers. Mandelstam’s Aurora can therefore manifest the celestial phenomenon of the dawn while still possessing the distinctly human trappings of a “Russian name and a fur coat” (c russkim imenem i v shubke mekhovoi). Indeed, his second invocation of a “Russian name,” like the first, is a reference to the human figure of Tsvetaeva, who likely wore a “fur coat” during Mandelstam’s winter visit to Moscow. The parallel between the eighth and the sixteenth verses of the poem suggests that the “Russian beauty” of which Mandelstam speaks is

\(^{20}\) Mandelshtam and Brown, 49.
precisely the Hellenic materiality of the Russian language: as tangible as the cozy, sensual pleasure of a fur coat; as warm as the blue sky on a sunny day; as black as a nun’s habit; as crooked as the shapes of musical notes. Mandelstam concludes the poem by marrying the tactile sensation of a fur coat with a “Russian name” to suggest that all the “kernels” of Russian culture—with its attendant histories, mythologies and architectural monuments—reside in the language.

Works Cited


Appendix

В разноголосице девического хора
Все церкви нежные поют на голос свой,
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Я город озирал на чудной высоте.
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По русском имени и русской красоте.

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Isn’t it a marvelous marvel, that we dream of a garden,
Where doves soar in the burning blue,
The nun is singing Orthodox hymns:
Gentle Assumption – Florence in Moscow.

And the five-domed Moscow cathedrals
With their Italian and Russian souls
Remind me of the appearance of Aurora,
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(Translation my own)