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Reading the Body:
Hesychasm in the “Life of Saint Stephen, Bishop of Perm”

In an essay published in 1973, D.S. Likhachev presented Hesychasm as the catalyst for a new feature in late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Muscovite hagiography, which he dubbed “abstract psychologism” (Лихачев 1973: 75-126). Controversially, he proposed that “abstract psychologism” was evidence of a proto-Renaissance in Russian culture, a contention that gave birth to a lively debate about the relationship between cultural artefacts of the period and the milieu from which they stemmed. Discussions about hagiography came to refer to two features, one stylistic – pletenie sloves (word-weaving) – and the other theological – Hesychasm. Likhachev sought to unite the two, suggesting that the fusion of theology and rhetorical devices marked an important indigenous feature, namely a renewed interest in the culture of Kievan Rus.

In an essay published in 1973, D.S. Likhachev presented Hesychasm as the catalyst for a new feature in late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Muscovite hagiography, which he dubbed “abstract psychologism” (Лихачев 1973: 75-126). Controversially, he proposed that “abstract psychologism” was evidence of a proto-Renaissance in Russian culture, a contention that gave birth to a lively debate about the relationship between cultural artefacts of the period and the milieu from which they stemmed. Discussions about hagiography came to refer to two features, one stylistic – pletenie sloves (word-weaving) – and the other theological – Hesychasm. Likhachev sought to unite the two, suggesting that the fusion of theology and rhetorical devices marked an important indigenous feature, namely a renewed interest in the culture of Kievan Rus.
In his 1988 study of early Russian hagiography, J. Børtnes overhauled Likhachev’s idea, arguing that it wrongly opposed the traditional view that pletenie sloves was inspired by the linguistic reforms thought to have been implemented by Patriarch Euthymius around 1375-1393. Børtnes contended that these reforms, transmitted to Muscovy via Serbia during the so-called “second South Slav influence”, had a unifying, restorative function throughout the Orthodox commonwealth, and nothing to do with Hesychasm (Børtnes 1988: 126-7). His study of the “Life of Saint Stephen, Bishop of Perm” (henceforth *Life of Stephen*) rejected outright any correlation between literary style and Hesychasm, an idea that had prior been put forward by F.C.M. Kitch (Kitch 1976: 28).

Although Muscovite hagiographies associated with the “second South Slav influence” have been discussed in the context of Hesychast debates during the fourteenth century, scholars rarely provide an adequate definition for Hesychasm. Whilst Likhachev’s analysis lacked a precise discussion of the nature of the Hesychasm with which he thought hagiography imbued, Børtnes opposed this idea unduly, for in privileging history over theology by attempting to place the formal features of the *Life of Stephen* into a historical narrative, he ignored Hesychasm and in so doing failed to consider that a Hesychast reading of the text might actually complement a historical appreciation of pletenie sloves.

As a result, it remains unclear how exactly Hesychasm has been understood in this debate. The term can – and has been – used to denote a multiplicity of related but distinct phenomena, from an abstract form of Christian mysticism, to a search for inner quiet (hesychia) (Maloney 1973: 103); a specific method of praying involving the indefinite ejaculation of the name of Jesus combined with a strict breathing technique (Maloney 1973: 104); theological debates in the Orthodox Church during the fourteenth century, especially the Palamas/Barlaam conflict (Meyendorff 1981: 96-118); and a fourteenth-century hierocratic movement throughout the Byzantine commonwealth (Meyendorff 1974: 51-65). All of these phenomena are associated with Hesychasm since they are all
computed as stages in the development of this strand of Orthodoxy expressed, as G.A. Maloney seems to suggest, in its “final” fifteenth-century Muscovite form by Nilus of Sora (Maloney 1973: 108-111).

Theologically, then, Hesychasm can be understood as a strand of Orthodox tradition encompassing a range of different theologies and practices. These theologies and practices may be either accentuated or downplayed by any individual practitioner or, in some instances, they may belong to a particular theologian. For example, whilst Simeon the New Theologian is thought to have introduced the notion of supernatural consciousness into Hesychasm (Maloney 1973: 105), Gregory Palamas has been identified as the chief Hesychast exponent of theosis, implicitly defending Paul’s teaching that the body is a member of Christ (Meyendorff 1964: 150). It is on Palamite Hesychasm that this study focuses.

In the first of his Triads, Palamas wrote: “Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in us” (1 Corinthians, 6:19); “We are the house of God” (Hebrews, 3:6), and “We, who […] in our bodies bear the light of the Father in the form of the human Jesus so that we may know the glory of the Holy Spirit, do we lack the nobility of the Spirit, if we protect the integrity of our souls within our bodies?” (Palamas 1959: 74-8). Such remarks demonstrate the radical nature of Palamas’ interpretation of the Incarnation compared to the ideas of his opponent, Barlaam.

I suggest that we can make sense of Palamite Hesychasm by thinking back to Aristotle. In particular, I want to suggest that Palamite Hesychasm is a form of what Aristotle called hylomorphism. According to Aristotle’s theory, every substance is a compound of matter and form, and within this, forms are constituents of objects, not transcendent universals (Rae 2011: 138). Correspondingly, Palamite theology emphasises the fusion of a matter, the soul, and a form, the flesh, which together form a single entity. Although the Aristotelian theory implies neither harmony nor disharmony of matter and form, hylomorphism nevertheless provides a structural framework to understand
Palamas’ idea that soul and flesh are constituent parts of the human condition in harmony with one another.

According to Palamas, the body is a temporary instrument of the eternal soul, onto which the Holy Spirit proceeds, “serving the body with which it lives naturally in conformity, as one instrument” (Palamas 1959: 78). And so, argued Palamas, the body is an essential tool to prayer and worship. When it perishes, the soul ascends. Man’s “matter” (the soul) is eternal, but his “form” (the flesh) is ephemeral. As such, penthos, and thus a conscious remembrance of the mortality of humankind, is stressed as a central step in the process of deification. In spite of this, although the body is not transcendent, it is implicated in the transcendent process of theosis. Palamas embraced corporality in his evaluation of the human condition. It is this understanding of Palamism – as a harmonious, hylomorphic approach to the human condition – through which the Life of Stephen can be read productively. Its content, which focuses on Stephen’s physical presence, works in unison with the form of its composition – its structural and rhetorical features – to embody Palamite Hesychasm in prose.

Focussing on the body of the saint, this essay suggests that the text’s formal features and theological content can rightly be considered in unison as a kind of “literary theology”, that undermines common-held ideas about the text’s derivation from South Slavonic models (such as Domentijan’s thirteenth-century zhivoti) or harking back to the Lives of Kievan Rus (Børtnes 1988: 134-5). It is the text’s corporeal panegyric to the saint that differentiates it from supposedly comparable works of both Balkan and Kievan provenance.

Since I define “literary theology” as the sum of the Life’s structural and rhetorical devices and the theology they compound, and that sum is hylomorphic, my analysis of the text comments simultaneously on the text’s form (morphē) and “matter” (hyle) – its content.
The structure of the Life follows most of the generic conventions of hagiography. It begins with an introduction comprising of traditional topoi (such as a humility topos), before a description of Stephen’s childhood (generically, the saint lacks the playfulness of his contemporaries: “к дътем играющим не приставаще”) and adolescence in Ustiug (Слово о житии: 148). It then recounts his tonsuring at the Grigoriev Monastery in Rostov, departure for Moscow, and blessing from Bishop Gerasimus of Kolomna to evangelise the Zyrians, before entering into its central series of episodes regarding Stephen’s conversion of Perm to Orthodox Christianity. Before the end of the narrative, the saint returns to Moscow, where he is appointed Bishop of Perm, and finally we learn of his death, foretold by the saint: “Се азъ отхожу от вас” (Слово о житии: 212). The Life contains no posthumous miracles (indeed the saint’s apostolic achievements are miraculous in and of themselves), but rather three lamentations. Each component part of the Life’s structure accounts for approximately the following percentage of the text: the exordium and description of Stephen’s life before his journey to Perm (15%); the mission in Perm (60%); the departure and death of the Saint (7%); the concluding plachi (18%). The majority of the Life, then, deals with Stephen’s interaction with the heathens and later, the newly-baptised Christians of Perm.

Børtnes argued that the narrative takes the form of a travelogue in which the individual stages of Stephen’s mission correspond to a linear timeline of the saint’s gradual perfection and rise within the Church hierarchy. He interpreted the narrative’s linear direction through B. Uspenskii’s and I. Lotman’s understanding of medieval Russian culture, whereby the new incorporates the old, “subjectively thinking of itself as its antipode” (Lotman, Uspenskii 1985: 43). He thus made two conclusions on the significance of the text’s linearity: that “time and geographical space […] acquire an ethical and religious significance” and that Stephen’s mission is depicted to surpass all similar missions in the past (Børtnes 1988: 167). However,
Stephen and his predecessor Saint Cyril are portrayed as equals: “Оба сия мужа добра и мудра быста и равна суща мудранием. Оба единакъ, равенъ подвижъ обависта и подъяста” (Слово о житии: 204).

Børtnes, I contend, misstated the direction of the *Life*, the catalyst for which is apostolicity. Apostolicity dictates that, far from the alleged mapping onto time and space of a binary of “us” – Orthodox Christians – and “them” – heathens (Børtnes 1988: 160), Stephen’s physical actions enable the religious ascension of *others*, his disciples, since conversion is a process of overcoming a binary of faith. The saint’s actions, along with his body that completes them, are mapped onto time and space. They drive the narrative towards its unconventional ending, as the concluding *plachi* lament the *physical absence* of Stephen – not only his death, but also that his corpse resides in Moscow, not Perm. The people of Perm bewail:

“Въскую же пустихом тя и на Москву, да тамо почилъ еси! Лучши бы было нам, да бы былъ гробъ твой в земли нашей, прямо очима нашима, да бы былъ увѣт не худ, и утѣха поне велика сиротству нашему. И аки к живому, к тебѣ приходяще, благословлялися быхом у тебе и по успении, аки к живому […]. Нынѣ же оттинудь всего поряду лишени быхомъ” (Слово о житии: 216).

This passage evokes one of the scenes following the burial of Jesus, in which Mary Magdalene is distressed at the disappearance of the corpse of Christ, sobbing that “they have taken my Lord away, and I don’t know where they have put him” (John 20:13). Since it is precisely Christ’s body that is a central point of endearment for Biblical protagonists, reiterating the somatic significance of the Incarnation, so it is Stephen’s physical presence, dominating the *Life*, that is the catalyst for its concluding lamentations.

The structure of the *Life* reflects its dominant corporeal chronotope. Even prior to the start of Stephen’s mission and the focus on his body that it prompts, apostolicity directs.
Of the eleven scriptural quotations that open the text, for example, six are assigned to the apostles:


II. Body as Soul

Apostolicity facilitates a corporeal appraisal of the saint since his mission requires extensive physical work and educes the potential of fleshly sacrifice caused by foreign bodies. Both elicit a focus on Stephen’s virtues:

“[…] терпяще от них по вся дни, зило стража, аки твердый камень, утвержденый вѣрою в толицых подвизѣх и искушениях и бѣдах, моляся Богу, молитвою и постом, алча и жажда, жадая спасения пермскаго, многи досады от них приимая и за то не гнѣваяся на ня о всѣх сих приключывшися ему” (Слово о житии: 172).

Access to Stephen’s soul is granted via his body. His love for the people of Perm expressed by his desire to save them, an exhibition of one of the three heavenly graces, is accentuated by the physical hardship that accompanies it, emphasising Stephen’s fortitude, one of the four cardinal virtues (1 Corinthians, 13:13). So his virtues, exposed directly by his physical reaction to hardship (prayer and fasting), reveal his graces: his faith in God, his hope to succeed and his love for his fellow man. Acoustic qualities underscore the panegyrical code: assonance and sibilance enshroud physical hardships with guttural acrimony, so that they are
juxtaposed onomatopoeically against the inner quiet (hesychia) of the saint.

This panegyric code – the appraisal of character based on physical actions – constitutes part of the unification of body and soul in the Life. Kitch pointed out that, unlike in the overwhelming majority of Byzantine and Slavonic hagiographies of this period and before, in the Life of Stephen there is no antithesis of body and soul (Kitch 1976: 101). Rather, they are united hylomorphically. As Palamite Hesychasm denotes that the soul proceeds onto the flesh, so in the Life access to Stephen’s soul is privileged through his physical actions referring transcendentally to the Divine forces acting on them. At the start of his mission, for example, Stephen is ambushed by a gang of heathens, described pleonastically: “убити егохотяу, […] смерть емунанестихотяще, […] умыслиша огнем немилостивно въсмерть въгнати его” (Слово о житии: 160). This prompts Stephen to turn inwards, recalling the words of David. The tirade of scriptural citations that follows is presented in the form of an interior monologue, so that, again, the graces of Stephen’s soul (his faith in God and hope that God will intercede) are shown in his virtuous reaction to physical hardship, as the prudent words of David are emitted from within Stephen via a stream of thought. Thus we see that a typical feature of pletenie sloves, the weaving of scriptural quotations into the body of the narrative (Kitch 1976: 132), serves as an instrument for Epiphanius’ atypical Palamite message.

Not only does the threat of bodily injury reveal the nobility of the Holy Spirit residing within Stephen, but physical integrity is also highlighted. In spite of the many threats facing him, Stephen remains physically unscathed, so that the state of his flesh reflects that which it enrobes. The text points to the saint’s physical attractiveness. Parallels are drawn between Stephen and Joseph “the Handsome”. Although this is not an allegory specific to this Life and tends to denote charity, the use of the epithet prekrasnyi is specific to the Life of Stephen, and it appears twice in a description of the saint, on one occasion through direct corporeal analogy (Слово о житии: 220).
III. Reinterpreting “Imitatio Christi”

Børtnes argued that, unlike in Kievan hagiographies (such as the Life of Theodosius) and other contemporary Lives (such as Epiphanius’ or Pachomius’ Life of Sergius) in which saints become imitators of Christ, the Life of Stephen depicts its protagonist as a historical hero of the Church, and not in the image of Christ (Børtnes 1988: 167-184).

Generically, imitatio Christi often relies on the “dehumanization” of the saint in line with the Biblical idea that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:24). Accordingly, in the East Slavonic hagiographic tradition, imitating Christ tends to necessitate persecution of the flesh, from self-mutilation (in the Life of Theodosius, for example, the saint has a craftsman engirdle an ironclad chain around his hips) to fasting and self-exhaustion (in the Life of Sergius, for example, the saint fasts extensively at a young age to the chagrin of his mother). Whilst the Life of Stephen does not place a strong emphasis on the saint’s persecution of his flesh (although this does occur infrequently and mildly), his appreciation of the transience of his earthly life is expressed foremost in corporeal terms, through preparedness to suffer fleshly harm and even death for the sake of his mission. For example, before the proposed test of faith, a walk through fire, he says: “азъ с радостию тщуся подвизатися и пострадати. И не точию же се, но и умрети рад есмъ за святую вѣру православную” (Слово о житии: 186).

Whereas in other hagiographies, the flesh tends to be punished as part of the insurance of a non-passionate, Christ-like state, in the Life of Stephen the body-soul interaction flows contrariwise: the soul proceeds onto the flesh, and thus Stephen’s actions imbue with the nobility of the Holy Spirit. His corporeality, the catalyst for his exaltation, denotes an imitatio Christi. In the first instance, this inculcation is allegorical: the preservation of Stephen’s bodily integrity not only emphasises that his mission is divinely ordained and protected, but it also evokes the prophesised preservation of the integrity of Jesus’ human form: “Not one of his bones will
be broken” (John 19:36). The inculcation is also expressed through the application of Biblical metaphors about Christ’s identity to Stephen, mapped onto his body. His paternity, for example, is conveyed corporeally, as the fortitude he shows in the face of danger (“огню горящу, и пламени распалающуся; преподобный же паче прилежаше ем […] и нудма влечаше и къ огню очима” (Слово о житии: 188)) is an externalisation of the love within his soul for his disciples, identified as his “flock” six times in their lamentation of the loss of their “father” and his corpse.

The reversal of the “(punished) flesh = (chaste) soul” paradigm, reformulated so that the Holy Spirit residing within the soul informs the physical actions of the saint, can be read in the depiction of a traditionally central physical display of asceticism – crying. Whereas in other contemporary Lives, compunction has been interpreted as an element of “abstract psychologism”, as the source of emotional display tends to remain enigmatic, a mystery of the state of supernatural consciousness prescribed by Simeon the New Theologian (Лихачев 1958: 39), in the Life of Stephen tears are ascribed an origin: “[…] преподобъный, не терпя видѣти христианы досажаемы, да того ради не худа бяше печаль ему о том, но часто о том со слезами моляше Бога” (Слово о житии: 170). Epiphanius unpacks mysticism, as love gives birth to an emotion that dictates a physical response.

The terms of the expression of imitatio Christi in the Life reiterate the nature of the saint’s human form – of his bodily actions as the deeds of his spirit. And thus, whilst he may not be made non-passionate like the saints of other hagiographies (indeed he experiences anger: “Какову же ревность стяжа преподобный на болваны, глаголемыя кумиры!” (Слово о житии: 174)), he nevertheless appears as a corporeal allegory of Christ.
IV. Anthropomorphism in Prose and Lyric Poetry

The *Life* can be read as a eulogy to Stephen, a suspended, cathartic mourning of the loss of the saint in his human form. The aesthetic properties of the text serve to morph it into a simulacrum of Stephen: as the *Life*’s preoccupation with physicality embodies the saint’s flesh in prose, the concluding lamentations are an emotionally intense, lyric exposé of the significance of his flesh.

Kitch pointed out that the intensity of Epiphanius’ poetic style varies according to context (Kitch 1976: 229). Indeed, the contrast between the styles of the “travelogue” and lamentations is the organising foundation of the text’s style. Tangible narrative is juxtaposed against abstract meditation (Kitch 1976: 272). The former, although not devoid of decorative features, relies predominantly on a concrete mode of expression, according to which the tangible accomplishments of the saint are catalogued chronologically. Within this, there are digressions, for example in the form of interior monologues and scriptural quotations, especially of the Psalms (Kitch 1976: 132). But such features of *pletenie sloves* are moderated to the requirements of a narrative advancing towards tangible accomplishments – the conversion of Perm and Stephen’s appointment as Bishop. As such, stylistic devices normally associated with *pletenie sloves*, such as periphrase, are deployed less for emotional, and more for exegetical, purposes. Stephen’s appointment as Bishop, for example, is accounted for as follows: “И умножьшимся учеником, пребываху христиане, но и церкви святыя на различных мѣстах и на розных реках, сдѣ и ондѣ, созидаеми бываху. И нужа всяко бысть ему взискати и поставить и привести епископа” (Слово о житии: 194). The periphrases (highlighted in bold) carry an explanatory purpose here, leading to a tangible progression of the plot: “иже шед на взискание епископа внезапу токмо сам обрѣтеся епископъ” (Слово о житии: 196).

Features associated with *pletenie sloves* found in the concluding *plachi*, by contrast, progress a panegyrical *penthos*
of the saint’s flesh which constitutes an end in itself. Due to a focus on reconstructing genealogically the formal features of the laments (which yields circular and inconclusive conclusions, since various features of the retrospectively interpreted style of *pletenie sloves* dominate a range of texts of far-removed provenances to different degrees), scholarly analyses of the *plachi* often overlook their function within the text. The significance of the anthropomorphism of the Church of Perm in the *Plach’ tserkvi perm’skia*, for example, has never been analysed.

“The Church bewails the loss of Stephen, privileged with her own, first-person lamentation. She mourns the absence of the corpse of the man who was betrothed to her. The accumulation of emotional exclamations (“увы”, “о”) between rhetorical questions creates a sense of the Church’s intimate connection with the person Stephen. It is his physical presence for which she yearns: Stephen’s absent voice is evoked in a periphrase of four minute clauses, decorated with an abundance of synonyms (in bold). The emotive personification of the Church serves as a concluding moment in the Palamite message of the *Life*: in linking Stephen and Church as one entity, the identity of both is abstractified into a “тѣло церковное”, of which Stephen is a member, here of sensory – and indeed sensual – significance. Resultantly, the boundaries of external form and inner soul – of *hyle* and *morphē* – are blurred irretrievably. Stephen’s teachings
and the body that externalised them are intertwined metaphorically as a river depleted of water. His parish remains without its pastor. Stephen survives as an echo, as a matter whose beloved, sacred form has been lost forever.

Conclusion

This Palamite Hesychast interpretation of the *Life of Stephen* suggests that it is worth considering late medieval Russian hagiographies more than just in terms of the historical place they occupy in the “second South Slav influence”. Whilst notionally it might be possible to trace theological and/or stylistic tendencies chronologically or geographically, when reading for ideas, texts should be approached through textual analysis. Arguments have followed that, if *pletenie sloves* is a South Slavonic feature with no relation to Hesychasm, and thirteenth-century Serbian *zhivoti* were models for late fourteenth-century Muscovite *Lives*, then the Muscovite texts simply cannot be Hesychast. Not only does this conclusion privilege historicity over textual analysis; it also confines literary expression into a simplistic historical narrative, limiting the scope for interpretation.

As it happens, a Palamite interpretation of the text’s “literary theology” is not devoid of historical plausibility. After Mount Athos was transferred from imperial to patriarchal jurisdiction in 1312, high Church administration was taken over entirely by monastics, and so Palamas’ disciples came to occupy the patriarchal throne, from where they could influence the theological agenda of their commonwealth (Meyendorfff 1974: 51). But such a line of argument should not be required to justify a reading of a theological text, and the claim to validity on which the present reading is premised stems primarily – if not solely – from careful observation of the human body.
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Abstract: This article is a short literary analysis of a late medieval Russian hagiography, the “Life of Saint Stephen, Bishop of Perm”. Scholars such as J. Børtnes and F.C.M. Kitch have approached the Life in the context of the so-called “second South Slav influence”, suggesting that its style is the result of cultural exchange with Serbia and not, as originally argued by D. S. Likhachev, a means of conveying a Hesychast theology. This article seeks to emancipate the Life from a narrative of unilateral cultural exchange, challenging the idea that historical context trumps literary analysis. By focussing on the depiction of Stephen’s body, I argue that the Life contains a Palamite Hesychast message, articulated in its structural and rhetorical features.

Key words: The body, Epiphanius the Wise, hagiography, Hesychasm, Gregory Palamas, literary analysis, second South Slav influence, theology.

References (transliteration)


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