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**LEV SHESTOV: THE MEANING OF LIFE AND THE CRITIQUE
OF SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE**

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LIFE AND WORK

Lev Shestov was born Lev Isaakovich Shvartsman (or Yehuda Leib Schwarzmann) in 1866 to an affluent Jewish merchant family, in the Podol district of Kiev, at a time of cultural emancipation for the Jewish community under Russian imperial rule. The eldest son of seven children, he attended the local gymnasium, where he developed an interest in the authors of the Russian Golden Age. At the same time he was introduced to classical Hebrew literature by his father, Isaac Schwarzmann, who had a reputation for erudition and for being a free-thinker. As an aspiring adolescent writer, Lev Shestov admired Pushkin, Lermontov, and Nekrasov, alongside foreign authors such as Shakespeare and Goethe (Fotiade 2016a, 19). Despite his literary inclinations, in 1884 he enrolled in the Faculty of Sciences at the University of Moscow, where he studied mathematics, before undertaking a degree in Law. Due to a conflict with the students' inspector, Bryzgalov, he was forced to leave Moscow and return to Kiev, where he finished his law studies in 1889 (Baranov-Shestov 1983a, 7). Some of the unfinished fictional writings dating from his youth (such as the autobiographical short story, *Netuda popal*) testify to the influence of the generation of the 1840s and to the humanist ideals posed by Dostoevsky's *The Insulted and the Injured* and by Belinsky's socialist propaganda. In his later work, starting with *The Good in the Teaching of Tolstoy and Nietzsche: Philosophy and Preaching* (1900), he repudiated both the atheist-socialist and the Christian versions of this naïve type of humanism. In doing so he was influenced by Nietzsche's critique of morality as well as by Dostoevsky's panoply of

nihilist characters of the 1860s, ranging from the Underground Man to Raskolnikov and Ivan Karamazov.

As a young intellectual and avid reader of classical literature and contemporary literary magazines, Lev Shestov was no doubt aware of the confrontation between Slavophiles and Westernizers in Russian society.¹ Although his position in the Schwarzmann household, as heir to a prosperous family business, destined him to become a practically-minded entrepreneur and a defender of traditional values, he also happened to belong to the new generation of intellectuals steeped in anarchist and nihilist ideological debates. Although some early commentators such as Berdyaev linked the nihilist outlook of Shestov's writings – for example, *The Apotheosis of Groundlessness* (1905) – to a typically 'Jewish rejection of values' (Rubin 2010, 156), other close friends and witnesses point to a conflict with paternal authority and the obligation to safeguard his father's spiritual legacy and financial interests (Shteinberg 1991, 257-258).

Among several decisive incidents in his early life that brought Lev Isaakovich into contact with revolutionary circles, it is worth mentioning his kidnapping by an anarchist group at the age of twelve. The details of this episode remain largely unknown, apart from the fact that the government forbade paying a ransom and that the boy was eventually returned unharmed after six months (Baranov-Shestov 1983a, 7). Two years later his alleged involvement in a political affair, whether or not related to his kidnapping (and his presumed complicity in the anarchists' demand of a ransom), resulted in Lev's expulsion from the gymnasium in Kiev and his move to Moscow to finish his secondary education.

¹ In this chapter I use these labels in a general sense, the first to designate proponents of traditional Russian Christian values and faith, the second to designate proponents of liberalism and of philosophical and scientific rationalism.

This was a time of great upheaval in Russian society. The assassination of Alexander II in 1881 was followed by Jewish pogroms. These were witnessed by Shestov's cousin, Alexander Grinberg, who went into hiding after the ransacking of the Jewish Quarter in Kiev and then emigrated to the United States in 1882. The ideological confrontation between Slavophiles and Westernizers over the best manner of modernizing Russian society (by either emphasizing its traditional values and institutions, or embracing Western European democratic principles and scientific rationalism) transcended ethnic divides, and it was not unusual to find young Jewish intellectuals in pre-revolutionary Russia at the end of the century actively involved in economic and philosophical debates about the best path to reforms and the relative merits of Western utopian socialism as opposed to the capitalist model. During his university studies, which he started in Moscow and finished in Kiev (because of a brush with the student administration), Shestov wrote a paper on factory legislation in Russia, followed by a law dissertation, 'The Condition of the Working Class in Russia' (Lowtzky 1960, 80). According to an autobiographical account, the dissertation was written in collaboration with a colleague and was based on data of the factory inspectorate. In order to obtain his law degree and begin practice (as *Kandidat prav*), he had to submit the dissertation to the Moscow Censorship Committee. However, the reporter of the Committee not only refused permission to print it, but confiscated the work, saying that 'if this paper were published, it would spark a revolution everywhere in Russia' (Baranov-Shestov 1983a, 9). Several decades later Shestov recounted the event to his friend and disciple, Benjamin Fondane, in Paris:

I went to Moscow to clarify the matter. One of the members of the council advised me to demand the return of the manuscript to make changes to it in the spirit indicated by the censor. But the reporter convinced the council that no possible changes could change the revolutionary essence of the book. They did not return the manuscript to me. The other copy belonged to the university. My

drafts disappeared. The book never appeared. In it there was talk of the extreme poverty of the Russian peasantry, etc. (Fondane 1982, 86).

Given his reputation as an irrationalist philosopher criticized by atheist existentialists for his lack of engagement with politics and his neglect of systematic ethical discourse, it is noteworthy that Shestov had a thorough knowledge of the judicial system in Russia, coupled with a keen interest in social justice. In his conversations with Fondane, Shestov acknowledged his youthful commitment to revolutionary ideas and his gradual disenchantment with Marxist political and economic theories in the wake of the First World War and the violent rise to power of the Socialist-Revolutionaries and Bolsheviks: ‘I was a revolutionary at the age of eight, to my father’s great dismay. I only ceased to be one much later, when “scientific”, Marxist socialism appeared’ (Fondane 1982, 116). During his formative years, his proximity to anarchist and radical revolutionary movements (including *Narodnaia Volia* by some accounts – cf. Lundberg in Baranov-Shestov 1983a, 10), paradoxically combined with his admiration for Slavophile writers, resulted in a unique blend of religious philosophy and a critique of systematic theology and German idealism.

While Shestov’s evolution has been deemed atypical for Jewish thinkers of the late 19th century, such as S. L. Frank and Mikhail Gershenzon, who either converted to Orthodox Christianity or remained attached to a Jewish speculative religious outlook, respectively (Rubin 2010, 162, 213), his early paradoxical position stemmed from a combined interest in Western social reforms, on the one hand, and Slavophile humanist and Christian ideals, on the other. Before adopting a nihilist stance under the influence of Nietzsche, his first articles focused on the idea of the good in Vladimir Soloviev’s writings, on modernist literary tendencies in Russian journals, and on the tension between individual aspirations and ethical imperatives in Shakespeare’s tragedies. ‘The Ethical Problem in *Julius Caesar*’ which came out in *Kievskoe Slovo* in 1895, raised

for the first time the question that would remain at the centre of Shestov's philosophical reflection on the meaning of life. In quoting Hamlet's lines, 'The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!', Shestov draws attention to the tragic conflict between the ideal character of the moral law and the reality of a broken world in which each living individual is confronted with the meaninglessness of suffering, injustice and death. The discontinuity in time corresponds to the collapse of the ethical underpinnings of existence. As he later remarked during his meetings with Fondane:

However strange this may seem, my first philosophy teacher was Shakespeare. It is from him that I learned something enigmatic and inconceivable, which is also such a dangerous and disquieting thing: the time is out of joint. After Shakespeare, I turned to Kant who, with the unparalleled art of his *Critique of Practical Reason* and his famous postulates, tried and managed for several centuries to seal the gaps that his own *Critique of Pure Reason* detected in existence. But Kant could not answer my questions, so I looked elsewhere – to the Scriptures' (Baranov-Shestov 1983a, 15).

In 1895, when his first articles on literary and philosophical issues were published in Kiev, Shestov was undergoing a deep personal crisis. The circumstances, although never disclosed, left an indelible mark on his work and determined his evolution as an atypical thinker, in search of answers to 'limit situations' in life. Several explanations of this turning point in his biography have been put forward: the strain of having to take over the family business in 1895 (Baranov-Shestov 1983a, 22); the growing rift between an authoritarian father and the son's vocation as a writer, reflected in his choice of pseudonym (Shteinberg 1991, 257-258); and his failed attempts at emancipation through romantic relationships with Russian Orthodox women whom he was forced to abandon (Gromova 2013, 332-333), before eventually entering into a secret relationship while abroad. (He spent the following two decades hiding his Russian Orthodox wife and two daughters from his father by moving among different cities in Russia, Switzerland and Germany.) When in 1920 he went into exile with the

rest of the Schwarzmann family, following the Bolshevik revolution and Jewish pogroms in Kiev, a note in his diary recalled his personal crisis of 1895: ‘It’s been 25 years since “time is out of joint” or, more precisely, it will be 25 years in the autumn, at the beginning of September. I’m writing this down so as not to forget: the most important events in life that are unknown to everyone except yourself – are easily forgotten’ (Shestov in Fotiade 2016a, 30-31).

One of the often debated limit situations which Shakespeare explored in *Julius Caesar*, and which would become a recurrent topic of reflection for atheist existentialists such as Camus and Sartre, concerns the case of politically motivated crime. In discussing the inner conflict of Shakespearean heroes – first Brutus in the article published in *Kievskoe slovo* in 1895, then Macbeth in *Shakespeare and his Critic Brandes*, the book he completed during his travels around Europe and published in 1898 – Shestov initially strove to uphold the impartiality and inflexibility of the moral law over and above the hero’s individual predicament. He was trying to ‘mend the broken joint in time’ and arrive at an understanding of tragedy as a necessary evil for the attainment of moral edification: ‘In my first book I had already attained the sublime. [...] I explained King Lear with reference to Brutus, and when I spoke of Job, I agreed with his friends’ (Fondane 1982, 112-113). Only later did he come to understand that the individual’s constant striving to patch over the cracks in the edifice of knowledge and overcome moral conflict through lofty ideals is but an illusion: ‘it’s better to leave time out of joint, so that it breaks to pieces’ (Fondane 1982, 85). The profound transformation of his philosophical convictions that followed the crisis of 1895 and the publication of his book on Shakespeare occurred under the influence of his contact with Nietzsche’s critique of morality. The two books that Shestov published within a short interval, *The Good in the Teaching of Tolstoy and Nietzsche: Philosophy and Preaching*

(1900) and *Dostoevsky and Nietzsche: The Philosophy of Tragedy* (1903), set the most famous Russian ‘Slavophile’ (religious-philosophical) novelists and the radical reformer and nihilist of Western systematic philosophy into dialogue for the first time. However improbable this alliance may seem, Shestov brought out the connection between the failure of Tolstoy’s idolatrous identification of the ‘good’ and ‘brotherly love’ with God (Martin 1969, xi) and Nietzsche’s pronouncement of the death of God, which in fact signalled the demise of the idol of the Moral Law. The controversial final statement in the book on Tolstoy and Nietzsche prefigured the transition to an apophatic and aphoristic philosophical style. It ran: ‘The “good”, “fraternal love” – the experience of Nietzsche has taught us – is not God. [...] We must seek that which is *higher* than compassion, *higher* than the “good”; we must seek God’ (Shestov 1969, 140). It was this new style that Shestov inaugurated with the publication of *The Apotheosis of Groundlessness* in 1905.

Following from the process of the ‘regeneration of convictions’ which Shestov had analysed in his book on Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, with reference to the collapse of the old system of values in a limit situation, *The Apotheosis of Groundlessness* (subtitled *Essay in Adogmatic Thought*) proposed a radical redefinition of philosophy. This was based on the subjective experience of life’s impermanence and on the fragmentary aspect of our representations rather than universal principles that implied belief in a unified and unshakeable grounding of human knowledge. From this point of view, the aim of philosophy, according to Shestov, is ‘to teach men to live in uncertainty – man who is supremely afraid of uncertainty, and who is forever hiding behind some dogma or other. More briefly, the business of philosophy is not to reassure people, but to upset them’ (Shestov 1920, 24).

The possibility of an alternative, underground strand of philosophical inquiry, the ‘philosophy of tragedy’, was announced in the essay on Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. In the 1905 volume of aphorisms, this new style of inquiry was related to a groundless form of knowledge that suspends the principles of syllogistic reasoning and embraces paradox and contradiction. Its motto is in keeping with Tertullian’s aporetic creed from the treatise on incarnation: *credo quia absurdum* (I believe it because it is absurd), and *certum est quia impossibile* (it is certain because it is impossible).

Along with a landmark essay on ‘Anton Chekhov and Creation from Nothing’ (published the same year), in which the loss of faith in the edifying virtues of the moral law disconnected from the ‘horrors of existence’ makes way for an absurd creation from the void that echoes the divine creation of the world, *The Apotheosis of Groundlessness* marks a decisive turn in Shestov’s apophatic approach. It earned him the reputation of an irrationalist and a mystic. His critique of rational, scientific knowledge grounded in *a priori* principles and necessary or ‘uncreated’ ethical values has rightly been situated in the context of modern Jewish contributions to Pauline studies (Langton 2010, 242-250). However, contrary to Langton’s assumptions, Shestov’s interest in the Bible and the religious dimension of his ‘existentialism’ did not emerge in the aftermath of his exile from revolutionary Russia to France in 1921, but was present all along in his published studies from the mid-1890s onward. The Western idea of the death of God was already mentioned in the first pages of his book on Shakespeare. Likewise the defining opposition between scientific reasoning and lived experience (which Shestov traced back to the first chapters of Genesis, and the opposition between the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life) had a lengthy prehistory. It made its way from his essay on Tolstoy and Nietzsche into his book on the philosophy of tragedy before it became connected to the nihilist, anarchist critique of the moral law

and of rational knowledge in Saint Paul's Epistles and in Tertullian's treatise on the incarnation in *The Apotheosis of Groundlessness* and the later essays and collections of aphorisms.

Between 1910 and 1914, Shestov lived in the Swiss town of Coppet on Lac Léman, where he devoted his time to the study of German Protestant theology, and in particular to Luther, whom he later included among those apostate Christian thinkers who underwent a profound 'transformation of convictions', a process Shestov first illustrated in his comparative analyses of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. During this period, Shestov also started to read Plotinus and the philosophers of the Middle Ages in preparation for a book on theological issues (titled *Sola Fide*), which was left unfinished when the First World War broke out and he and his family had to return to Russia. Forced to leave the manuscript of his book behind along with his library, Shestov started writing a second draft from memory, which eventually became a collection of essays and aphorisms, *Potestas Clavium*, published in Berlin in 1923, after the author's exile.

Like Luther centuries earlier in his ninety-five theses against the Pope's sale of indulgences, Shestov mounted a searing critique of the Catholic Church's claim that it had the authority to unlock the gates of heaven (hence *potestas clavium*, 'the power of the keys'), and more broadly of its doctrine of salvation through works rather than through 'faith alone' (*sola fide*). Shestov's argument is a continuation of his earlier critique of the autonomous, speculative ethical systems that had replaced belief in the Living God as the measure and justification of human life. In highlighting Luther's revolt against the 'order of merit' and the idea that life's worth resides in upholding doctrinaire ethical values (or being seen to do so within a socially acceptable context), Shestov reframes and develops his previous philosophical discussion of Nietzsche's

transvaluation of all values, as well as his treatment of Dostoevsky's and Tolstoy's conversion from an idolatrous position of worshippers of the abstract notions of the good, beauty, social justice and progress to their iconoclastic stand as 'Slavophile' apostates and enemies of Kantian and Hegelian idealism. The monologue of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* had served to make clear the effects of the Hellenization of Christianity, which Shestov analyses in *Potestas Clavium*. The idea of a commerce between the human and the divine that enables the believer to earn salvation through allegiance to the authority of the Church (by the purchase of indulgences, for example) rather than through belief in Christ and in unmerited grace can be traced, Shestov argues, to Philo of Alexandria's attempt to reconcile Greek philosophy and Jewish biblical thought. Shestov's critique of scientific knowledge and logical reasoning thus aims to reverse the long-established alliance between speculative philosophy and biblical revelation in order to restore the outlook of the early Church Fathers, and most prominently, Tertullian's opposition between Athens and Jerusalem. The latter became the theme of Shestov's best known work and philosophical testament, published shortly before his death in 1938.

During the turbulent years that he spent in Russia before his definitive exile in 1919, Shestov completed not only the majority of the essays and aphorisms in *Potestas Clavium*, but also an article in response to the rise of scientific philosophical enquiry spearheaded by Husserl's phenomenology. The article, 'Memento Mori: On Husserl's Theory of Knowledge', was later translated into French and published in *La revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* in 1926. It sparked a polemic with Husserl's disciple, the French Protestant theologian Jean Héring, over the compatibility between the aims of phenomenology and those of Christian theology, based on the doctrine of the logos. In his second article on Husserl, 'What is Truth? On Ethics and

Ontology', published in 1927, Shestov began his analysis of the phenomenological and biblical accounts of truth by highlighting the opposition between the rationally-grounded Greek notion of 'logos' and the irrational Scriptural definition of the Word made flesh (John 1:14), as well as the associated notions of death and resurrection (John 12:24), which inspired Dostoevsky's choice of motto for *The Brothers Karamazov* (Shestov 1968, 361). The article he wrote for Dostoevsky's centenary celebrations in 1921 earned him immediate recognition in France and was later included in the volume *The Revelations of Death* (1923). This essay, together with the French edition of *Potestas Clavium* (1928), his magnum opus *Athens and Jerusalem* (1938), and his essays on Pascal (*Gethsemane Night*, 1923) and Kierkegaard (*Kierkegaard and Existential Philosophy*, 1937), can all be said to bear the mark of his decisive polemic with Jean Héring over Husserl's theory of self-evidence and the possibility of a religious phenomenology.

In Shestov's view, the modern concern with aligning Biblical revelation and the phenomenological search for truth and absolute certainty (which disconnects self-evident being and truth from the thesis of natural existence in the world) is but the latest in a long series of attempts at Hellenizing Christianity. In *Potestas Clavium*, he contrasted the rationalist, speculative stance of medieval theologians such as Thomas Aquinas with the paradoxical faith in the incarnation and other logically impossible manifestations of divine omnipotence professed by the early Church Fathers. Such a faith was also found in several philosophers and theologians of the Middle Ages such as Duns Scotus, William of Occam, and Peter Damian, who affirmed that God can reverse the flow of time (Shestov 1968, 311). Similarly, the third part of *Athens and Jerusalem*, devoted to the philosophy of the Middle Ages, distinguishes between the problem of knowledge as tied up with logical and ethical reasoning, on the one hand,

and, on the other, the search for the authentic sources of life rather than an abstract, impersonal concept of being. This contrast is reflected in the first chapters of Genesis: ‘The metaphysics of knowledge in Genesis is strictly tied to the metaphysics of being. If God has spoken truly, knowledge leads to death; if the serpent has spoken truly, knowledge makes man like God. This was the question posed before the first man, and the one posed before us now’ (Shestov 2016, 280).

The modern person is confronted with the same choice as the medieval philosopher, that is, a radical either/or which resonates with Kierkegaard’s defiant disengagement from ethical reasoning to allow for faith when he states: ‘My either/or does not in the first instance denote the choice between good and evil; it denotes the choice whereby one chooses good *and* evil or excludes them’ (Kierkegaard 1959, 173). Although the evolution of religious philosophy in the second half of the twentieth-century has mainly endorsed Jean Héring’s harmonization of phenomenology and theology, Shestov’s critique of logical and ethical a priorism has spurred a number of decisive debates among atheist and religious existentialists. It has had lasting influence on postmodernist philosophy due to its revival of biblical and metaphysical reflection through literary exegesis or fictional writing. Most often associated since the 1970s with similar maverick, apophatic thinkers (Blanchot, Cioran, Jankélévitch, Deleuze, Derrida), Shestov is responsible not only for the renewed interest in the idea of a ‘second dimension of time’ – derived from the Shakespearean motif of time which is out of joint – but also for the introduction of the notion of faith as ‘the second dimension of thought’, along with a whole alternative philosophical vocabulary. Gilles Deleuze aptly referred to this unconventional style of argumentation as the emergence of ‘conceptual characters’. Some of these, such as Job in Shestov’s critique of Spinoza, Dostoevsky’s ‘underground man’ and Chekhov’s ‘superfluous man’, have their

equivalent in Nietzsche's apostate figures such as Zarathustra, the Overman and the Ugliest of Men, as well as in Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorial voices and his exegesis of biblical and mythical figures such as Abraham, the knight of faith and Ahasverus – the Wandering Jew.

SOURCES AND DEBATES IN RUSSIA

It would be impossible to give an accurate account of Shestov's irrationalist strand of religious philosophy without reference to the Russian context out of which it emerged, and the manner in which it responded to the debates between Slavophiles and Westerners, Christian reformers and atheist nihilists.

On the one hand, the amorality professed by nihilist ideologists, which underpinned the question of women's emancipation through the programmatic disregard for the sacrosanct values of matrimony and fidelity, had found its staunch advocate in Chernyshevsky (and his fictional characters, such as Vera Pavlova in *What is to be Done?*), while its equally compelling detractor was Tolstoy, through the portrait he drew of adultery in *Anna Karenina* (Hingley 1967, 32-37). In *The Good in the Teaching of Tolstoy and Nietzsche*, Shestov questioned the Slavophile claim to have the higher moral ground in the debate by pointing out that the Biblical motto Tolstoy chose for his novel ('Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord') is made to serve an unchristian judgmental purpose and an all too human thirst for vengeance: 'The most important person, however, among the accused, for whose sake the Biblical verse was obviously set at the beginning of the work, is Anna. It is her whom vengeance awaits, her whom Tolstoy wishes to punish. She has sinned and must accept the punishment' (Shestov 1969, 13).

On the other hand, the similarly inflexible moral injunction coming from the atheist Westernizer camp, where Belinsky demanded 'account for all the victims of the

conditions of life and history, for all the victims of chance, superstition, the inquisition of Philip II', failed to undermine the universalist assumptions behind Hegel's philosophy of history and his idea of progress. It thus failed to provide any protection or consolation to the current victims of injustice, social inequality and disparagement of individual human life in Christian tsarist Russia. Belinsky's sweeping humanist claim is as disproportionate, irrational, and ineffective as is the dogma of Christian love for one's neighbour in the abstract, which Ivan Karamazov rightly denounces as impossible to put into practice – and likely to turn into hate when individuals realize their powerlessness to seek and find just retribution for the suffering and death of innocent victims. Shestov's own amorality is rooted in the failure of both Christian dogmatic and atheist nihilist ideologies to address the individual plight of those who have fallen foul of the law or who have been the perpetrators, the victims, or the powerless witnesses of the 'horrors of existence' (Shestov 1920, 69). The overcoming of the old metaphysical system of universal moral principles, heralded by the provocative final statement in Shestov's book on Tolstoy and Nietzsche, can only be understood in the context of a radical dismantling of the authority invested in *both* religious and atheist condemnations of individual existence, given their common grounding in impersonal logical judgements and rational necessity:

Moral people are the most revengeful of mankind, they employ their morality as the best and most subtle weapon of vengeance. They are not satisfied with simply despising and condemning their neighbour *themselves*; they want the condemnation to be universal and supreme: that is, that all men should rise as one against the condemned, *and that even the offender's own conscience shall be against him*' (Shestov 1920, 55).

The lively intellectual exchanges which animated the gatherings at the Schwarzmann residence in Kiev in pre-revolutionary Russia were evoked by Sergei

Bulgakov, the Orthodox Christian theologian, in his obituary of Shestov, 'Some Aspects of the Religious Weltanschauung of Lev Shestov': 'At the hospitable home of the Schwarzmans in Kiev at the beginning of the nineties, the local intelligentsia as well as writers and artists from the Capital, passing through Kiev, used to meet at musical gatherings. Life passed smoothly and quietly in Kiev, at least until 1905, when, in the wake of the first revolution, one of the first pogroms against the Jews broke out, which we experienced in all its tragedy' (Lowtzky 1950, 80). The solidarity within the group of Slavophile philosophers and thinkers, whose meetings moved from Kiev to Moscow over the years, was forged in the course of debates opposing religious intellectuals (such as Bulgakov, Berdyaev and Shestov) to 'local representatives of positivism and atheism' (Lowtzky 1950, 80). According to Bulgakov's recollection, Shestov's presence as a supportive yet quiet bystander at these meetings is indicative of the difficult balancing act of a Jewish philosopher engaged in a radical redefinition of the Christian faith, whose only ally, apart from Nietzsche, was Tolstoy, after the latter's existential crisis in the late 1870s and the controversial publication of *A Confession* as the first of a four-part work which also included *A Criticism of Dogmatic Theology*. Needless to say, Shestov was alone within the Slavophile group in his attempt to highlight the parallelism between Nietzsche's and Tolstoy's existential itineraries and 'conversions of beliefs' resulting from a loss of faith in Christian morality. The idea of the death of God, which, as Shestov argued, corresponded to the demise of the idol of the Moral Law and allowed for an apophatic rediscovery of the Living God beyond the knowledge of good and evil, remained alien to Slavophile theologians and philosophers of religion.

Although later united in their resistance to the anti-intellectualist and atheist programme of reforms ushered in by the Bolshevik Revolution, Berdyaev and Shestov

were at opposite ends in their interpretation of the Fall of Man, and of the post-lapsarian bondage of the will at the centre of the debate between Luther and Erasmus. It was precisely in relation to the contrasting views of reason and freedom of these two theologians that Shestov wrote his article on Berdyaev, 'In Praise of Folly' (1907). In this essay he also pondered the incomprehension which greeted his adogmatism (elaborated in *The Apotheosis of Groundlessness*) within Slavophile circles, where the mainstream religious stance was defined by Bulgakov's, Berdyaev's, and Merezhkovsky's recent conversions from Marxism or socialist revolutionary ideologies to Christian faith. As Shestov ironically commented on Bulgakov's sudden spiritual volte-face: 'He solved a difficult problem in an original manner: from his first articles, he started to mention the word Christ with the same intonation with which he had previously mentioned the word Marx' (Shestov 1987, 58).

Shestov's dialogue with Berdyaev and Bulgakov continued well after he fled from persecution in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1919 and settled in Paris. In the final exchange of letters between Bulgakov and Shestov, on the topic of Shestov's recently published article on Berdyaev in the Russian émigré journal *Sovremennye Zapiski*, Bulgakov remarked that despite their disagreement over the irrational and 'antidogmatic' account of revealed truth in *The Apotheosis of Groundlessness*, the two of them seem to share 'the dogmatic minimum of the Epistle to the Hebrews: "for he that comes to God, must believe that he is" (Hebrews 11:16).' And he then added a belated acknowledgment of Shestov's transition from Judaism to Christian faith: 'I say this not as polemic, but only to welcome You. I always knew, and here definitely sense, that Your apotheosis of groundlessness conceals in itself the absolute ground of Old Testament revelation, which in your consciousness, of course, has long become New Testament' (Baranov-Shestov, 1983b: 191-192). In his reply,

sent less than a month before his death in November 1938, Shestov interestingly commented on the changed political and ideological battleground in Western Europe at a time when the prevalent scientific strand of metaphysical reflection happened to coincide with the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany, and the persecution of the Jews:

It seems to [Berdyaev] that one observes in history the revelation of the truth proclaimed in Scripture, and he understands this revelation as the exegesis of Scripture in the symbolic sense, as did Philo, i.e., in a sense that does not insult the wisdom and knowledge of the Hellenists. This is natural: modern theological thought in Germany (Otto, Herder, et al) has done the same. And philosophers – Heidegger, Jaspers, Scheller – have already relegated the Scriptures to the archives. For us, of course, religious persecution in Europe has assumed a horrible character, but the ‘spiritual’ danger from the representatives of modern thought is much greater: ‘fear not those who kill the body, but those who kill the soul’ (Shestov-Baranov, 1983b: 192-193).

LIFE IN EXILE: FRENCH & GERMAN RECEPTION

Shestov’s arrival on the French intellectual scene in 1921 was accompanied by a landmark shift in the reception of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. In Shestov’s interpretation, the work of these two great novelists became associated with an undercurrent of Western mystical thought, running from Plotinus’s *Enneads*, through the confessions of the saints (St Bernard, St Theresa, St John of the Cross), and up to and including Nietzsche’s pronouncements about the death of God and the collapse of the Christian ethics of pity, self-denial, and brotherly love. The article on ‘Dostoevsky and the Fight against the Self-Evident’, translated and prefaced by Shestov’s life-long friend and interpreter, Boris de Schloezer, was published in the special centenary issue devoted to Dostoevsky in the *Nouvelle Revue française* in 1922. This publication earned Shestov unprecedented critical acclaim from some of the most prestigious writers, philosophers and publishers at the time, such as André Gide, himself the author of a series of lectures

on Dostoevsky, as well as Charles du Bos, Jules de Gaultier, and Daniel Halévy. Further invitations started to arrive from the best French journals and publishing imprints at the time. In 1923, Shestov's article on Descartes and Spinoza appeared in *Mercure de France*, while his essay on Pascal, *Gethsemane Night*, was published in Daniel Halévy's series 'Les Cahiers Verts', with Grasset. His book on Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, *The Revelations of Death*, which included the article on the 'fight against self-evidence', came out with the Plon publishing house. The same year, Shestov participated in the *Decades de Pontigny*, alongside Boris de Schloezer and Jacques Schiffrin (the young Jewish émigré publisher and founder of the Editions de la Pléiade, which later became an imprint of Gallimard), as well as Gide and Lytton Strachey.

Among the new ideas that Shestov advanced in *The Revelations of Death*, a book written for the most part after he left Russia, was the notion of a 'second sight' and the experience of a 'second dimension of thought'. These were linked to the untimely, accidental encounter with the Angel of Death, whose body, according to the legend, is all covered with eyes: 'It happens sometimes that the Angel of Death, when he comes for a soul, sees that he has come too soon, that the man's term of life is not yet expired; so he does not take the soul away, does not even show himself to it, but leaves the man one of the innumerable pairs of eyes with which his body is covered' (Shestov 1975, 5). The start of genuine philosophical reflection, as Shestov argued, is not intellectual curiosity or bewilderment, but 'the preparation for death and dying' (*melete thanatou*), in keeping with Plato's remark on the death of Socrates. Both Dostoevsky (in *Notes from the Underground* and *Dream of a Ridiculous Man*), and Tolstoy (in some of his last works, notably *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and *Master and Man*) described the experience of a descent into the underground or the otherworldly realm of the dead (reminiscent of Hamlet's encounter with the ghost and his sudden

realization that ‘time is out of joint’). The reversal of those basic principles of thought that underpin physical as well as moral sequential links between cause and effect in the natural universe makes possible a different understanding of philosophy, which Shestov defines as a ‘pilgrimage among human souls’, by analogy with Dante’s account of his travels through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise in *The Divine Comedy* (Shestov 1975, 257).

The publication of the French translations of the early works on Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche in 1925 and 1926 (*The Good in the Teaching of Tolstoy and Nietzsche*, translated by Georges Bataille and Tatiana Beresovsky-Chestov, and *The Philosophy of Tragedy: Dostoevsky and Nietzsche*, translated by Boris de Schloezer) consolidated Shestov’s reputation, although his proposed overcoming of pity and the good in search for God was later misconstrued by atheist existential critics as an irrationalist self-immolating doctrine. Conversely, Shestov’s reference to Husserl’s theory of self-evidence in the title of his celebrated article on Dostoevsky led to a successful collaboration with the prestigious journal edited by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *La Revue philosophique de la France et de l’étranger*. Shestov’s articles on phenomenology and his exchanges with the Protestant theologian Jean Héring were published in this journal in 1926 and 1927. The following year, Shestov met Husserl at a conference in Amsterdam, and their mutual appreciation of one another’s incompatible, yet equally fundamental, enquiry into the ‘sources of all things’ sparked the beginning of a philosophical friendship that would last until the death of both philosophers in 1938. Shestov’s 1928 encounter with Martin Buber in Frankfurt resulted in a sustained correspondence on the meaning of the Fall and several exchanges and meetings over the years, culminating with the publication in *La Revue philosophique*, in 1933, of an article entitled ‘Martin Buber: A German Jewish Mystic’.

The article testifies to their shared interest in the Biblical and Hasidic accounts of faith as an unmediated personal relationship between the living person and the living God, rather than Spinoza's 'Deus *sive natura*' (Shestov 1982, 112).

The article on Buber also includes one of Shestov's first references to Kierkegaard's work, with which he became acquainted at Husserl's recommendation, following an impromptu meeting with Heidegger in Freiburg in 1928. Having read *Being and Time*, Shestov quoted a few passages from the book which, as he thought, 'ought to have shattered his system', without realizing that 'these texts reflected Kierkegaard's influence and that Heidegger's input consisted in his determination to fit these ideas into the Husserlian framework' (Fondane 1982, 114). Echoes of their initial debate and ensuing discussion during Husserl's visit to the Sorbonne in 1929 (which Shestov helped organise) resonate through the inaugural lecture, 'What is Metaphysics?', which Heidegger gave that same year at the University of Freiburg. The meetings and correspondence between Shestov, Husserl, and Heidegger at this time are particularly important for the elaboration of Shestov's book on Kierkegaard and existential philosophy (first published in 1936), whose problematic is equally evoked in the second part of *Athens and Jerusalem* (Fotiade 2016b, 24). While Shestov and Heidegger agree on the significance of the individual's awakening to his ultimate confrontation with death for an authentic manner of living (a condition that Heidegger terms 'being-toward-death'), Shestov's paradoxical reversal of the values of sleep and wakefulness within the allegorical story of the Angel of Death seeks to redefine philosophy in terms of a fight against the 'supernatural enchantment and slumber' (as Pascal qualified it) that has taken over the human mind after the Fall. The purpose is to recover the possibility of a freedom toward life (*Freiheit zum Leben*), opposed to the Heideggerian *Freiheit zum Tode* (freedom toward death).

POSTWAR LEGACY & CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

In the preface to the first (1920) English edition of *The Apotheosis of Groundlessness*, published as *All Things are Possible* in London, the English writer and poet D. H. Lawrence commented on the alterity of Russian religious thought when compared to the tradition of Western philosophy and culture: ‘[Russia’s] genuine Christianity, Byzantine and Asiatic, is incomprehensible to us. So with her true philosophy’ (Shestov 1920, 8). In one of the aphorisms in the volume, Shestov presented the contact between traditional Russian mentality and the advances of modern European civilization as a superficial grafting of ideas that never managed to alter the profound nature of a ‘savage’ people: ‘Scratch a Russian and you will find a Tartar. Culture is an age-long development, and sudden grafting of it upon a race rarely succeeds. To us in Russia, civilisation came suddenly, whilst we were still savages’ (Shestov 1920, 39). The unique blend of Christian orthodoxy and Nietzschean nihilism which Shestov brought to the debates between Slavophiles and Westerners in Russia, and which became his trademark in Europe after his exile, emerged from an understanding of faith which radically opposed scientific knowledge to revelation.

Very often in his later work, Shestov insisted on the ‘uneducated’, ‘primitive’ and ‘savage’ nature of the Jewish people to whom the inconceivable meaning of the Fall was revealed: ‘How can one explain naturally how a little, uneducated, nomad people could come upon the idea [...] that the supreme sin of our forefathers was trust in “reason”?’ (Shestov 1975, 236). The explanation that Shestov provides in one of the aphorisms in his book, *In Job’s Balances*, is that ‘the legend of the Fall came to the Jews from somewhere *outside*, they received it as a “tradition”, and then it was transmitted from generation to generation’ (Shestov 1975, 237). This not only concurs

with D. H. Lawrence's emphatic remarks on the alterity of Russian religious thought in relation to the history of European philosophy, but it also justifies Shestov's inclusion by the generation of post-war philosophers in the lineage of 'private thinkers' (alongside Nietzsche and Kierkegaard), as one of the forerunners of the 'thought from outside'. Coined by Foucault in 1966 to describe Maurice Blanchot's apophatic approach as contrasted to 'the interiority of our philosophical reflection and the positivity of our knowledge' (Foucault 2001, 549), the phrase was picked up by Deleuze in his 'Treatise of nomadology' (published in *A Thousand Plateaus*) and applied to the subversive counter-systematic strand of thought represented by 'the private thinker' — Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and even Shestov — in opposition to 'the public professor' (Deleuze 1980, 467).

In *The Apotheosis of Groundlessness* (published in French translation in 1927), Shestov had already asked that philosophy not be entrusted to sedentary professors but to the 'homeless adventurers, born nomads, to whom *ubi bene ibi patria*' (Shestov 1920, 38). However, prior to the recent positive reappraisal of Shestov's and Kierkegaard's religious strand of existential thought, the French reception of the Russian émigré philosopher was marked by a confrontation with the first generation of atheist existentialists who came to prominence in the early 1940s. Shestov's revolt against the totalitarian, all-encompassing claims of scientific reasoning was greeted with emphatic approval in the first pages of *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), in which Camus paid homage to the tireless contestation of all that is 'irredeemable' (Camus 1965, 116). Nevertheless, the message that was passed on to posterity, at least until the mid-1960s, was that of an uncompromising indictment of Kierkegaard's and Shestov's 'leap of faith' as 'philosophical suicide' (Camus 1965, 128). Maurice Blanchot's perceptive book review of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, published in his collection *Faux pas*,

signalled the hasty rationalist redeployment of the absurd, which by the end of Camus's essay no longer threatens to 'unsettle and break everything' but is likely to arrange things, and is even a 'denouement, a solution, a kind of salvation' (Blanchot 1943, 75).

Blanchot's assessment resonates with the response that Shestov's only disciple, the Jewish Romanian émigré writer Benjamin Fondane, had time to draft before his arrest and deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where he was murdered in September 1944. In 'The Existential Monday and the Sunday of History', a commissioned essay for the volume *L'Existence* to which Camus also contributed, Fondane exposed the ethical injunction behind the triumphant concluding remark in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: 'One must imagine Sisyphus happy.' Both Blanchot and Fondane strongly reacted to this hasty alignment of the absurd with the positive outline of a path to a fulfilling and meaningful existence, in contrast to what Camus had labelled 'philosophical suicide'. In a later essay on Camus, 'Le détour vers la simplicité' (1956), reprinted in the volume *L'Amitié*, Blanchot traces the emergence of an existential counter-current, which bypasses the tradition of Western literature and philosophy, to the works of Dostoevsky and Shestov. They herald the attempt at breaking the logic of repetition and speculative turning back (which Orpheus's deadly glance back epitomizes), by revealing the strange hidden double of the everyday world, suddenly rendered alien in the shape of the 'outside of all known worlds' (Blanchot 1971, 217). Shestov's apophatic irrationalism has thus been incorporated into the recent philosophical reflection on the post-metaphysical 'thought from outside', along the lines of what other contemporary critics have labelled as Shestov's 'own tradition of Jewish learned ignorance' (Rubin 2010, 217). In opposition to the speculative philosophies of finitude which define temporal being in relation to the inevitability of death, Shestov's existential 'docta ignorantia' fights for the possibility of a *Freiheit zum Leben* and proposes an

irrationalist soteriology which draws on the Paulinian refutation of knowledge and the overcoming of death through the kenotic lawlessness of faith: ‘Laws – all of them – have only a regulating value, and are necessary only to those who want rest and security. But the first and essential condition of life is lawlessness. Laws are a refreshing sleep – lawlessness is creative activity’ (Shestov 1920, 127).

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