

Title: Inquiry & Quest: Mandelstam's Hellenic Poems
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Abstract:

Following Omry Ronen's claim that "the myth of the suffering logos, because of its metapoetic value, was of special importance for Mandelstam," this paper reads Osip Mandelstam's Hellenic lyric poems as a set of myth-based inquiries into the origins of the acmeist logos, or the poetic word. This allows me to pose questions about the lyric as a specifically thoughtful, capacious, even inquisitive genre, and what it might mean to find in Mandelstam's Hellenic lyrics that combination of rigor, curiosity, and imagination usually associated with logical inquiry.

I discuss the set of Mandelstam's lyrics that treat Hellenism in image and theme, such as: "Zolostistogo meda struia" (1917), "Kogda psikheia zhizn'" (1920), "Tristia" (1918), "Sestry tiazhest' i nezhnost'" (1920), "Ia slovo pozabyl'" (1920), "Za to, chto ia ruki tvoi" (1920), "Ia v khorovod tenei'" (1920), and "Bessonnitsa, Gomer, tugie parusa" (1915), and argue that, in addition to comprising a "Hellenic" series in Mandelstam's corpus, these poems also explicitly incorporate and thematize mythic journeys and quests into their very fabric, both in terms of image (i.e., Odysseus's journey home) and in terms of structure (i.e., the reader's journey from present-day Crimea to ancient Tauris, and thence from the Argos to Odysseus's ship; or the poet's journey from the catalogue of ships into his own bed). This structure – wherein a Hellenic poem is composed like a quest, the images in the poem take on metapoetic weight, and the end of the poem offers a vision of unity, presence, and reconciliation between the metaphors that do the seeking and the myth that's sought – is common through this series. Taking my cue from their riddling, questing, journeying qualities and motifs, I offer a reading of these poems as inquiries, as mythically structured quests for the Hellenic, ur-poetic word.