On the Letters Reaches Its Destination: Constantine Kostenechki's Russian Reception and the Historiography of the "Second South Slavic Influence"

Robert Romanchuk
Florida State University

> "Pravdivo skazano u Konstantina Kostechenskogo: v sut' vsiakoi veshchi vniknesh', koli pravdivo narechesh' ee."
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> Kirill in Andrei Tarkovskii's *Andrei Rublev*, paraphrasing Dmitrii Likhachev

The Bulgarian-Serbian "philosopher" Constantine Kostenechki, the most important medieval scholar of *Slavia Orthodoxa*, had an eventful career in Russia—although he never set foot there, nor did any of his scholarly writings ever reach Muscovy, at least in a form he would have recognized. Rather, he has proven irresistible to Russian medievalists. Yet the reception of his writings—and ultimately his persona—in Russia go beyond scholarship proper: he has entered Russian scholarship as a representative of a *translatio studii* (and indeed a poorly articulated *translatio imperii*) from the Balkans to Muscovy; of the rise of grammar, and indeed literature, in Muscovite space; and of the proliferation, via hesychast mysticism, of an epistemology in which "word and reality are indivisible."[1] These claims have become established in the discursive space of Russian medieval studies. In this paper, I will argue that the Russian reception of Constantine Kostenechki is a sequence of misreadings (or "slips") that serves to map out the scholarly and quasi-scholarly historiography of the interaction of Balkan and Muscovite cultures over the 14th–16th c. This reception is not a straightforward case of cultural imperialism (as is the case with much of Russian medieval studies), but has a structure that is *symptomatic* in the precise psychoanalytic meaning of the term: it is Constantine who has colonized Russian philology. Moscow is his "destination" because his presence there has been requested, as it were: his "arrival" quilts into a recognizable whole

[1] Hesychasm centers on struggles against *logismoi* (harmful thoughts) and *for* unceasing mental prayer; spiritual exercises and respiratory techniques may assist in eradicating the former and acquiring the latter. On hesychasm see Robert Romanchuk, "Mount Athos," in *Europe: A Literary History, 1348-1418,* Vol. 2, ed. David Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): 376–402.

the Russian post-war narrative of the so-called "Second South Slavic Influence" (henceforth *2SSI*).

Constantine Kostenechki was active at Stefan Lazarević's Belgrade court from ca. 1410 to 1427. To historians of the scientific and scholarly literature of *Slavia Orthodoxa*, he is known as the likely translator of the most complete cosmological-geographical textbook available in Slavic, the so-called *Novaković Fragments*—a compilation made from Michael Psellus's *De omnifaria doctrina* and Symeon Seth's *Synopsis tôn physikôn*, which, among its other teachings, "made the concept of the sphericity of the earth again accessible to the Orthodox Slavonic reader."[2] Constantine also wrote the *vita* of his patron Stefan, translated a *Commentary on the Song of Songs* by Theodoret of Cyrrhus, and compiled, from Greek sources, a *hodoiporicon* or pilgrimage to Palestine. He probably helped compose Serbian chronicles, and possibly even a universal history. But he is best known as the writer of the frequently obscure *Explanatory Treatise on the Letters* (*Skazánije izjavljénno o písmeneh*), composed at Stefan Lazarević's court in the 1420s and addressed to him as legislator (cf. c. 1–3) and "student" (cf., e.g., c. 10).[3] It makes reference to, and paraphrases parts of, Manuel Moschopoulos's popular Greek grammar textbook, the *Erôtêmata grammatika*, but has a radically different purpose.

On the Letters consists of an introduction and 45 chapters, broadly arranged into six sections (as delineated by Hans Schultze): a summary of the state of Serbian Church Slavic writing, a commentary on the usage of letters and other signs, a methodology for the teaching of pupils, a discussion of heresies, a commentary on the usage of words, and a summary of "what is to be done" about Slavic writing.[4] It is often considered to be the most complete exposition of the "Euthymian" reforms of book-writing in the 14th–15th-c. Balkans. Since the discovery of the unique Karlowicz MS of the full treatise by Đura Daničić in 1869, its reputation has experienced its ups and downs. Vatroslav Jagić considered it to be a failed *practical* manual: a Church Slavic grammar loaded with doctrinal, polemical, and pedagogical digressions[5] and characterized by a focus on the "external aspect of writing" and a "slavish dependence on Greek locutions."[6] In his 1987 monograph *Orthography and Orthodoxy*, Harvey Goldblatt offered a new reading of the treatise: it was not a practical manual of either grammar or orthography, but rather a "*theoretical peroration*" on Church Slavic writing as an instrument of revelation.[7] According to Goldblatt, Constantine's concern for linguistic "externals" and his Hellenism are grounded in hesychast concerns for ritual usage: the knowledge of correct writing is the foundation for correct doctrine.

My own approach to the treatise, to be set forth in a study of hesychasm and the verbal arts at the courts of the Lazarevići, takes Goldblatt's thesis as a point of departure. Fleshing out

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[2] Ihor Ševčenko, *Byzantium and the Slavs* (Cambridge and Naples: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute and Instituto Universitario Orientale, 1991), 606.

[3] Editions are Vatroslav Jagić, *Codex slovenicus rerum grammaticarum* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1968): 95–199 (transcription) and Kuio Kuev and Georgi Petkov, *Sŭbrani sŭchineniia na Konstantin Kostenechki* (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na bŭlgarskata Akademiia na naukite, 1986): 82–224 (facsimile); Harvey Goldblatt, *Orthography and Orthodoxy* (Firenze: Le Lettere, 1987): 105–88 (English paraphrase and commentary).

[4] Hans Schultze, "Untersuchungen zum Aufbau des *Skazanie o pismenechь* von Konstantin von Kostenec." PhD diss., University of Göttingen, 1964.

[5] Jagić, *Codex,* 80.

[6] Ibid., 86; 80–87.

[7] Goldblatt, *Orthography*, 341.

Goldblatt's outline of hesychast conceptions of language and the trivium arts, on the one hand, and the treatise's educational context at Stefan's court on the other, I argue that Constantine's manual charts a middle course between the "practical" and "theoretical": *On the Letters* is a spiritual exercise, a regimen for natural contemplation, linking the study of orthography and grammar to the *mediated* experience of the intelligible, or "God as created reality" (Clement of Alexandria). The treatise—and indeed, the whole project of "correction of books" in the 14th- and 15th-c. Balkans—may thus be located within an aristocratic-hesychast *psychagogy*, the "leading of the soul through words" (*Phaedrus* 261a) on the road to monastic "perfection." Much of this is quite far from the text's Russian reception: how does *On the Letters* reach its Muscovite "destination"?

The first moment in this reception occurs outside of Russia: indeed, it originates in Constantine's own thesis, articulated in chapter 4 of the long redaction of his treatise, of the privileged Rus role in the origin of Church Slavic. In an argument consistent with medieval views on language, Constantine claims that the "good and wondrous" codifiers of Church Slavic "selected the most refined and beautiful Rus language [as a base]; help was given to the Rus language by Bulgarian, Serbian, Bosnian, Slavonian, by a part of Czech, and by the Croatian language." Modern South Slavic scholars took "Rus" to mean Russian, and developed their theories accordingly. In 1963 Vladimir Mošin posited a link between Constantine's orthographic doctrines, the Bulgarian Metropolitan of Rus Cyprian's activities in Moscow, and Patriarch Euthymius's reforms themselves, which were, in this new light, undertaken "to make the numerous new translations more acceptable in Russia"![8] A teleology was established by South Slavic scholars that would prove irresistible to their Russian colleagues, who would study Balkan-Russian relations through the other end of the telescope, as it were.

What has gone practically without comment are Constantine's remark in the same chapter that the Rus say while praying *Ne laj na me, Hospodine* ("Do not reproach me, O Lord") and his conclusion that "all [the] Slavic letters are in the Rus language, with the exception of [their] *h*." That is to say, by "Rus language" Constantine refers not to Muscovite Russian, but to Ruthenian (Ukrainian-Belarusian) with its spirantized pronunciation of /g/, which he has heard spoken by Rus from Lithuania, whether on Athos, in Trnovo or at Stefan's court in Belgrade.[9] A political orientation on Lithuania would not be impossible, considering the career arc of Cyprian or especially that of his compatriot (and Constantine's near-

[8] Quoted in Goldblatt, *Orthography*, 234.

[9] In "An Archaic System of Church Slavic Pronunciation," Boris A. Uspenskii proposes that that the spirantized pronunciation of Church Slavic /g/ was taught in Muscovy prior to the 17th c. (*Izbrannye trudy* III, Moscow: Shkola "Iazyki russkoi kul'tury," 1997: 289–319). Aside from peripheral evidence of the "northern" pronunciation of the morpheme *gos-* as *hos-*, which is limited and possibly eccentric, and of the transliteration of h as Cyrillic r in several vernacular, *non*-Church Slavic documents—facts explained more economically by Alexis P. Vlasto (*A Linguistic History of Russia*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988: 69–70)—Uspenskii relies on the "Writing in the Slavic Language About the Letters," a 16th-c. phonological description of Church Slavic that includes the spirantized pronunciation of /g/; he presumes this work to be of Muscovite origin due to its presence in Russian MSS (*Izbrannye*, 316 n37). As Vladimir V. Kolesov suggests in "Traces of the Medieval Russian Language Question in the Russian *Azbukovniki,*" in *Aspects of the Slavic Language Question,* Vol. 2, ed. Riccardo Picchio and Harvey Goldblatt, New Haven: Yale Concilium on International and Area Studies, 1984: 87–123, (97), its proper context is almost certainly alongside a related grammatical work, "The Book Called the Letters"; the latter is without doubt Ruthenian in origin (see Dean S. Worth, *The Origins of Russian Grammar* (Columbus: Slavica, 1983), 56–64).

contemporary) Gregory Tsamblak;[10] but any political reading of this passage is simply unnecessary. The reason that a political interpretation *was* made, and in such a strangely displaced way, was the mid-20th-c. Russian scholarly debate around the *2SSI*. This debate took place against a rather different ideological background than that which had motivated, say, Aleksei Sobolevskii, who had conceptualized the *2SSI* in the first place: I have in mind Sergei Obnorskii's post-war patriotic campaign against Aleksei Shakhmatov's thesis of the South Slavic origins of literary Russian, which set the scholarly and semi-scholarly tone in the USSR for the rest of the 20th c.[11] If the *2SSI* had the misfortune to occur *in* the linguistically autochthonous Russia imagined by Soviet scholars, their Balkan counterparts provided the consolation that it was, after all, a gift *for* Russia: South Slavic "influence" thus became a *translatio studii*, which was in its turn inscribed into a *translatio imperii* by which "the spiritual leadership of Orthodox Slavdom was … transferred from the Balkan Peninsula to the Russian lands."[12]

The second moment in the reception concerns the 16th-c. East Slavic reworking of the epitome of Constantine's treatise. This East Slavic version is not really a redaction of *On the Letters* or its epitome, the "Discourses in Brief" (*Slovesa vkratce*), but two anonymous excerpts from the latter, concerning diacritics and orthography, compiled into longer grammatical treatises. It is usually called "Russian" (as it is preserved in MSS from the Synodal Library and the Trinity-Sergius Monastery), but, as Dean Worth has pointed out, judging from certain phonetic features it could well be Ruthenian: considering that the epitome itself (i.e., the "Discourses in Brief") exists in a Moldavian redaction preserved in a Ukrainian archive, this is an economical hypothesis.[13] Constantine's material has here been broken up and recompiled into a properly grammatical treatise (together with the Old Slavic grammar called the "Eight Parts of Speech" and other materials). A curious contemporary slippage accompanies this medieval recompilation: if in his edition of the long version of *On the Letters*, Vatroslav Jagić calls Constantine alternately "philosopher" or "grammarian" (arguing that his subject "studied literature in the capacity of a grammarian" in Serbia), in his edition of the East Slavic version Jagić calls him exclusively "grammarian."[14] And it is with the latter epithet that Constantine entered Russian studies in America: the chapter devoted to him in Dean Worth's *Origins of Russian Grammar* is titled "Constantine the Grammarian." As far as I have been able to determine, Constantine is only ever called "philosopher" in the medieval sources, never "grammarian." The latter epithet seems to have been Jagić's invention.

One of Constantine's theological masters, Goldblatt argues, was Gregory of Sinai.[15] In his *Acrostic Chapters*—which were studied by Nikon Jerusalimac, Constantine's successor in Montenegro as "court teacher"—Gregory transforms the classical trivium to meet hesychast needs, or reimagines monastic spiritual progress as a trivium of verbal arts. In this

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[10] On Cyprian and Gregory Tsamblak in Ruthenia, see Julia Verkholantsev, "Ruthenia (Lithuania-Rus)," in *Europe: A Literary History, 1348-1418,* Vol. 2, ed. David Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016): 420–39.

[11] On this debate and the role that the *2SSI* played in it, see Henrik Birnbaum, "On the Significance of the Second South Slavic Influence for the Evolution of the Russian Literary Language," *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics* 21 (1975): 23–50.

[12] Riccardo Picchio, quoted in Goldblatt, *Orthography*, 234.

[13] Worth, *The Origins*, 31–32.

[14] Cf., e.g., Jagić, *Codex*, 78; 266.

[15] Goldblatt, *Orthography*, 9–14, 24.

transformed trivium, the grammarian engages in ascetic *praktikê* and the allegorical interpretation of scripture and the rhetor pursues intelligible unity within perceptible difference, while the philosopher engages in *theôria* and the Platonic study of God as cause.[16] If the task set before the reader of *On the Letters* in some way resembles the work of Gregory's rhetor, it does not resemble the work of his grammarian at all; to call the Bulgarian-Serb Constantine a "grammarian" because parts of his writings are compiled into a grammatical treatise in Russia (or, more likely, Ruthenia) is anachronistic.

Yet this title of "grammarian" is as overdetermined as was Constantine's trajectory toward Russia: it "fits" Constantine's inscription into the history of the *2SSI*, for the study of this "influence" has focused almost entirely on matters of orthography, phonology and morphology, grammar and lexicon, and the identification of figures—precisely the matters that concern Constantine in his treatise, all of them parts of *grammar*, traditionally defined. Although Sobolevskii, at the very beginning of the study of the *2SSI*, warned against overestimating such phenomena—"the change of one pattern of writing for another and of one orthography for another has no value," he warned in 1903[17]—they have, in the economy of post-war scholarship, been about the only thing to retain their value. The historiography needs Constantine precisely *qua* "grammarian" to provide consistency to its "grammatical" image of 15th-c. Balkan-Muscovite cultural contacts. And again, South Slavic scholars have been obliging: Boniu Angelov, for example, claims that Constantine's work was "important in the Russian cultural developments" of its era, which purportedly embraced "cultural-historical and grammatical questions."[18]

The third moment of the reception is of a different order than the first two. From the late 1950s to well into the 1970s, Dmitrii Likhachev endeavored to expand the study of Balkan-Muscovite cultural relations from the confines of grammar to include rhetoric, art history and philosophy (*vel* theology); and in so doing, to reformulate—some would say, unsuccessfully—the period of the *2SSI* as a "Russian pre-Renaissance" (*Predvozrozhnedie*). Constantine is central to Likhachev's scheme, framing his paper at the Fourth International Congress of Slavists in 1958, "Some Tasks of the Study of the Second South Slavic Influence in Russia" and playing an important role in his scholarly-popular book of 1962, *The Culture of Rus in the Time of Andrei Rublev and Epifanii Premudryi*.[19] In these two works (the second really being an expansion of the first, with Church Slavic citations estranged or paraphrased in Russian), Likhachev relocates Constantine within "philosophy"—in particular, "hesychast teachings about the word, silence, and God's world and his name."[20]

Likhachev's 1958 formulations, if imprecise in their terminology (e.g., a more felicitous term for "God's world" would be "the intelligible," while the *multiplicity* of God's names is an

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[16] *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, comp. Jacques Paul Migne, Vol. 150 (Paris: 1865), cols. 1239–1300 (text); Nikodimos and Makarios, *The Philokalia*, trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, et al., Vol. 4 (London: Faber and Faber, 1983): 212–52 (English paraphrase): see c. 127.

[17] Aleksei I. Sobolevskii, "Perevodnaia literatura Moskovskoi Rusi XIV–XVII vv." *Izvestiia Otdeleniia russkogo iazyka i slovestnosti Imperatorskoi Akademii nauk* 74, no. 1 (1903): 1–14, (13).

[18] Boniu S. Angelov, *Ia starata bŭlgarska ruska i srŭbska literatura,* Vol. 2 (Sofia: Izdatelstovo na Bŭlgarskata Akademiia na naukite, 1967): 210–11 n. 5.

[19] Dmitrii S. Likhachev, *Issledovaniia po drevnerusskoi literature* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Nauka, 1986; idem, *Kul'tura Rusi vremeni Andreia Rubleva i Epifaniia Premudrogo*, Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1962.

[20] Likhachev, *Issledovaniia*, 23.

object of hesychast study), nonetheless provide a useful point of departure for a discussion of Constantine's linguistic doctrine in *On the Letters*:

> The word, according to [this] teaching, was the essence of phenomena. To name a thing meant to understand it. … To comprehend a phenomenon means to express it by a word, to name it.[21]

This outline of what one might call a "hesychast realist" epistemology, founded in the Christian Neoplatonism of Ps.-Dionysius (Likhachev refers to Proclus, not incorrectly insofar as the Areopagite adapts Proclus's doctrines in his exposition) loses its precision in Likhachev's 1962 version:

> To understand a thing is to name it correctly. Comprehension for [Constantine], as for many theologians of the Middle Ages, is the expression of the world by means of language. The word and reality are for him indivisible.[22]

As Robert Bird has shown, this text enters Tarkovskii's "Andrei Rublev," in the scene of the monk Kirill's meeting with the iconographer Theophanes the Greek that provides the present essay with its epigraph.[23] Kirill praises Theophanes's painting by citing Constantine (in fact, Likhachev): "Verily said Constantine Kostenechki: you penetrate into the essence of any thing if you name it truthfully."

"To understand a thing is to name it correctly"—this is not necessarily a "wilful paraphrase" of Constantine, as stated by Bird,[24] for Constantine twice makes a similar argument, that the study of the "true teaching" will "bring all things back to their nature" (*praef*., c. 1). However, Likhachev's claim that for Constantine "word and reality are indivisible" is a misreading. It distorts a precise hesychast doctrine—manifest word and intelligible reality *are* divided, but analogies of the latter may be sought in the former—and generalizes it to the point that it becomes at once universal and trivial. Likhachev locates this doctrine within a tradition of "medieval theology" (apparently realism), and by it accounts for phenomena as diverse as "literalism in translation, citations from Scripture, traditional formulas; the effort to make verbal expression call forth the same mood and feeling as the phenomenon itself, to create a kind of icon, a work for veneration, out of the written work, to turn the literary work into a prayerful text."[25] Constantine thus anchors the leap from philology to universalism—a not uncommon Russian scholarly move, often visible in the "higher criticism" of Russian medieval studies but especially characteristic of post-1958 studies of the "word-weaving" (*pletenie sloves*) of the 14th–15th c.; he allows for a kind of short circuit, or a one-to-one correspondence between text and ideology, bypassing the real institutions that mediated the *2SSII*.

I have argued that the post-war Russian reception of Constantine Kostenechki has structured the historiography of the *2SSII* in three ways: through an (inaccurate) image of the

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[21] Ibid., 23.
[22] Likhachev, *Kul'tura*, 49.
[23] Robert Bird, *Andrei Rublev* (London: BFI, 2004), 26.
[24] Ibid., 26.
[25] Likhachev, *Issledovaniia*, 23.

2SSJ as a *translatio studii* (*vel imperii*) from the Balkans to Russia; by focusing scholarship on the grammatical, in particular orthographic, aspects of the *2SSJ*, to the exclusion of other phenomena; and by discouraging the study of the role that institutions played in the *2SSJ*, in favor of an unmediated appeal to (a misinterpreted) ideology. To what degree do post-Soviet Russian studies of the *2SSJ* elude this structure? Let us glance at Aleksei Turilov's important 1998 overview of "East Slavic Book Culture from the End of the 14th c. through the 15th and the *2SSJ*."[26] The study's foundations are firm: Turilov straightaway locates the problem in institutional exigencies, noting that the *2SSJ* is linked to "the substitution of the liturgical practice of the Stoudite rite with that of the Jerusalem rite, and […] works relating to monastery life and ascetic practice."[27] The new South Slavic corpus together with the graphical innovations it prompts appear first at the "new" monasteries of the Muscovite north, Trinity-Sergius (and its daughter foundations) and Kirillov:[28] "the needs of the new cenobitic monasteries for ascetic literature […] and the change of the liturgical rule" are its motivation.[29] This communal-monastic context, far from the levers of power, is distinct from the elite-courtly setting of Constantine's work.

Turilov goes on to state that the orthography of the *2SSJ* "was not mechanical, but a completely conscious phenomenon" on the part of scribes.[30] What motivated it?

> Apparently, over the course of the 1390s–1400s, in the same circles in which the new texts were disseminated, and as a result of the continuing and strengthened contacts with Slavic monasticism on Athos and in Constantinople, the idea was established—not receiving, to be sure, a theoretical foundation fixed in writing, but, based on its results, close to the views of its contemporary Constantine Kostenechki, as presented in his *Explanatory Treatise on the Letters*—of the normalization of the language and orthography of texts (and even their graphics!) as a necessary condition of their orthodoxy.

In the next paragraph Turilov even returns to the supposed role of "South Slavic émigrés" such as Cyprian in the dissemination of the orthographic reforms of the *2SSJ* in Rus (here designating Muscovy, as distinct from Ruthenia)—a thesis pilloried, not without reason, by Worth.[31] This is little short of astounding. Turilov has just established that the phenomena of the *2SSJ* are asynchronous. The new texts, copied from Cyprian's books in Muscovy, do not show orthographic innovations: such innovations only appear at the communal monasteries, far from Moscow, over the following decades. Turilov has also asserted that reforms of the monastic life and liturgy, not theological hair-splitting, underlie the reforms of the *2SSJ*. Yet, for the moment at least, all this has been forgotten.

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[26] Aleksei A. Turilov, "Vostochnoslavianskaia knizhnaia kul'tura kontsa XIV–XV v. i 'vtoroe iuzhnoslavianskoe vliianie,'" *Drevnerusskoe iskusstvo. Sergei Radonezhskii i khudozhestvennaia kul'tura Moskvy XVI–XV vv.* (St. Petersburg, 1998): 321–37.
[27] Turilov, "Vostochnoslavianskaia," 321.
[28] Ibid., 323.
[29] Ibid., 324.
[30] Ibid., 325.
[31] Dean S. Worth, "The 'Second South Slavic Influence' in the History of the Russian Literary Language," in *American Contributions to the Ninth International Congress of Slavists* II, ed. Michael Flier (Columbus: Slavica, 1983): 349–72.

What is it that insists upon a *translatio* from the Balkans to Muscovy, consisting of conscious "reforms" of orthography there, and founded in an ideology that lacks any "fixed, written" expression—not only at the Trinity-Sergius or Kirillov monasteries, but anywhere in Russia? What binds them together in such a way that established facts melt into thin air? What else is it but the *On the Letters* of Constantine Kostenechki, which "reaches its destination" in Russia to this day and will continue to do so, in all likelihood, for a long time to come.